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El Greco in...Greece

By MARY TOMPKINS LEWIS

The stunning 1983 discovery of the signature of Domenikos Theotokopoulos on an exquisite Byzantine icon dramatically enlarged our knowledge of the enigmatic painter far better known as El Greco (1541-1614). This small egg tempera on wood panel depicting the Dormition of the Virgin has long been owned by the archdiocese of the Greek island of Syros but was rarely seen. It had suffered passages of overpainting and minor abrasions, and these were delicately removed or restored in the wake of its new acclaim. Yet even with some of its decorative surface effaced, it bears the markings of what would be El Greco's richly synthetic career. The panel follows the traditional, stylized format of the popular Byzantine subject, and embodies the deeply emotive character of Greek icon painting as a whole. But it reflects as well a burgeoning interest in the depiction of real space and of animated, sculptural figures, and so suggests the artist's early exposure to the naturalistic painting of Italy even before he sailed from his native Crete for Venice around 1567.

"The Origins of El Greco: Icon Painting in Venetian Crete," at the Onassis Cultural Center in New York, explores the roots of El Greco's fascinating and multifaceted art without diminishing his brilliant transformation from a highly successful icon painter in Candia (now Heraklion), the capital city of Crete, as he became an artist of late Renaissance Venice and Rome, and then the profoundly unorthodox Mannerist in Spain whom we know best. The island of Crete, a historic crossroads for maritime commerce and a matrix for cultural exchange, vividly shaped El Greco's peripatetic life and the striking originality reflected in all of his painting.

In 1211, just after the Fourth Crusade, Crete became a Venetian territory, and its vibrant pictorial tradition soon mirrored its new, multicultural society. With a diverse clientele that stretched from Venice to the Dalmatian coast and the Balkans, Cretan painters quickly acquired the stylistic dexterity their historical circumstances now demanded. They conflated Byzantine and late Gothic elements in icons they produced en masse, and signed them in Latin as befitting their international audience.

In the decades leading up to the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, a period in which many of that beleaguered city's painters migrated to the more peaceful climate of Crete, the quality of the island's art increased significantly. The balanced compositions, classically proportioned figures and noble sentiments of these new, Palaiologan models, known as works *alla greca*, erased any lingering provincial traits, and often incorporated elements of early Italian Renaissance painting. A superb example of this graceful hybrid genre is the late-15th-century panel of "Christ and the Woman of Samaria," cautiously attributed in the scholarly exhibition catalog to Nikolas Tzafouris (c. 1455-1500), a painter renowned for his mastery of several manners as well as his miniaturist technique. Its stylized, rocky bluffs are typical of Byzantine

landscapes and hold an episodic, New Testament narrative that is found on the walls of many Greek monasteries, but these are framed with views of cities, grassy hills and brilliant blue skies borrowed from 14th-century Tuscany.

In time, the forms of later Italian Renaissance painting, gleaned from widely circulated prints, found their way into Cretan art, and these icons *a la latina* were treasured as both moving devotional images and extraordinary artistic objects. A magnificent "Pietà" from about 1500, lent for the first time ever (as are three other panels) by the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, is a virtual paraphrase of a painting by the Venetian artist Giovanni Bellini, and a poignant evocation of a subject countless Byzantine artists would adopt.

Even the theological disputes of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, which shaped so much of 16th- and 17th-century art and history in Europe, may have found their way into the painting of the eastern Mediterranean. "The Restoration of the Icons" (c. 1575) portrays the Early Christian Empress Theodora, her son Michael III and the Patriarch Methodios, and recalls their historic roles in the return of icons in 843 to Byzantine churches, from which they had been banned for over a century. Though executed in a patently Palaiologan style with static registers of elegant Byzantine figures surrounding the treasured, portable panels (a format El Greco would later use in Toledo), the icon's theme was strikingly current in an era when the fear of idolatry figured again in religious discourse.

Against the background of such a richly variegated genealogy, the handful of El Greco's paintings on view, though still miraculous, emerge as a vivid reflection of his lifelong artistic journey. As described by the exhibition's curator, Anastasia Drandaki of the Benaki Museum in Athens, he arrived on the main stage of European painting through the gateways that had opened for him in Crete, and his art remained redolent of the island's resonant history and pictorial culture.

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