

El Greco's Influence on the People of Toledo

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Abstract

This research paper explores the circumstances of the creation of the painting *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586) by El Greco, a renowned painter of the Spanish Renaissance known for his dramatic and expressive style. With an emphasis on the artistic and symbolic significance of this painting in the context of late 16th-century Toledo, the paper will examine the painting's Catholic themes and their connection to religious movements of the time. This paper also examines El Greco's spiritual devotion and the challenges he faced in conveying his beliefs through his art. In examining *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* through both historical and modern contexts, this essay sheds light on the painting's influence on Toledo's artistic and religious identity, as well as El Greco's lasting impact.

Introduction

In the late 16th century, Toledo, Spain was a hub of Catholicism amid growing Protestant factions across Spain. Amid this religious and political upheaval, the painter El Greco dedicated his career to reinforcing Catholic ideals through art. His efforts culminated in *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586), where he employs starkly contrasting elements, such as selectively elongated figures, a hierarchical composition, and luminous color schemes, to showcase the heavenly realm's spiritual control over our earthly domain. This Mannerist style emphasized elegance to the extreme, emphasizing the vertical elongation of figures, unusual composition, and intense tension. Although El Greco intended to inspire faith and devotion through his artwork, his otherworldly Mannerist style differed so significantly from the popular artistic tastes of the time that his work likely failed to strike a chord with the citizens of Toledo, who favored traditional and realistic portrayals of religious themes (Wethey). However, El Greco's originality in painting his masterpiece left a lasting legacy for the people of Toledo, countering Protestant influences and promoting Catholic principles for generations to come.

Toledo's role as an essential hub of Catholicism

Toledo was a place where Catholicism thrived for centuries. In the 6th century, Toledo became the political and religious capital of the Visigothic Kingdom. The people in the Kingdom converted their religion from Arianism to Catholicism, adhering to Catholic customs until the fall of the Kingdom in AD 711. Between the 6th and 8th centuries, Toledo hosted numerous religious councils, publicizing the Catholic religion and the Church's role in the governance of the kingdom. Even during the Muslim conquest of the Spanish kingdom (711-1492), the people of Toledo persisted in maintaining Catholic beliefs and, after regaining their independence, returned to Catholicism. Additionally, many Catholic religious landmarks were built in Toledo, including the Primate Cathedral of Saint Mary of Toledo, which is built on top of the Muslim mosque, symbolizing the city's transition from Islam to Catholic beliefs. Today, Toledo is

renowned for its Catholic sites, such as the Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes, a Pilgrimage site revered by foreigners and citizens alike (ODIHR). Due to Toledo's deep-rooted Catholic tradition and devotion to its ideals, its citizens held high expectations for religious artwork to adhere closely to established conventions.

Toledo, in El Greco's mind



Fig. 1. Portrait of El Greco. El Greco. *Self-portrait*, 1600

El Greco's strong connection to Toledo is evinced by his close relationships with the leading scholars and churchmen while he was residing there from 1517 to 1614. Fray Hortensio Paravincino, the head of the Trinitarian Order in Spain and King Philip II's favorite preacher, dedicated four sonnets to El Greco after the painter's death, one of which focused on El Greco's self-portrait. After searching in vain for a place to flourish in Venice and Rome, El Greco found a home in Toledo in 1577. There, his artwork was supported by renowned church leaders and intellectuals (Wethey).



Fig. 2. Portrait of the Toledo. El Greco. *View of Toledo*, 1600

In his work *View of Toledo*, El Greco paints a scene that depicts the city's skyline dominated by rolling hills, the Alcázar, and the spire of the Cathedral of Toledo under a stormy, overcast sky. The painting rearranges some architectural elements for dramatic effect, emphasizing the city's spiritual and historical significance. He uses dramatic lighting and stormy skies to evoke the ethereal nature of heaven while linking the divine to the earthly by employing similar dark color schemes in both realms, thereby emphasizing Toledo's significance as a religious center. Through this work, El Greco likely wanted to convey the idea that Toledo is not merely his home but also a source of religious inspiration (Brown and Kagan 19). *View of Toledo* is an unusual piece since landscape painting was not a prominent practice at the time of its creation in 1600, which makes El Greco's choice of subject matter even more meaningful (Zappella). Through his portrayal of Toledo, we know that El Greco likely believed that he had a responsibility to leave a lasting influence in Toledo and play a significant role in preserving Catholic beliefs in the city.

The Burial of the Count of Orgaz's Commission

El Greco's masterpiece, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, was commissioned by Andres Nunez, a parish priest of Santo Tome, in 1586. Nunez wanted to restore the burial chapel of

Gonzalo Ruiz de Toledo, better known as the Count of Orgaz, a nobleman and well-known benefactor of religious institutions. El Greco was likely around 45 years old at the time, having spent nine years in Spain since his arrival in Madrid in 1577. Before this commission, he had already received several major commissions in Toledo, including works for the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo and the Cathedral. The commission came in the wake of numerous lawsuits, starting from 1564, submitted by Nunez against the citizens of Toledo as they were refusing to pay the annual endowment to the church specified in Don Gonzalo's will. With the help of El Greco's piece, Nunez hoped to inspire the public with a renewed devotion to the church, compelling them to honor the annual endowment in the future. The artwork was meant to emphasize that good deeds and acts of charity would be handsomely rewarded in the afterlife (Serraller 8).

In the commission, Nunez required that several prominent figures be featured in the painting: Saint Augustine, who is said to have miraculously descended from heaven to facilitate the burial of the Count of Orgaz; Saint Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr and is said to have participated in the miraculous event; the Count of Orgaz, clergy; and important Catholic figures such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, and John the Baptist. Besides the initially assigned figures, El Greco added Saint Peter holding the keys to heaven and angels surrounding the heavenly realm to emphasize the Catholic symbolism in the work (Serraller 10). He also included his son's portrait, emphasizing the Catholic concept of eternal life, where Don Gonzalo, having passed away, ascends to the heavenly realm while El Greco's son, symbolizing new life, continues his journey in the earthly world. The commission's relatively loose guidelines, less restrictive than others of the time, allowed El Greco to freely express his unique personal vision (Brown 34).

El Greco's art style



Fig. 3. Portrait of the Burial. El Greco. *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586

In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, El Greco depicts the legendary funeral of Don Gonzalo Ruiz de Toledo, a nobleman said to have been miraculously buried by Saints Augustine and Stephen in recognition of his piety and generosity. The lower half of the painting portrays the earthly burial scene, with richly dressed mourners and clergy members surrounding the count's body, while the upper half transitions into a celestial vision of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and an assembly of saints welcoming his soul into heaven.

El Greco uses a distinct color palette to create a stark contrast between the earthly and heavenly realms. In the lower portion, the painting uses dark tones (particularly, on the Toledo noblemen's garments—expressed by blacks, browns, and grays). These colors project dignity and solemnity, reflecting the gravity of the burial. Notable exceptions are the Count of Orgaz and the saints, who are emphasized with vibrant colors such as gold, red, and yellow. In contrast, the upper heavenly world is filled with bright and exquisite colors, including gleaming whites, luminous blues, and dazzling gold, symbolizing divine light and glory coming from heaven.



The painting's composition is divided into two separate yet integrated realms: the earthly world and heaven. The lower portion is structured with a clear horizontal alignment of noblemen focused on the burial. The figures are densely placed with an emphasis on the Count of Orgaz. In contrast, the upper section is vertically aligned and dynamic, with swirling clouds and upward-reaching figures leading the viewer's eyes to Christ at the top. This vertical elevation represents the spiritual movement of the Count's soul toward Christ. El Greco's composition reinforces the Catholic doctrine of ascension, in which the deceased moves gradually to the heavenly realm from the earth.

El Greco is famous for his elongated figures, which was one of the hallmarks of his style. In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, El Greco reserves elongated proportions for the heavenly figures such as Jesus, the symbolic form of the Count's soul reaching toward Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. The elongated figures stretching vertically emphasize their existence in both earthly and heavenly realms, demonstrating their superiority and emphasizing the citizens of Toledo's respect for those figures. In contrast, though the figures are slightly elongated, El Greco's earthly figures are more naturalistic and serve to ground the work.



Fig. 4. El Greco, *Dormition of the Virgin*, c. 1565, tempera and gold on panel, Holy Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin, Ermoupolis, Syros (photo: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2nd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities)

We can find other compositions celebrating the roles of saints, as evidenced by El Greco's early iconography work. A strong example is *Dormition of the Virgin*, in which he uses a similar composition of contrasting heavenly and earthly realms. *Dormition of the Virgin* is a painting that features religious icons and the Virgin Mary sleeping peacefully, reuniting with heaven. In the earthly realm, Mary is in the center, surrounded by mourning apostles. In the heavenly world, the ascension of Mary into heaven is depicted. The horizontal alignment of apostles with great solemnity emphasizes the gravity of the scene, and the luminous reds and golds emphasize the important figures within the image. In the upper section, where the heavenly world is located, El Greco uses vertical dynamics in alignment, symbolizing the superiority of heaven over earth (Casper 362).

El Greco's unique style, with its strong emphasis on significant religious figures, can be seen as an indication of his personal commitment to serving Catholicism.

Catholic traditions in El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*

In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, El Greco portrays the idea of “sacred tradition” by placing his young son in the moment of burial with himself, showcasing Catholicism as it is passed down over generations (Diocese of Orlando). This idea of sacred tradition is not strongly supported in Protestant churches, which focus on an individual’s belief in the present (Bainton and Nelson). While Catholic funerals follow solemn rituals to honor the soul of the deceased to God, Protestants conduct funerals with less emphasis on ritual practices. Furthermore, Catholics believe in purgatory, which is the state where souls are purified before entering heaven; Protestants believe that faith in Christ’s sacrifice at the cross is sufficient for entering the heavenly realm. In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, the clergy manages the sacraments, namely a cross that represents Christ’s sacrifice; this is a uniquely Catholic practice, and Protestants do not believe that the clergy holds significance in rituals in the same way (Toledo Monumental).

The idea of sacred tradition is exemplified in how El Greco passed down his legacy to future generations by exploring new art styles and making Toledo more popular because of the interesting connections between his masterpiece and the religious background of the city. Moreover, El Greco’s choice of drawing his son might be an indication that he wished for his son to walk in his footsteps and serve Catholicism. El Greco’s commitment to include the idea of sacred tradition, uncommon among Protestants, made him not only emphasize Catholic ideals but also meet some aspects of the Counter-Reformation goals.

Popular artistic tastes in Toledo during the late 16th century



Fig. 5. Portrait of the Virgin Mary. Fernando Yanez de la Almedina. *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1567

Prior to El Greco painting the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, the style of the early Renaissance was rapidly evolving. One of the key emerging features was naturalism: portraying human figure with emphasis on dramatic facial expressions and realistic drapery. The Spanish artist Fernando Yanez de la Almedia implemented these principles in his painting *The Adoration of the Magi* by focusing on naturalistic and balanced composition in the painting (Waterhouse 111).

When El Greco painted his masterpiece, Renaissance art was enjoying great popularity in Toledo. The rise of Renaissance art significantly impacted the movement of artists from Italy to Spain. Human figures in paintings were more realistic compared to the idealized bodies represented in the early Renaissance style. Stories from Greek mythology, classical architecture, and balanced compositions were greatly sought after. Creating balance in proportions with mathematical principles was considered essential to representing divine harmony in the religious paintings of the Renaissance (Waterhouse 112). However, El Greco disregarded these new traits, favoring his characteristically elongated figures and the bright colors that had become his trademark.

The contemporary eye-witness Fray Jose de Siguenza had reported that King Philip rejected El Greco's style because of his use of "elegant poses and languorous gestures" over the content, not conveying the purpose of the Counter-Reformation. Also, El Greco, as an artist, was elitist. When he was drawing the commissioned painting, he represented himself as an upper-class man of literature who held a high social status. Due to this belief, he didn't think that popular styles were worth thinking about. The only time El Greco drew a public masterpiece was in creating *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*; other commissioned paintings were all from private churches, showing that his style and depiction of the Catholic events were not in line with popular taste (Brown 30).

The citizens of Toledo would have expected *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* to be more realistic, with nondramatic facial expressions and true-to-life proportions. Clearly, El Greco went against the common style, highlighting the dramatic feelings and gravity of the scene.

Post-Orgaz



Fig. 6. Portrait of the Virgin Mary enthroned. El Greco. *The Coronation of the Virgin*, 1591

After his creation of *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, El Greco's other works were not treated with respect. Citizens of Toledo often regarded El Greco's works as peculiar, pointing out unusual characteristics such as the imaginative, fantastical nature of his paintings (The Art Story). *The Coronation of the Virgin*, which was painted after *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* for the friars of the Hospital of Charity in Illescas, was criticized for its overuse of gold and shimmering effects and abstract figures. The painting included many features of the Mannerist style, which was in direct opposition to the popular Renaissance style. The friars were so disappointed that during the appraisal, they strongly undervalued the piece and reordered El Greco to modify the painting further (Alspaugh). This dismissal of his work epitomizes El Greco's struggle to connect deeply with his contemporaries despite El Greco successfully leaving a lasting legacy in supporting Catholicism.

Conclusion

El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* exemplifies how an artist's innovations and creative risk-taking can stand in the way of his or her intended message resonating with an



audience that is unprepared for such departures from commonly held aesthetic principles. Unfortunately, instead of bolstering support for the Catholic church, *Burial* likely only served to alienate El Greco from the citizens of Toledo, evidenced in his relative obscurity following his death. Although lauded today as an exceptionally gifted master of his craft, El Greco was unable to bridge the gap between his vision and his audience during his lifetime. The fact that he couldn't connect to citizens can mean that art is the source of communication, and popular artistic style matters to ensure the viewers' full comprehension of the piece. Despite the lack of widespread support of Toledo's contemporaries, 20th century observers recognize his unique genius. El Greco's piece has served as a crucial artwork in shaping contemporary religious arts that underscore tenets of the Counter-Reformation, dramatic Mannerist styles, and ultimately grab viewers' attention with otherworldly components. His work influenced the persistence of Catholic doctrine in Toledo and assured him an enduring legacy as an artist. El Greco's masterpiece is constantly recalled in our everyday lives because of his innovative approach to religious art, which compels us to think more deeply about the scene and his efforts to explore distinct art styles beyond expectations during his lifetime.

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