

Livia Stoenescu. *The Pictorial Art of El Greco: Transmaterialities, Temporalities, and Media*. Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 322 pp. \$130. Review by FELIPE PEREDA, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

It is certainly nothing new to say that Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known as ‘El Greco,’ is one of the most intriguing, complex and at the same time intriguing painters of that period that we still call the Renaissance. Few other painters of the sixteenth-century speak with such a clear voice to some of the major concerns, if not debates of this particular field of the discipline of Art History: the geography of art, for example; the coexistence of diverse and conflicting temporalities within one and the same historical period—in other words, how painters reflected on the relation of their art to the past, and maybe also to their future viewers; and, last but not least, the way artists’ mobility in this period challenges the nationalistic burden that shaped art history since it was born as a modern humanistic discipline.

Trained in Crete as an expert in a school of painting that had remained stagnant for several centuries, the young Domenikos moved abruptly in the 1560s to Venice, one of the most dynamic, experimental and no doubt competitive cities of the century. After working and the circle of Titian (how close to him it is still hard to know), and after intensely studying the works of artists such as Tintoretto, by the early-seventies, the painter had enthusiastically converted to the modern *maniera*. El Greco did not only transition across two very different geographies, he also travelled across two worlds that had very different, if not opposite ways to think of the place of the art of painting in relation to the traditions that legitimized its practice: the evangelical fathers for the Cretan icon-painters of the *maniera greca*, on the one hand; the authority of nature and the legendary traces of a remote, lost, antiquity for his Italian contemporaries, on the other. To make things even more complicated, the Greek artist finished his days in the distant Spain ruled by the Catholic Monarchy, at a time in which a “conservative” cultural policy responded to the challenge of Reform with the authority of tradition. The rest of El Greco’s career was, as it is very well known, a bittersweet story of popular success and repeated official disappointments when not failure.

As will by now be obvious, one of the big challenges to write a book on the painter El Greco's is to articulate his work with his biography, to provide a model for how his work negotiated between different geographies, cultural horizons and even temporalities. And this is not at all easy. In recent years, new interpretative books on some aspects of his work (Nikolaos Panagiotakes' or Andrew Casper's for example), important exhibitions (like the ambitious one just opened at the Art Institute of Chicago more recently) and an important documentary and biographical reconstruction (Fernando Marias' work most notably) have changed dramatically El Greco studies, precisely for incorporating some of the big questions mentioned above. But the task is big and the nature of El Greco's immense creativity and polyedric personality make this at least as complex as it is promising or stimulating.

Livia Stoenescu's most recent book is an ambitious response to this challenge and one that is very much welcome. The main goal of the book—and its greatest merit in the opinion of the present reader—has been to try to break with the “compartmentalized” Greco that comes out of much of the past literature in order to “demonstrate the breadth and depth of his thinking as a painter aligned with the major artistic trends of his time” (18). The book reads not as a biography, neither as a collection of articles. Organized instead around five major problems or topics, Stoenescu goes over El Greco's career drawing some of the biggest arguments that run across a 50-year-long artistic career. Mainly three: Sacred portraits, History painting and the nude.

*The Pictorial Art of El Greco* opens with a chapter looking into one of the genres of his work that has traditionally being explored and considers how El Greco's Byzantine heritage shaped his later career, or even how some of his paintings can be seen as responding critically to the past he left behind. I am referring of course to the Portraits of Christ, particularly those visualizing relics of the imprint of his face (from the Veronica to the Mandylyon) and how these relate to Byzantine icons. Instead of just confronting the two genres, Stoenescu does two things that are paradigmatic of the methodology displayed in the rest of the book. First, she considers portraits of sacred subjects (and not only illustrations of the relics), therefore extending the breadth of her analysis beyond the trope of the Byzantine icon-painter who

became a Renaissance artist. Second, the book compares El Greco's strategy to that of other contemporary painters such as Federico Zuccaro (a painter with whom El Greco did not only come across both in Spain and in Italy, but might have been responsible for giving him a copy of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* in whose margins the Greek would later scribble his thoughts). By breaking with Hans Belting's rigid—and at least in El Greco's case unnecessary if not artificial—dualism between an era of the image (the *past* Byzantine world) and a *Renaissance* era of art, Stoenescu brings El Greco out of his historiographic exceptionalism: Not only was El Greco confronting similar challenges as other contemporary artists, the traces of the pictorial remedy developed to navigate in a period when there was an increasing concern with the cultic function of sacred images is something that affected his whole oeuvre. The argument developed in this first chapter extends in the next one with a closer analysis of one specific example: the portrait of Saint Ildefonso (Illescas, Toledo) where the legendary Bishop is shown writing on his desk while looking for inspiration from the Miraculous Image of the Virgin of Illescas that tradition considered a work of Saint Luke.

The second big topic addressed in the book is that of History painting. The chapter is devoted entirely to one single biblical story, the Purification of the Temple, that El Greco repeatedly depicted mostly in a small, cabinet-painting format that he began painting during his Roman years probably for an educated elite of art-connoisseurs. Stoenescu, however, again expands the list to include now an altar version of the same typology today still at the Parish Church of San Ginés (Madrid). This allows her to interpret the paintings under a new light, showing how El Greco's success relied to a certain extent on this ability to adapt his language and style to his audience: From the refined version of the 'Purification' in Minneapolis including the portraits of the artists that were bringing art to perfection (Titian, Michelangelo and Giulio Clovio) to the late, much straight-forward religious composition in the church of San Ginés which shows Christ's body against the tabernacle in what looks like an un-equivocal Eucharistic statement.

The third and final topic covered in the book is the nude, which is developed along two complementary chapters: one more general

devoted to the Counter-Reformation critique of the representation of contorted naked bodies (mostly on anti-Michelangelesque sources) and El Greco's struggle to continue investigating the formal and narrative possibilities of this subject in his Spanish compositions. As in the first part of the book, the last chapter now continues with a specific case study, the extremely provocative *Laocoön*, where the tragic fate of the priest of the Troyan priest and his sons is placed in the outskirts of the city of Toledo, with its symbolic buildings perfectly recognizable to the viewer. Once more, Stoenescu illuminates El Greco's flexibility to "bridge the gap between Eastern and Western traditions," between "two modes of artistic practice," (204) and in the latter case, even between the ancient pagan past and the sixteenth century, deploying the *Laocoön*, "as a classical reference in a preeminently Christian context" (289). The author considers El Greco's language as one shaped by a determined flexibility and pictorial intelligence to navigate within the realm of fiction to make those connections possible. In the opinion of this reader the book is sometimes (the case of the *Laocoön* is an exemplary case of it) more suggestive and thought-provoking than argumentative, inviting to think further, more than giving a concluding response to some of the always pertinent questions raised by the author. Another minor critique refers to frequent misspelling of Spanish names and sources (*Carduchio* for "Carducho," *Villaneuva* or "Villanueva," *linenzos* for "lienzos" or the Italianism *San Felipe Reale*, to give some examples). The book would have benefited from a Spanish-speaking editor. Overall, however, Livia Stoenescu's *The Pictorial Art of El Greco* is a thoughtful and stimulating introduction to the art of the Cretan artist, filled with intuitive and subtle observations that—meeting the author's promise in the introduction—succeed in presenting El Greco's radical originality, his "extravagant" style as some of his contemporaries put it, as the result of a dynamic while critical dialogue with the art of his time.