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EL GRECO

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## A painter ahead of his time

Cretan-born painter Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known by his Spanish nickname, El Greco (c.1541-1614), studied under Titian in Venice before settling down in Toledo. Commissioned by the church and local nobility, El Greco produced dramatic paintings marked by distorted figures and vibrant color contrasted with subtle grays. Though his work was appreciated by his contemporaries, especially intellectuals, it wasn't until the 20th century that it was widely embraced and admired, influencing in particular the Expressionist and Cubist movements.

### About the Series:

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### The author:

Michael Scholz-Hänsel studied art history, history, theatre studies, and Hispanic studies in Berlin and Hamburg, earning his doctorate in 1984. He has taught at Leipzig University since 2002 and has published widely, especially on topics relating to the Hispanic world. His research focuses on cross-cultural influences in the Mediterranean area, for example in the work of El Greco and Jusepe de Ribera.

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In Search of Work in Rome and Spain

El Greco's presence in Rome in 1570 is evidenced by a letter by Giulio Clovio (1568-1634), a Cretan painter of miniature, in which Clovio reports on his patron, Alessandro Turchetti, a "giovane Cavaliere discipolo di Tiziano" ("a young man from Candia, a disciple of Titian"). Adding a reference to a self-portrait which reportedly accompanied the painter in Rome, Clovio also mentions the El Greco and the promise of helping for him at the Palazzo Barberini.

Perhaps as thanks, El Greco painted a portrait of his friend Clovio, the earliest surviving portrait from the Cretan artist's hand (JL, p. 143). The artist is depicted holding his most famous work, the famous Book of Hours which he illustrated for Alessandro Barberini in 1590.

The originality of El Greco's pictorial ideas at this early date is reflected in a number of other works, including copies, such as *The Young Man from Candia* (JL, p. 143). One of these works, surviving in the Formosa Collection, may have been directly commissioned by the Duke (JL, p. 143). The subject was very probably a paraphrase of a classical model, but also had several precedents in Venetian painting, yet there the distortions tended to be marginal episodes in a larger narrative context, as with Titian or Jacopo Bassano, whose work had a high audience at the period. El Greco's achievement, in other words, consisted in isolating an individual figure and bringing it into close proximity with the viewer by means of the lighting and the low vantage point, known as *scenari* in 16th-century Italian.

Actually there was very little to do for El Greco in the Formosa household, which already employed Italian painters, although the participation of a "pittore Cretese" in the decoration of the Villa Formosa at Caprarola is recorded, but pointed out, can be associated with this written source. At any rate, the artist became acquainted with a further model at the Palazzo Formosa, a man who soon became his most significant patron in Rome: the humanist and historian Fulvio Orsini (1576-1630). The inventory of Orsini's collection would later include seven El Greco, including his portrait of Clovio.

His last self-portrait, the portrait of Clovio and the *Self-Portrait as an Elderly Man* in Rome, that of *Portrait of Fulvio Orsini*, perhaps the most outstanding example of his work in this genre is his portrait of Fulvio Orsini (JL, p. 143, B. 143).



Fulvio Orsini, c. 1570-1630. The portrait of the artist by El Greco, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (JL, p. 143).

The *Self-Portrait as an Elderly Man* by El Greco, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (JL, p. 143).

The *Portrait of Fulvio Orsini* by El Greco, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (JL, p. 143).

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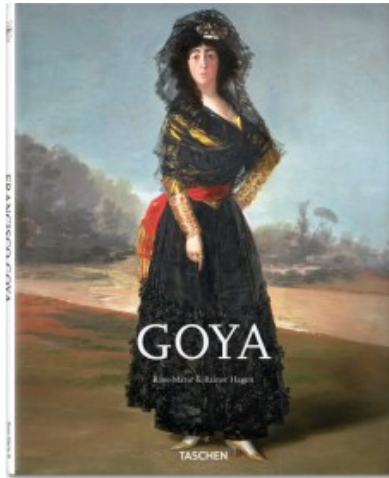
The *Portrait of Fulvio Orsini* by El Greco, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (JL, p. 143).

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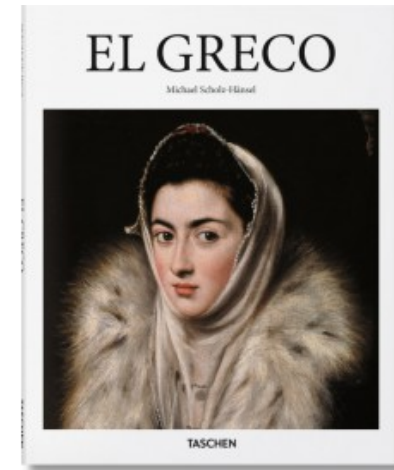
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