

Sharing Divine Light; El Greco's Representations of Saint Francis.

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Abstract

Saint Francis, the young, wealthy son of one of the richest merchants in Assisi, gave away all his property and spent the remainder of his life in prayer and meditation. He was among the most widely depicted religious figures of the Italian Renaissance. Italian masters of the 14th and 15th centuries repeatedly portrayed scenes of his life and miracles. A hundred years later in Spain, El Greco created more than 40 different representations of Saint Francis. On surveying his paintings, however, we may be surprised by the ways in which they depart from Italian works. This article examines these essential differences, which lie not only in the composition, expression of light, and use of colour, but also in the religious views expressed by El Greco and the Italian painters. It is pertinent to explore the extent to which El Greco's images of St Francis represent the spiritual turn he experienced during his life in Toledo, and to what extent they are due to his education in Greece and Italy. I shall focus on Giotto's interpretations of Saint Francis, not only because Giotto was commissioned to decorate the first Basilica named after Saint Francis, but also because his paintings completely re-shaped and re-formulated the Italian style for the next 200 years.

Keywords: El Greco, Saint Francis, painting, art.

Essay

Saint Francis "was the subject ... followed with most regularity and persistency during El Greco's activity in Toledo", according to art historian Jose Guidol (1962, p.195). A significant number of images of Saint Francis are attributed to him, and all of them are restricted to the saint's three main

moments: his meditation, his stigmatisation and his ecstasy. These works are, perhaps, those most deprived of the visual sensation of colours that El Greco used throughout his life. The plain quality of colour and his subdued palette correspond to the aesthetic life of Francesco and have as much immediate impact on us as the brightest of El Greco's paintings. This demonstrates the intellectual and philosophical power that engages both the meditative faculties and involves the viewer in a spiritual union with the image.

Saint Francis, as legend tells us, was the "rich young dandy" (Clark, 1969). Francesco Bernadone (1182-1226) underwent a great change in values after experiencing a spiritual vision. According to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, he gave away all his property and spent the rest of his life in poverty, looking after the sick, praying and taking upon himself the blame of society for Jesus' sufferings (Cross, F. L., 2006, p.97). Two years before his death, in the solitude of prayer, he received *stigmata*, thus becoming the first person to bear the wounds of Christ's passion. The legend also relates that Saint Francis valued joy as well as faith: he wandered through Italy, together with his pupils, reciting sermons to birds, talking to animals, and singing like the troubadours. The Pope gave him permission to found his own order in Assisi. Francesco died in 1226, at the age of 43, and was canonised only two years later. His order went on to become a great institution.

The story of Saint Francis stimulated the imagination of Renaissance painters, providing a novel and dramatic theme for their works. Italian artists from Cimabue and Giotto, to Fra Angelico and Bellini, repeatedly depicted all these episodes in the 14th and 15th centuries. Almost a century later in Spain, El Greco repeatedly painted Saint Francis. There are many interpretations and replicas on the topic of Saint Francis; either by El Greco's own hand or by those of his pupils, and one feels there must have been something intrinsically significant about this saint both for El Greco and for the people who commissioned these works. In fact, the earliest image of Saint Francis by El Greco, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (early 1570), is quite different from later works on the subject. The saint is set in an open, light-filled landscape; the light effects are shown by straight lines, which was a technique popular in the medieval tradition. There are numerous colours and details, features which El Greco dismisses in the later interpretations connected with his life in Toledo.

Born in Crete in 1541, El Greco received his initial training as an icon painter in the Post Byzantine style. He arrived in Spain via Italy, where he first lived in Venice and then in Rome. According to the Roman miniature painter Giulio Glovino (cited by Clark, 1960, p.90), he was a pupil of Titian,

who at that time was eighty years old. In Rome, he encountered works by Michelangelo, Tintoretto and the post-Michelangelo mannerists. El Greco arrived in Toledo in 1575 at a time of “intense religious activity” (Davies and Elliott, 2003, p.59). People such as St Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and Frey Luis de Leon were already living in the town; each of them was engaged in new mystic ways of experiencing faith through meditation. Alongside them, the educated middle classes came to practice a religious mysticism based on meditation and prayer. Kenneth Clark has noted that at the time, “Toledo offered the most intense spiritual life in Europe” (1960, p.96). A year after El Greco's arrival, in 1576, Gaspar the Quiroga became Archbishop of the town and his policy reflected the ideals of the Counter Reformation. Along with ideas like that of the cosmic hierarchy, particular emphasis was laid on the need for devotion to Christ through “repentance, asceticism and prayer” (Davies and Elliott, 2003, p.60). These were seen as the three avenues to the mental state that allows us to share the suffering and belief of Christ. Most of these principles were reflected in the doctrines of the Council of Trent.¹ Along with other rules, there was an insistence on “emphasising the doctrine rather than the narrative” (Davies and Elliott, 2003, p.184). We can see this principle at work in many of El Greco's paintings, such as his *Expulsion of the Moneylenders from the Temple* (circa 1570). He removes all the material circumstances described in the Bible and concentrates on the message. In fact, this eager denial of the subject matter corresponds with the Byzantine tradition in which El Greco was brought up. In most early icons Jesus Christ is abstracted from the world and placed against an empty background. Perhaps this is the reason why earlier versions of *Expulsion of the Moneylenders from the Temple*, created in Italy, also bear this same characteristic. This trend towards detaching the saints from any additional narrative elements reaches its height in El Greco's innumerable paintings of Saint Francis.

In surveying Giotto's works devoted to Saint Francis, we realise how different the representations of the same saint can be. The imaginations of Giotto and El Greco moved in completely different directions. The first difference that strikes us is the treatment of space. In Giotto's compositions, we observe a formula that he repeats throughout his life - solid looking figures, filling their clothes, are arranged in a particular space. Giotto creates a realistic feeling of space using the details of the

¹ According to Davies and Elliott (2003, pp.59-66), the Council of Trent, working in 16th century Trent, was one of the most important Catholic councils. The twenty five sessions of the council issued numerous reform decrees as opposed to Protestants' accusations, principally based on the idea that by mediating between people and God the church put obstacles before believers. This is as opposed to the argument against images of saints, for example, the Council of Trent argued that images of praying saints could help people achieve spiritual union with Jesus Christ.

landscape or geometrical lines of the buildings. This formula does not change regarding the tone of the narrative; it does not matter whether he represents *The Wedding at Cana* or the *Stigmatization of St Francis*.

Therefore, as in the majority of Greco's works, Saint Francis is placed in the dark mass of rock and often in total obscurity, thus depriving us of the opportunity to define the space. The only objects around him are a skull (the symbol of mortality; a *memento mori*) and the Bible. The figure of the saint almost fills the frames of the paintings as if it were a portrait or icon. Yet it is neither of these. These genres should, however, be dismissed, because of Saint Francis' expressive poses, which are positioned on the diagonal of the painting. Although we note the real face of a true man, the emphasis is on his concentration, as underlined by the chiaroscuro effect. The contrasting light also emphasises the folds of his hooded cloak – one of the symbols by which we recognise Saint Francis: his habit looks almost empty, so we cannot imagine what the body under it would be like. However, we can almost touch the robe and experience its coarseness – the tactile quality of the clothes and the ropes is rendered with extreme mastery.

We see only Francis' hands painted with supreme delicacy and his sensitive face, in one of the rarest moments in human life, when emotion and intellectual power come together in a condition of inner peace. However, it is not the facial expression that gives power to these works. The entire mood and mental state of Saint Francis are shown exclusively through his gestures; and this manner of representing emotional states through gestures is, perhaps, the only point where Giotto and El Greco come close to each other.

In *Saint Francis' Vision of the Flaming Torch* (1600-1605), the saint is depicted in the company of Brother Leo. He is kneeling, turning three-quarters of his body towards the viewer, while Brother Leo is sitting with his back to us and looking in almost the opposite direction. The light comes from a phosphorescent cloud in the upper right corner; Saint Francis is staring directly at it. This dim moonlight not only outlines the figures in the painting but also conveys the entire emotional mood, serving in itself as an element of expression. Saint Francis is sitting diagonally in the same line with the phosphorescent cloud, thus completing the composition. With his diagonal position Saint Francis looks much taller, as if seen from a very low angle, and his kneeling body almost bears the proportions of a standing man. According to David Davies (2003, p.184), he opens to the light but also to us, as if to give the viewer the light's divine power through his phosphorescent cloak. At the

same time, his companion Brother Leo is almost lying down, raising his right hand to the light that illuminates the contours of his cloak, thus leaving the folds extremely dark. The scene is sunk in darkness and the space is organised through the architecture of the cloaks, hoods and ropes, which monks used as belts. The rope that falls from Saint Francis' waist goes far ahead of his figure, as if it had a very heavy end to keep it in position; in a way, this reminds us of an anchor. According to the laws of gravity, the rope must fall directly to earth, following the kneeling body of St Francis; it could not therefore be so extended from his knees. This gives a sense of weightlessness and the figure being overcome by gravity. The rope forms a small square with the lines where Saint Francis' and Leo's cloaks meet the floor. In this square, El Greco places an inscription with his own name – perhaps in order to emphasize the unreality of that space and those people. Next to it, we see Brother Leo's left hand, which bears the weight of his body and also forms a right angle with the floor. It seems almost impossible for Leo's unfolded arm to support a leaning body whilst still making a right angle with the floor.

This manner, of showing the human body in convincing yet unreal poses, is among Michelangelo's most recognizable inventions. We know that after his arrival in Italy, El Greco spent a little time in Rome, where his work became closer to this style; perhaps due to his Byzantine education he preferred unrealistic styles and shared Michelangelo's contempt for baseness but not the sculptor's disdain for colours. Despite the limited chromatic range in this painting, all the effects – the tactile quality of the robes and ropes, the light, the mystic face – are rendered through colour.

El Greco was a wizard at unfolding and crushing spaces into one in the same picture, as is evident in *Espolio* (1577-79), where the foreground is formed by alternating bowing, twisting and standing figures, whilst the background is pressed by the heads of the crowd. His ability to create indefinable spaces through only clothes and robes, and through the way in which one figure suddenly peers out from behind another, is apparent in most of his pictures.

The disdain for baseness, which El Greco inherited from the two unrealistic styles of Mannerism and Byzantine, is the first thing that places his works in opposition to those of Giotto. Apart from all the differences that have to do with composition, technique and colours, Giotto's works are totally devoted to the narrative, the miracles performed by the saint, and his acknowledgment by the Pope. In the church named after Saint Francis, there is a long series of paintings depicting the episodes of the legend. Saint Francis is just a figure among the other solid participants in the events

depicted. Giotto was interested in humanity; he attributed either dramatic or lyrical power to the saint, whose figure retains the solidity of Giotto's forms and thus remains on the earth. In the *Sermon to the Birds* (1297-99, Upper Church Assisi), even the birds are placed on the earth, despite the fact that during Francis' time they were appreciated as the most privileged animals because of their mobility and ability to fly.

In *Apparition at Arles* (1297-1300), the scene takes place in a chapter-house and Saint Francis is standing up within the porch-frame of the back wall. The perception of space is given through the geometric ornaments and lines of the ceiling. Saint Francis is surrounded by friars who are sitting either on a bench or directly on the floor. Their massive figures are shown in a variety of colours and positions that betray different attitudes towards Saint Francis, who stretches out his arms with a dramatic commanding power, so remote from the peaceful meditating face of El Greco's images. This solidity of Giotto's works represents his own world: the solid reality created by the bankers and merchants who, after all, commissioned his paintings. El Greco's images of St. Francis were, however, to be contemplated in a spirit of solitary meditation, reflecting the current spiritual atmosphere of Toledo. In addition to those spiritual luminaries already well established (such as St Teresa and St John of the Cross), the town accommodated Gongora, Lope de Vega and Cervantes, all of whom El Greco is believed to have met (Clark, 1960, p.96).

For all his love of solidity and humanity, Giotto lacked the philosophical power of Saint Francis, who was a Gothic figure and represented the transcendental state of mind in that age. Some Italian artists after Giotto tried to find more appropriate images by placing him back in Gothic-like compositions, which in a way could appear more similar to El Greco's, due to their rejection of reality. The works by the Siena master Sassetta, for example, manage to convey his lyrical Gothic mood and Francis' love for joy and courtesy. These pictures, however, are naïvely beautiful and above all, lacking in that heroic concentration on the prayer that El Greco's contemporaries valued so much.

Later, Bellini set his Saint Francis in an open landscape that presents an "encyclopaedic variety of nature" (Meiss, 1964, p.8). The saint is on the right, gazing at the light with his mouth open. The skull and the Bible are behind him. One can meditate at length trying to unfold the meaning of every part of the landscape. There is a shepherd with sheep, a donkey, trees, rocks; an early morning reality that has nothing to do with El Greco's ecstasy and transcendently obscure spaces.

There are some ten paintings of Saint Francis by El Greco and each of them has been reproduced many times. According to Jose Gudiol (1962, p.198), El Greco made more than 40 copies of *Saint Francis and Brother Leo Meditating on Death*. Pacheco says that El Greco had a “large room containing small oil replicas of all the pictures he had ever painted in his life” (Clark, 1960, p.98). It is something that El Greco had possibly inherited from the Byzantine tradition; once the image was established and fulfilled its intentions it was to be repeated many times. All of his works of Saint Francis share some characteristics: a restricted palette, chiaroscuro effects, unreal – almost empty – dark spaces, expressive gestures and tactile materials rendered through colour.

Whether they represent a story based on the Francesco legend, or his prayer and meditation, paintings by Italian Renaissance artists only show episodes of the saint's life. El Greco's works, however, portray mental states. By sacrificing his only wealth, the “burning beauty of colours” (Clark, 1960, p.90), El Greco comes closer to the essence of Francesco's vocation; the idea that we should liberate ourselves from our wealth in order to achieve spiritual purity. They are, perhaps, the most obvious examples of the spiritual turn that El Greco experienced in Toledo, but they also show his unique perception of the world. There is no clear evidence of his Byzantine education in these paintings; we find in them an extraordinary combination of Titian's mastery of colour, mannerist forms and El Greco's personality. The very fact that he preferred the unrealistic style of Mannerism to Giotto's solid figures is more likely due to his first years in Crete.

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