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Review: Javier Barón (ed.), *El Greco & La Pintura Moderna*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, June–October 2014.

by Claudia Hopkins

The exhibition *El Greco y La Pintura Moderna*, curated by Javier Barón at the Prado earlier this year in commemoration of El Greco's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary, celebrated El Greco as an essential source of inspiration for nineteenth and twentieth-century painters. The display of 26 works by El Greco with 80 paintings by modern artists offered a truly visual feast that invited the viewer to see the old master through the varied lenses of modern artists, ranging from Eduard Manet through to the luminaries of twentieth-century art, such as Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock and Francis Bacon.

What emerged was a complex web of rich and diverse interpretations of El Greco, which showed that the revolution of modern art did not begin at zero but had its roots in the art of the past: El Greco's somber portraits of Toledan nobleman find different adaptations in portraits by artists as diverse as Madrazo, Picasso or Modigliani; a comparison of Cézanne's *Bathers* with two small sculptures of the resurrected Christ by El Greco reveal striking similarities. El Greco—a highly individualist artist in his own time—prompted many modern artists, searching for their own paths, to identify with him. “*Yo, El Greco*” wrote Picasso on an early sketch of El Greco-like heads with pointed beards. Chagall found in El Greco formal and spiritual inspiration, as exemplified by his *Self-Portrait in Vitsep*, a city referred to as the ‘Russian Toledo’ for its Christian and Jewish elements. For the Spanish artist Zuluoga El Greco became an obsession. As is well known, his acquisition of El Greco's *The Vision of St. John* turned out to be vital to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which signaled the birth of cubism. El Greco's impact on cubism was shown in the exhibition through smaller works by Picasso and his followers. Perhaps the exhibition's most spectacular and challenging section was the display of monumental works by El Greco, such as the *Laocoonte* and the *Vision of Saint John*, in dialogue with expressionism, abstract expressionism, surrealism and new figurative art.

In order to understand the process by which El Greco's work was assimilated and ‘translated’ into modern languages of art, we need to turn to the exhibition catalogue. This well-researched and multi-authored publication includes two essays by Javier Barón, and one essay by each of the following scholars: Leticia Ruiz Gómez, Pedro J. Martínez Plaza, Veronika Schroeder, Jeffrey Schrader and Javier Portús. Barón's introductory essay is followed by Ruiz Gómez' rich analysis of the pictorial development of El Greco from his Cretan origins to his last works in Toledo, which highlights the formal aspects that so appealed to the modern eye: his energetic brushwork, expressivity of form and colour, and innovative organization of space. In turn, Martínez Plaza offers new insights into the presence of El Greco's works in private and public collections as a factor contributing to his fame both in and outside Spain.

An important issue—difficult to transmit through the exhibition—concerns the importance of art historians, curators and critics, who presented El Greco in modernist terms to their audiences. As Barón explains, El Greco's status as a precursor of Cézanne, the father of modern art, was a powerful construct. The parallels that critics detected in Cézanne's and El Greco's works were

repeated over and over again, leading to a topos that stands at the basis of the modern fascination with El Greco. As Schroeder argues, the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe—the ‘apostle of El Greco’—presented El Greco with such enthusiasm and conviction through his travelogue *Die Spanische Reise* (1910) that it was *his* vision of El Greco that was adopted. German expressionists, who in the pre-war years wished to turn their back on materialism and build a life based on spirit and soul, found in Meier-Graefe’s El Greco a rich visual vocabulary—ethereal figures, vaguely defined nocturnal landscapes, anti-natural colours, monochrome greys etc.—which helped them to visualize their existentialist identity.

Artists in North America were also drawn to El Greco—one artist who had seen El Greco’s *View of Toledo* at the Knoedler Galleries in 1915, judged this work as “more provocative” (p. 242) than the Armory show of 1913—but El Greco’s perceived modernity had different repercussions in North America than in Europe. The North American fascination was bound up, at first, with regionalism and formalism, and then with abstraction. Thomas Hart Benton’s *Chilmark*, a quintessential American landscape with spiritual overtones, takes inspiration from the undulating lines of El Greco’s *Agony*. Pollock, following Benton’s example, made small drawings after El Greco’s *Resurrection* from a black and white reproduction, but unlike Benton, emphasised the expressive potential of the figures. As Schrader’s nuanced essay reveals, Pollock’s interest in El Greco was often mediated via other El Greco-influenced artists, such as Orozco or Picasso. Hence, the alignment Pollock-El Greco is not always obvious.

Comparisons between abstract expressionists and El Greco were often made by gallery owners and curators in the 1950s. Later on artistic interest in El Greco waned due to the rise of pop and other movements, but the idea of El Greco’s vital role to modern art still had currency in 1965 when even Roy Lichtenstein talked of a direct lineage from El Greco to abstract expressionism.

The final chapter by Portús reveals the diverse responses to El Greco by surrealists and later figurative artists in Spain, France and Britain. The importance of art writing surfaces again. The complex debates about El Greco led to a kaleidoscopic vision of the artist, which also found its echoes in art. For example, Roger Fry’s evaluation of El Greco as baroque and anti-classical made him palatable to British artists like Henry Moore, who considered him as an artist with an inner vision. Other critics looked at El Greco in terms of mysticism or eroticism, which in turn attracted surrealists like Oscar Domínguez who explored the erotic potential of the old master.

The reception of El Greco in modern times is not a new topic. The Prado exhibition builds on two previous ones: *El Greco. Su revalorización por el Modernismo Catalan*, in Barcelona, 1996, and *El Greco and Modernism* (which focused on German expressionism) in Düsseldorf, 2012. However, the Prado exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are unprecedented in their sheer scope and firmly place El Greco in a wide international arena of modern art.