

El Greco

The first great Spanish painter was not a native of Spain. Domenikos Theotokopoulos was born in 1540 or 1541 on an island called Crete which is in the Greek Islands. Not a lot is known of his childhood. And nothing is known of his parents, or of the Theotokopoulos family. There is every indication that his family was of some status, and able at least to provide a liberal education for Domenikos. It was almost certainly in Crete, too, that he received his first artistic training, and possibly in the monastery of Saint Catherine, the most important school of painting on the island. He did not leave this in a diary, nor were there pictures but he made reference in one of the first works painted.

Monasteries were the only places of learning and artistic training in Crete. It was very formal and strict and did not keep up with the times.

There was war and chaos on the island of Crete and many left for Italy – including Dominokos. There was a letter dated 1570 which states that he left the island for Italy. He got there and his friends simply referred to him as El Greco.

This time could not have been more favorable. It was the time of the where many artists were all working in the city. It must have been an immense inspiration to work with the great masters. He helped another famous artist named Titian at this time who was very wise but very old. This was his training.

At this time, Spain king's had this huge project (Escorial), to build this great palace and cathedral. He was directing his great crusade to change all the people that were bad. You see the king was very religious and wanted everyone to believe what he believed in. The King was seeking painters to decorate his great palace. Many artists wanted to be asked by the king. But El Greco by no means a great artist in Venice. We know this because of his paintings.

In 1570, the first certain date in El Greco's biography, he moves to Rome, the capital of the Christian world, and the great artistic centre of Italy. It was there that he was to complete his artistic training and his introduction to the new ideas of the West.

At age 35 he received the offer of an important commission for Madrid, Spain. He hoped of course to be eventually working for the Escorial.

That year the long-desired opportunity to work for the Escorial was offered him. He worked for two years on the painting: if he were successful, his great ambition would be fulfilled. But he was to be disappointed. The splendid masterpiece of painting did not please the King, who commissioned another artist to make a substitute. El Greco was devastated. He turned to his first patrons in Toledo, and he was not given another opportunity to work for the King.

It was a time in Spain of great religious and spiritual activity - possibly found in its most concentrated form in Toledo. Toledo was considered the religious capital of Spain.

Like all great independent geniuses, El Greco could have no real followers. He was the one outstanding painter of his age, and no painter has better expressed the spirit of a particular time and place. He was understood by only a few in his time, and soon after his death was more or less forgotten.

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Toledo

Toledo is a medieval city and today if you travel there you will find it preserved. It is less than an hour away from Madrid by train. The city was important to the empires of the Romans, Visigoths, Moors, and at one point, headquarters for Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V (Carlos I). Toledo is also famous for its swords.

Gates to the city – Toledo has many medieval gates, Arab walls, bridges over the Tagus River (Rio Tajo), twisty winding streets, and a great sense of adventure.

Arab city walls – The inhabitants of Toledo were a rebellious lot, and for centuries the city was routinely attacked by one group or the other. Whole sections of city walls, constructed in the 10th century, are beautifully preserved.

Puerta de Cambron (Cambron Gate), entrance to the old Jewish quarter. The gate was also living quarters for the guards. Check out the original massive iron-covered doors as you go through the gate.

Bridges – Toledo is a city high on a hill, surrounded on three sides by the Tagus River (Rio Tajo). The river, with steep banks on either side, was a natural defense for the city, but fortified bridges were essential for people going in and out of the city to the east and west.

Catedral (Cathedral)– The Cathedral of Toledo, often compared for beauty with Notre Dame, is not only one of the biggest Gothic cathedrals around, but the monumental interior is totally covered with sculpture, paintings, carvings, massive gold and silver altar pieces, and illuminated with 750 stained glass windows.

El Greco's House and Museum (Casa-Museo de El Greco) - Visit this house-museum to get a feel of what life was like at the end of the 16th century - tiled kitchen, sewing room; painting studio, charming interior patio. (El Greco didn't live in this particular house in Toledo, but the furnishings bring to life the time in which he painted.)

- Most of El Greco's paintings aren't here in Toledo