

El Greco

**NAME:** El Greco

**Name of Painting:** View of Toledo Date of work 1604

**OCCUPATION:** Architect, Painter, Sculptor

**BIRTH DATE:** c. 1541

**DEATH DATE:** April 07, 1614

**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Candia, Crete, Greece

**PLACE OF DEATH:** Toledo, Spain

**BEST KNOWN FOR** –Greek artist whose painting and sculpture helped define the Spanish Renaissance and influence various movements to come.

## Synopsis

El Greco was born around 1541 in Crete, which was then part of the Republic of Venice. In his mid-twenties, he traveled to Venice and studied under [Titian](#), who was the most renowned painter of his day. Around age 35, he moved to Toledo, Spain, where he lived and worked for the rest of his life, producing his best-known paintings. His works from this period are seen as precursors of both Expressionism and Cubism. He is remembered chiefly for his elongated, tortured figures, often religious in nature, the style of which baffled his contemporaries but helped establish his reputation in the years to come.

## Early Years: Venice and Rome

El Greco was born Domenikos Theotokopoulos on the island of Crete, which was at the time a Venetian possession. Around age 20, somewhere between 1560 and 1565, El Greco (which means “The Greek”) went to Venice to study and found himself under the tutelage of [Titian](#), the greatest painter of the time. Under Titian, El Greco began mastering the fundamental aspects of Renaissance painting—e.g., perspective, constructing figures, and staging detailed narrative scenes (a prime example of his work from this period is *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*). □□El Greco moved to Rome from Venice after a time, remaining from 1570 to 1576, staying initially in the palace of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, one of the most influential and wealthy individuals in Rome. In 1572, El Greco joined the painters’ academy and established a studio, but success would prove elusive (El Greco had criticized [Michelangelo](#)’s artistic abilities, which likely led to him being ostracized by the Roman art establishment), and he left Rome for Spain in 1576.

## Finding a Foothold: Toledo, Spain

In Madrid, El Greco tried to secure royal patronage from King Philip II, but to no avail, so he moved on to Toledo, where he finally began to find the success history would remember and where he would paint his masterpieces.

□□ In Toledo, El Greco met Diego de Castilla, the dean of the Toledo Cathedral, who commissioned El Greco to paint a group of works for the altar of the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (such as *The Trinity* and *The Assumption of the Virgin*, both 1579). Castilla also facilitated the commission of *The Disrobing of Christ* (1579), and these paintings would become some of El Greco's most accomplished masterworks.

(Unfortunately, the price El Greco demanded for *The Disrobing of Christ* led to a dispute, and he never received another comparable commission from Castilla again.) □□ Regardless of where commissions now came from, El Greco embarked on a wildly successful career in Toledo and produced such landmark works as *St. Sebastian* (1578), *St. Peter in Tears* (1582) and *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1588). *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, especially, encapsulates El Greco's art in that it depicts a visionary experience, transcending the known and revealing that which exists in the spiritual imagination. One of El Greco's most celebrated works, it features a dichotomy of heaven and earth, the burial and the spiritual world waiting above, and it took his artistic vision beyond what he had previously been able to accomplish.

Another notable work from this period is *View of Toledo* (1597), which is considered the first landscape in Spanish art. It is also one of the only, if not the only, surviving landscape done by El Greco, who rarely strayed from religious subjects and portraits.

## Later Years and Legacy

El Greco's later works are marked by exaggerated, and often distorted, figures, stretching beyond the realities of the human body (which is what modern viewers generally have found so appealing). Among them are *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1599), *Concert of Angels* (1610), and *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (completed in 1614). *Fifth Seal* in particular went on to spark great debate, as it has been suggested that it was an influence on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, often considered the first cubist painting. □□ El Greco's effect on Picasso's evolution is just one thread of his influence. The twisting figures and brash, unreal colors that form the very

foundation of El Greco's art influenced scores of artists, from the cubists following Picasso to the German expressionists to the abstract impressionists after them. His work also inspired those outside the realm of painting, such as writers [Rainer Maria Rilke](#) and Nikos Kazantzakis. El Greco died on April 7, 1614, unappreciated in his time, with the art world waiting 250 years before embracing his status as a master.

# View of Toledo- El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos) (Greek, Iráklion (Candia) 1540/41–1614 Toledo)

Medium:

Oil on canvas

Dimensions:

47 3/4 x 42 3/4 in. (121.3 x 108.6 cm)

Classification:

Paintings

This artwork is currently on display in **Gallery 611**

**Gallery Label** In this, his greatest surviving landscape, El Greco portrays the city he lived and worked in for most of his life. The painting belongs to the tradition of emblematic city views, rather than a faithful documentary description. The view of the eastern section of Toledo from the north would have excluded the cathedral, which the artist therefore imaginatively moved to the left of the Alcázar (the royal palace). Other buildings represented in the painting include the ancient Alcántara Bridge, and on the other side of the river Tagus, the Castle of San Servando.

**Catalogue Entry** We know remarkably little about the circumstances around the creation of this masterpiece, El Greco's greatest surviving landscape. There is a possibility that it was still in the artist's studio when he died, for the 1614 inventory of his possessions lists three landscapes: a "Toledo" and "two landscapes of Toledo". What must be the same three paintings recur in the 1621 inventory of the possessions of El Greco's son, in which the measurements for the first translate to about 41 x 66 1/8 inches, and for the other two to about 43 3/4 x 43 3/4 inches. (The 1621 inventory lists six further landscapes, either just begun or unfinished, but neither artist nor subject is included.) The larger, horizontal canvas is usually identified with the View and Plan of Toledo in the Museo de El Greco, Toledo, though that work actually measures 52 x 89 3/4 inches. Two paintings of Toledo by El Greco are listed in the 1629 inventory of the collection of the artist's friend and patron Pedro Salazar de Mendoza. These are described as "a picture of the city of Toledo with its plan" (possibly the View and Plan in the Museo de El Greco) and "a landscape of Toledo looking towards the Alcántara bridge" (the viewpoint of the MMA canvas). Later two landscapes by El Greco are recorded in the collection of Pedro Laso de la Vega, Conde de Arcos, a major collector who owned at least seven paintings by El Greco, possibly including the Portrait of a Cardinal also in the MMA. His inventory of 1632 or 1639 lists the two landscapes in his castle at Batres as a "piece [showing] Toledo and the other a monastery of the Great Camaldolese". The second is certainly the Allegory of the Camaldolese Order (Instituto de Valencia de

Don Juan, Madrid), and the other may well be the MMA painting, which belonged to a descendant of the Conde de Arcos when it was shown (together with the Portrait of a Cardinal) to Louisine and Harry Havemeyer in 1901; Louisine acquired it only in 1909, after her husband's death, from the French dealer Durand-Ruel.<sup>22</sup> This fragmented information presents a number of problems, not least of which is the issue of how many landscapes with a view of Toledo El Greco painted and when and how the ones listed changed ownership. Because of these uncertainties, our understanding of the origin and meaning of the two surviving landscape paintings—the View of Toledo and the View and Plan—remains largely speculative. Certainly, they respond to very different objectives: one setting out to document the city in cartographic terms, the other evoking it through a selective arrangement of its most characteristic features. As Brown and Kagan (1982) noted, the MMA painting belongs to a tradition of emblematic city views and derives its potency precisely from the representational licence it takes. As with El Greco's finest portraits, its approach is interpretative rather than documentary: it seeks to portray the essence of the city rather than to record its actual appearance.<sup>23</sup> Both here and in the View and Plan the city is shown from the north, except that El Greco has included only the easternmost portion, above the Tagus river. This partial view would have excluded the cathedral, which he therefore imaginatively moved to the left of the dominant Alcázar or royal palace. A string of buildings descends a steep hill to the Roman Alcántara bridge, while on the other side of the Tagus is the castle of San Servando. Another cluster of buildings appears on a cloud-like form below the castle. In his View and Plan El Greco shows the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist (the Tavera Hospital) raised on a cloud, and explains in an inscription that he used this device so that the hospital would not obscure a view of the city gate. Taking up this line of reasoning, Brown and Kagan have suggested that in his cluster of buildings in the MMA picture El Greco may have wanted to represent the Agaliense monastery where Saint Ildefonso, the patron saint of Toledo, went on retreat. He may have felt that a depiction of this monastery complex was crucial to a spiritual portrait of the city. That the buildings are on a cloud has been questioned—figures are shown walking about—but there is really no other explanation for the form. Kagan identifies Pedro Salazar de Mendoza, who either owned both pictures or similar ones, as crucial to the genesis of the two paintings. He was administrator at the Tavera Hospital and his interest in maps might explain the character of the View and Plan. Similarly, his interest in Saint Ildefonso and his attempt to determine the site of the Agaliense monastery used by the saint as a retreat could be equally important for the View of Toledo.<sup>24</sup> The same view appears in the background of El Greco's altarpiece in the Capilla de San José, Toledo, which was commissioned in 1597 (National Gallery of Art, Washington). It also appears, without the Alcázar, in The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo), which was commissioned in 1607. The San José altarpiece shows Saint Joseph with the infant Christ, and an inscription adjacent to it refers to the Christ Child as the ruler of Toledo: the city thus appears as his dominion. In the Immaculate Conception the city, significantly deprived of the building that served as the seat of secular power, is transformed into one of a number of Marian symbols in the landscape. It has sometimes been conjectured that the View of Toledo is itself a fragment of a

religious picture. Although this is incorrect, the impulse behind it is intimately linked with the altarpieces and it seems likely that the View served as a model for the ecclesiastical works and thus dates to about 1597

*Famous Quotes:*

*I paint because the spirits whisper madly inside my head."*☞- El Greco

*I suffer for my art and despise the witless moneyed scoundrels who praise it."*☞- El Greco

*The language of art is celestial in origin and can only be understood by the chosen."*☞- El Greco

*It is only after years of struggle and deprivation that the young artist should touch color - and then only in the company of his betters."*☞- El Greco

*Artists create out of a sense of desolation. The spirit of creation is a excruciating, intricate exploration from within the soul."*☞- El Greco

*I was created by the all powerful God to fill the universe with my masterpieces."*☞- El Greco

*Art is everywhere you look for it, hail the twinkling stars for they are God's careless splatters."*☞- El Greco

*You must study the Masters but guard the original style that beats within your soul and put to sword those who would try to steal it."*☞- El Greco