

# El Greco's *Saint Francis* at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Text published in:

*Buletina = Boletín = Bulletin*. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Eder Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao = Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, no. 8, 2014, pp. 111-157.

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**S***aint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, by El Greco [fig. 1], came to light in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. All but hidden away for three and a half centuries in an enclosed convent, the painting was rescued from oblivion and almost certain destruction. Our purpose in this essay was to trace the painting's fortunes once El Greco had finished it, paying particular attention to its wartime predicament, until it was finally acquired by the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, where it is now exhibited. We explain why this splendid version of Saint Francis, signed and dated by the artist, was the butt of decades of misunderstanding and disparagement, and saddled with an undeserved reputation for being much the worse for wear and having been heavily repainted. The situation lasted until the late 1990s, despite very few scholars having questioned the work's authenticity.

For a complete vision and a full understanding of the work, we decided on a novel approach that would combine historic, stylistic and technical features viewed from a scientific perspective. Besides documentary research, a thorough set of tests were performed for in-depth analysis. Though careful not to lose sight of the latest research findings, we were particularly interested in paintings with direct links to this one, including versions on the same theme in public and private collections. It is fair to say that this essay is to date the fullest approach to the work in question. Another of our objectives was to reconstruct the painting process to identify stylistic and technical features extensive to the artist's production in his maturity.

## Rescued from disrepute

Of all the penitent saints painted by El Greco (a roster that includes Mary Magdalene, Saint Peter and Saint Jerome), Saint Francis of Assisi (Assisi, Italy, 1182-1226), canonized by Gregory IX in 1228, takes pride of place in the artist's abundant production. Saint Francis was associated with the ideas of penitence and repentance, very much in line with Counter-Reformation Spain, where religious convictions were deep-rooted.



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1. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
Oil on canvas, 105.5 x 86.5 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 69/115

Just how popular portraits of the saint became may be gauged from the fact that El Greco's workshop produced a hundred or so versions and that his models were copied and repeated throughout the 17th century. Except for an early *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, from a private collection, painted in Italy between 1570 and 1572, the rest were done in his workshop in Toledo over a period of more than thirty years. El Greco always saw Saint Francis as a rather austere-looking young man, who is shown, at times overcome by emotion, at prayer, meditating or receiving the stigmata.

Although often harsh in his criticism of the artist's style ("[...] who will believe that Dominico Greco often took his paintings to hand, and repainted them time and again, to leave the colours different and separated and add those cruel blemishes to affect boldness?")<sup>1</sup>, Seville painter and essayist Francisco Pacheco (1564-1664) praised his manner of portraying the saint: "It is true that if Antonio Mohedano [1563-1626] had followed these signs [he provides a description of the most convenient manner of portraying the saint] in my view, he would be the best painter of this Saint known to us in this age; but we shall leave that glory to Dominico Greco, because he better matches what history tells us; [...] he dressed him, harshly, in rough serge, as a recollect [...]"<sup>2</sup>. He also noted how some saints, when praying before the Crucifix, were clearly moved by His presence: "Saint Bernard and Saint Francis, like many other Saints, are known for the devotion and ardour of spirit they often conceived within their souls, on seeing the image of Christ Crucified"<sup>3</sup>.

Of all the surviving portrayals of the saint, the most successful was the one from the model for this particular painting, in twenty or so versions, either autograph, from the artist's studio or by his followers. And one of the most felicitous of these is the *Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix* at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. In this innovative composition El Greco shows Saint Francis's austere profile poised over the Crucifix and outlined against the darkness of the cave (in 1224, two years before his death, he had withdrawn to a cave at La Verna, on what is now Mount Penna, around 160 kilometres north of Assisi, to do penance<sup>4</sup>). Portrayed full-length, although in a three-quarters pose, there is something phantasmagorical about the saint's head, shown in profile, and the gaunt, haggard face, pallid skin and thin beard over a surprisingly strong jaw. Light enters through an opening that looks out onto a cloudy blue sky. In the opposite corner, the colours of an ivy branch, symbol of Christ, of salvation, strive to animate the whole. The saint's contemporary biographer, Tomás de Celano, describes him pretty much in these terms:

Saint Francis was small of stature, his face long, the forehead unwrinkled and a smidgeon elevated, eyebrows horizontal and a dark complexion. His eyes, middling and black, irradiated a gaze simple and frank; the nose was regular, straight and fine; the beard, thin and black, like his hair; small, thin lips, and a voice vehement, gentle, clear and resounding; the neck, slender; the shoulders straight and the arms short; his hands, slender, with long fingers and protuberant nails; the legs, thin; the feet small and soft the skin<sup>5</sup>.

Dressed in the rough habit held in place by the cord with three knots symbolising the three vows of the Franciscan order, Saint Francis holds his hands crossed on his chest, as yet unvisited by the stigmata he received

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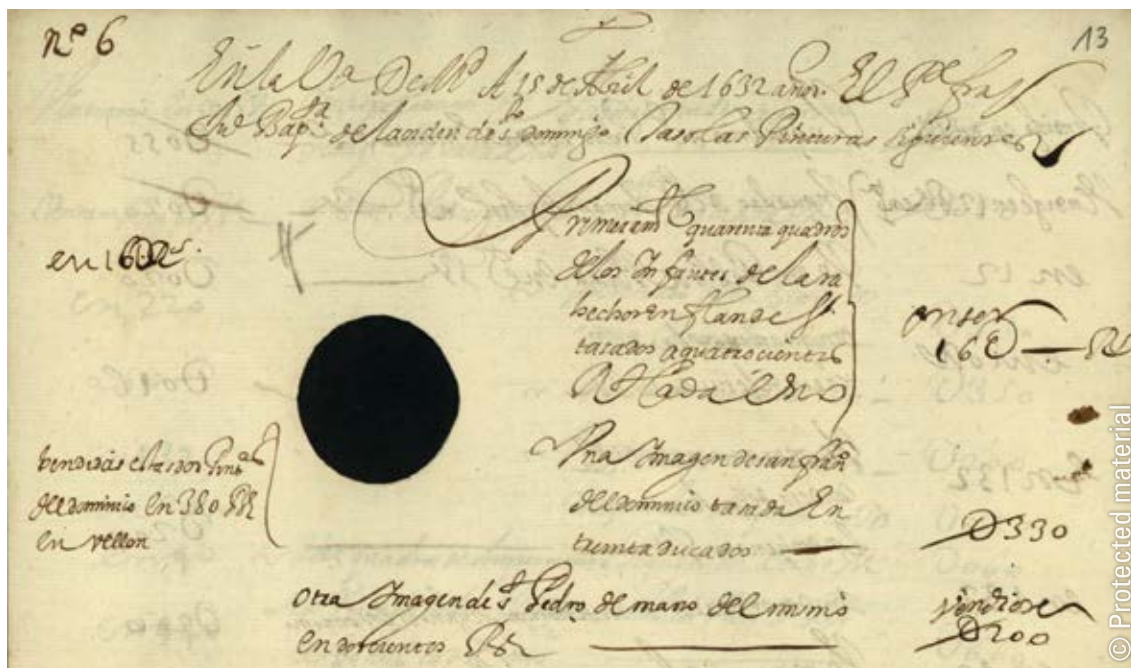
1 Pacheco 1990, p. 483.

2 Ibid., p. 698.

3 Ibid., p. 259.

4 "Considered in itself as an expression of a subterranean world, close to the kingdom of the dead, the cave bears a sense of renunciation, of a tomb willingly embraced, of the death of meaning, of the dark night of the soul, to use Saint John of the Cross's expression, into which a sudden clarity penetrates [...]. The night, by which I mean the shadows in the backgrounds of the ascetics painted by El Greco, Tristán, Ribera, Murillo, is the dark night of the senses, renunciation, penitence". Gállego 1984, p. 243.

5 Tomás de Celano. *Early Life of Saint Francis*, 1228, ch. 83. Quoted in Gratien de Paris 1932, p. 29. Reproduced at <http://www.franciscanos.org/sfa/gratien4.htm> [consulted: 11/11/2013].



2. Inventory, valuation and sale of the family goods of the first Count of los Arcos, 1632-1639  
 Archive of the Valencia de Don Juan Institute, Madrid  
 Mss. 26-V-24, fol. 13v

in the cave, in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. Unlike later versions also accepted as autograph, where the figure tends to lengthen, here it is portrayed with greater realism. His only company is a crucifix propped against a skull and a breviary placed on a rock acting as an improvised altar, together making a splendid still life.

The painting comes from the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Cuerva (Toledo), founded in 1585 by *doña* Aldonza Niño de Guevara (Toledo, c. 1532-Cuerva, Toledo, 1604), with whom it would appear to be related. Aldonza, who with her husband Garcilaso (or Garci Lasso) de la Vega y Guzmán held dominion over the borough, had spent part of her fortune between 1565 and 1572 on extending and refitting the church of *Santiago Apóstol* (Saint James the Apostle), adjacent to the convent<sup>6</sup>. So it is no great surprise to find this painting in Cuerva: the family had close links to the borough and owned properties there, along with others in Toledo, Batres and Madrid. Several members of the family were also clients of El Greco, including Aldonza herself “practically a contemporary” and her son Pedro Lasso de la Vega Niño y Guzmán (Toledo, 1559-1637), first Count of Arcos and lord of Batres and Cuerva. Between them all, they built up an excellent collection of works by the artist, as the family inventories show.

6 When *doña* Aldonza’s husband died, she withdrew to the convent of the *jerónimas de San Pablo* (the Hieronymite nuns of Saint Paul), in Toledo, which then also housed the family funeral chapel. The chapel was later transferred to Cuerva. When her convent was founded in 1585, Aldonza stayed there until her death. See Ríos de Balmaseda 1998, p. 20, and José Álvarez Lopera’s contribution to Athens 2007, p. 383. In handwritten documents of the time we consulted, the surname Lasso appears written both with one *s* and double *s*. Here we use the double *s* version, which is how it appears in the majority of the documents and how members of the family signed documents.

7 *Foundation and Endowment of the chapel of the Holy Relics in the Borough of Cuerva (Toledo)*, 1615. Madrid, Archives of the Don Juan Institute of Valencia, sign. 26-I-9; *Collection of documents referring to Rodrigo Niño y Lasso Count of Añover, deceased in 1620, being preceded by a list of documents contained in this book*, 1620. Madrid, Archives of the Don Juan Institute of Valencia; *Letter of Last Will and Testament of Mariana de Mendoza Countess of los Arcos wife of Pedro Lasso de la Vega Niño Guzmán, Count of los Arcos*, 1626. Madrid, AHPM, Historic Archive of Protocols, protocol no. 2345; *Inventory, valuation and auction of the goods of Luis Lasso de la Vega done by his father Pedro Lasso de la Vega Niño Guzmán on his death in 1632, 1632*. Madrid, AHPM, Historic Archive of Protocols, protocol no. 6167.

Understandably, the Bilbao *Saint Francis* has traditionally been considered to come from this illustrious family, and in an attempt to prove it we consulted a range of documents associated with the painting<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the work is mentioned just once in the inventory of the goods of Pedro Lasso de la Vega, dictated in Madrid on 15 April 1632<sup>8</sup>. In amongst the seemingly endless, and remarkably detailed list of objects mentioned are several lots of paintings, including several Grecos kept at various of the family residences. The heading for Folio 13v, with the number 6 in the margin, reads as follows:

In the *Villa* of Madrid on 15 April 1632 years. Father *fray* Juan Bautista [the painter Juan Bautista Maíno], of the Dominican Order appraised the following paintings

In the first place forty paintings of the *Infantes de Lara* made in Flanders, valued at four hundred *reales* each one

-An image of Saint Francis by Dominico valued at thirty ducats

-Another image of Saint Peter by the same artist's hand at two hundred *reales*<sup>9</sup>.

The note in the left-hand margin [fig. 2], mentioning some works is of some interest:

These two paintings by Dominico sold for 380 *reales de vellón*.

A long list of paintings is later given that includes other works by El Greco, some of them of particular import<sup>10</sup>.

*Saint Francis by Dominico* is valued at the not inconsiderable sum of 30 ducats, and is recorded as having been sold together with an image of Saint Peter, for 380 *reales de vellón* in all (a *real* was worth 25 cents, one quarter of a peseta; *vellón* is billon, a silver and copper alloy). However, we were unable to get beyond what Balbina M. Caviro said in her article "Pedro Lasso de la Vega's Grecos", published in 1985<sup>11</sup>. In her view, it is very hard to tell if the "image of Saint Francis by Dominico" mentioned in the inventory is the one studied here or not.

But what is really intriguing is that, if the painting is listed in Pedro Lasso's 1632 inventory as "valued and sold", it may be the one that came from Cuerva. Clearly, we cannot rule out the possibility of the "image of Saint Francis by Dominico" being a different work and that Aldonza herself commissioned the painting discussed in this essay from the artist directly with the idea of presenting it to the convent she had founded in 1585, the year she entered it to stay until her death in 1604. If this were the case, there is no reason for the painting to be listed in the inventories; furthermore, as this is one of the earliest versions of the model, the year 1585 would fit the possible date mooted by some researchers. But whether it is the Saint Francis mentioned in the inventory of Pedro Lasso de la Vega's goods and assets<sup>12</sup> or a direct commission by Aldon-

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8 *Inventory, valuation and sale of the family goods of the first Count of los Arcos, Pedro Lasso de la Vega, 1632-1639*. Madrid, Archives of the Don Juan Institute of Valencia, mss. 26-V-24.

9 *Ibid.*, folio 13v.

10 The El Greco paintings are mentioned in the following folios: fol. 13v, "A large painting of Laucon [Laocoonte] by Dominico at seventy ducats"; fol. 14v mentions the impressive portrait of the Cardinal and Inquisitor General, Aldonza's brother, painted by El Greco in 1600 and 1601, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art; fol. 31r, a "part of Toledo" or *View of Toledo* also at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and sold by the countesses of Añover and Castañeda to Paris art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel in 1907 from the Palacio de Oñate in Madrid; "Monastery of the Great Camaldolite" or *Allegory of the Order of the Camaldulensians*, of which Pedro Lasso possessed two versions, one held at the Don Juan Institute of Valencia, the other in the College of the Patriarch of Valencia; fol. 31r, "the Nursing Madonna"; fol. 32v, "a painting of Saint Luke the Evangelist by Dominico Greco"; fol. 35v, "one of a boy lighting a candle worth one hundred *reales*", which might be the popular theme of the *Soplón*, although no mention is made of it being by El Greco.

11 Caviro 1985.

12 In the list of paintings of the inventory of Luis Lasso de la Vega (Toledo, 1597-1632), third Count of Añover and son of Pedro Lasso de la Vega, mention is also made of "Another [painting] of Saint Francis [valued] at twenty ducats", with no reference to the artist. *Inventory and Valuation of the goods of the Count of Añover Luis Lasso de la Vega*, clerk Francisco Suarez, A.H.P.M., 6167, fol. 391, Madrid, 1632.

za, the fact remains that for centuries it was all but hidden from public view at the enclosed convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Cuerva.

Nothing more was heard of the painting until 14 June 1920, when the Directorate General for Fine Arts wrote to the Academy enclosing the request made by the prioress of the convent for it to report, as a State consultative body for the fine arts, on the convenience of “the State acquiring, for a sum of one hundred and twenty-five thousand pesetas, a painting by El Greco portraying Saint Francis of Assisi”<sup>13</sup>. However, as at 10 October of the following year, no commission had visited Cuerva to draw up the report. Financial difficulties were given as the reason for the delay, “there being no credit applicable to the case in the Budget”<sup>14</sup>. Another year went by and on 23 October 1922, with no report forthcoming, the Ministry urged the Academy to submit it. After a further two-year wait, a report was finally written on 21 January 1924 by the members of the Academy José Garnelo and Luis Menéndez Pidal, members of the mission sent to Cuerva “thanks to the kindness of their fellow member *señor* Conde de Casal, who generously provided them with the means to make the difficult journey quickly and in comfort”. After years of waiting, the verdict of both members of the mission must have bitterly disappointed the nuns: despite stating that “For all the above reasons, the painting is undeniably authentic and of positive value”, they ended by saying that “bearing in mind the number of extraordinary works by the same artist in our National Collection, the authors of this report do not think it to be of great import to recommend acquisition of the painting in question by the State”. Furthermore, in their view the original valuation of the painting was too high, and they brought it down to 65,000 pesetas<sup>15</sup>.

This important document, kept at the Academy, also includes information of particular importance for this essay, as it clarifies a major point. It comes in the paragraph in which the academicians discuss the conservation of the work and confirms a fact we will return to later on. What it says is this:

The canvas measures one metre five centimetres by 0.95 and is well conserved complete in all its parts frame and stretcher as it came from the artist’s hands and studio [...]<sup>16</sup>.

On 30 January 1924, a few days after the two academy members had finished their report, the Directorate General for Fine Arts wrote to ask the President of the Board of Trustees of the Prado National Museum to consider the convenience or otherwise of keeping the painting. They did not have to wait long for an answer; hardly a month had gone by when, on 26 February, the Museum management sent a handwritten letter to the man responsible at the Directorate General of Fine Arts in which they use, as a pretext for not acquiring it, the same reason given by the two academicians:

that, there being in this Museum 23 paintings by Dominico Theotocópuli, El Greco, the institution is not greatly interested in the acquisition, for its own collection, of the ‘Saint Francis kneeling before a Crucifix’ belonging to the Convent of Carmelite nuns in Cuerva (Toledo), and whose acquisition by the State has been requested by the R. M. Prioress and is valued at sixty-five thousand pesetas the San Fernando R. A. of Fine Arts<sup>17</sup>.

With the onset of the Spanish Civil War, sparked by the military uprising on 18 July 1936, a wave of anti-religious feeling led to serious outbreaks of violent public disorder. Major works of Spain’s historic and

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13 Archive-Library of the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts of, ARABASF, sign. 5-1-2. My thanks to Esperanza Navarrete Martínez, archivist, for making such important documents available.

14 *Ibid.*, sign. 5-5-1.

15 *Ibid.*, sign. 5-5-1.

16 *Ibid.*, sign. 5-5-1. The members of the Academy, probably as the result of an error, make the width of the picture 8.5 centimetres longer than it really is, 85 centimetres, as a brief examination of the unpainted side edges of the canvas makes clear.

17 Letter dated 26 February 1924 from the management of the National Museum of the Prado to the official at the Directorate General of Fine Arts. C-17-2-924.



artistic heritage were lost when churches and convents in the Republican zone were burned and sacked. In view of this worrying turn of events, the Republican government took a series of urgent measures designed to safeguard goods and properties and on 23 July 1936, just five days after the outbreak of war, created by decree the Artistic Heritage Confiscation and Protection Board. One of the Board's primordial objectives was the transfer of artworks to places of safety to prevent them from being destroyed.

Neither the convent nor the church at Cuerva escaped the uncontrolled rage of the first few days of the war. The convent was sacked and practically destroyed. From 22 July 1936 people from Cuerva began to harass the eighteen nuns living there, until the nuns received the order to leave the convent. It is worth quoting at this point from a brief text on the history of the convent written by nuns from the community; the nuns very kindly presented it to us on the occasion of our visit there in October 2010. One of the nuns relates the dramatic events that took place in the convent during the war:

one of the nuns who lived through the events gives a vivid picture in her hand-written notebook [...]. The convent and the Parish Church were profaned and completely looted [...]. Anyone with a mind to it entered the convent to steal [...]. They had opened a hole in the wall separating it from the Church and they entered and left with whatever they wanted through it [...] what they didn't want was piled onto a tip in the kitchen garden. The library and the archive, a real treasure-house, just disappeared. In their hunt for valuables, they had knocked out ceilings and walls, not even respecting the tomb of our founder, *Doña Aldonza*<sup>18</sup>.

When the library and archive, both of great artistic and documentary value, were destroyed, any information held there about the El Greco painting was lost.

In view of what was happening, and to avoid worse destruction, the Confiscation Board, as part of its policy for protecting the heritage in Toledo province, sent Thomas Malonyay<sup>19</sup> to Cuerva on 28 February 1937 to take possession of the most valuable objects. The *Certificate of Confiscation of works collected in Cuerva*, written up by Malonyay himself, records the twelve works confiscated, including the El Greco painting, listed as number 11, which he describes in the following terms: "Saint Francis, painting in a very poor state, crumpled. Attributed to El Greco"<sup>20</sup>. The painting was clearly in a bad way, with several creases; which accounts for it being "crumpled" and most likely without frame or stretcher. Malonyay took the painting to the Prado, where it was restored<sup>21</sup>.

Recently obtained documents held at the San Fernando Royal Academy of the Fine Arts mentioned above confirm that the canvas was in perfect conditions; "as it came from the artist's hands and studio", as the academicians who saw it in Cuerva in 1924 wrote in their report. This suggests that, with the convent abandoned and half in ruins, it came in for some rough treatment during the war, most likely at the hands of someone who took against the painting and inflicted as much damage as he pleased on it.

In 1939, with the Civil War over, the prioress of the convent once again offered the painting, this time with a good deal more success. The reason for the sale was much more understandable than before: the com-

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18 *Monasterio de carmelitas descalzas de Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación de la Villa de Cuerva (Toledo)*, n.d., p. 6. See also Rivera 1995, p. 599.

19 On Thomas Malonyay's work for the Artistic Heritage Confiscation & Protection Board, see Álvarez Lopera 2008, reproduced in <http://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ANHA/article/view/ANHA0808120535A/31017> [consulted: 10/03/2011]. See also Álvarez Lopera 1982, vol. II, pp. 98 and 100; Argerich/Ara 2009, p. 223.

20 *Certificate of confiscation of the works collected in Cuerva, Toledo*. Artistic Heritage Confiscation & Protection Board, 28 February 1937. Madrid, Cultural Heritage Institute of Spain, Ministry of Culture. Also mentioned in the list is the panel entitled *The Holy Family* by Jan Gossart.

21 The acting director, Francisco Javier Sánchez Cantón, mentions in a report the El Greco painting in a note with other works not belonging to the Prado but which had been restored at the Museum: "[...] Saint Francis by El Greco from Cuerva", in "The Museum of the Prado, from 18 July 1936 to 28 March 1938", *A Report by Sánchez Cantón*, Archive MNP, C. 1423, bundle 11,283, exp. 5, fol. 22, note 1.

munity, which had been dispersed, was trying to drum up funds to rebuild the convent and return there<sup>22</sup>. They concluded that the best way to meet the expense of reconstruction was to sell the Greco, which was now on offer together with Jan Gossart's *The Holy Family*<sup>23</sup>. In short, two masterworks generously donated centuries before by the Lasso de la Vega family to enhance the two buildings in Cuerva they were closely associated with, the convent and adjacent church of *Santiago Apóstol*. This tempting offer was made to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum<sup>24</sup>; the works are mentioned for the first time in the minutes of a meeting held there on 11 October 1939<sup>25</sup>. The red-tape surrounding such an acquisition was gone through with no little speed, as the operation concluded on 2 December 1939 with the payment of 125,000 pesetas to the convent's mother superior<sup>26</sup>.

Although the Gossart panel arrived promptly at the Museum, *Saint Francis* was subject to a long delay<sup>27</sup>. As is clear from his correspondence with Crescencio de Gardeazábal, private secretary to the Minister of Justice, Museum director Manuel Losada began to lose patience. In a letter from Madrid dated 20 January 1940, Gardeazábal informed Losada that he was working unremittingly to ensure the Greco was packed up and sent to Bilbao<sup>28</sup>. On 1 March he wrote again to say that the lorry carrying the painting had left Madrid at six o'clock that morning<sup>29</sup>.

With the work's arrival, the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection now featured two paintings by El Greco. The other was a splendid painting entitled *The Annunciation* (c. 1596-1600), acquired in 1920<sup>30</sup>.

This is as good a point as any to examine the painting's undeserved reputation as being "badly beaten up and repainted" that dogged the work for decades. Where did this persistent idea come from? For an answer, we need to return to the time of the Spanish Civil War. The paintings by El Greco confiscated in the province of Toledo during the war, including this *Saint Francis*, were used in a kind of propaganda campaign between Republicans and Nationals, each side accusing the other of mistreating the national heritage and parading the work each had done to protect it<sup>31</sup>. And to this end, to publicise its work as the protector of the nation's heritage, in February 1938 the Republican side issued a pamphlet entitled *New discovery of El Greco*, the first paragraph of which states:

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22 According to Antonia Ríos de Balmaseda, part of the community took refuge in the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Bergara (Gipuzkoa) and afterwards in the Order's convent in Durango (Bizkaia). They were not to return to Cuerva until 1945.

23 On this work by Gossart, see Ainsworth/Sánchez-Lassa 2012.

24 According to the Documents Service at the Prado Museum, the prioress of the convent at Cuerva offered the paintings in 1939. "Receipts for the return to institutions and private individuals of paintings deposited at the Museum by the National Artistic Heritage Defence Service. 1939-1940", ref. Archive Box 93, file 2.

25 "offer of several works of art [...] one work by El Greco and a panel of the Flemish School owned by the Community of Carmelite Nuns at the Convent of La Cuerva (Toledo), works now exhibited in the Museum of the Prado in Madrid". Minutes from 11 October 1939, p. 69. *Book of Minutes, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum*, 21 August 1923-24 January 1947.

26 Payment is recorded as follows: "To the Rev. Mother Teresa Valenciaga for a painting by El Greco and another by Gossart 125,000 [pesetas]". *Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. Revenues and Expenses for the Year 1939*, 2 December, in "Acquisitions and Restorations". For further details concerning the sale of the two works and the accompanying red-tape, see Ainsworth/Sánchez-Lassa 2012.

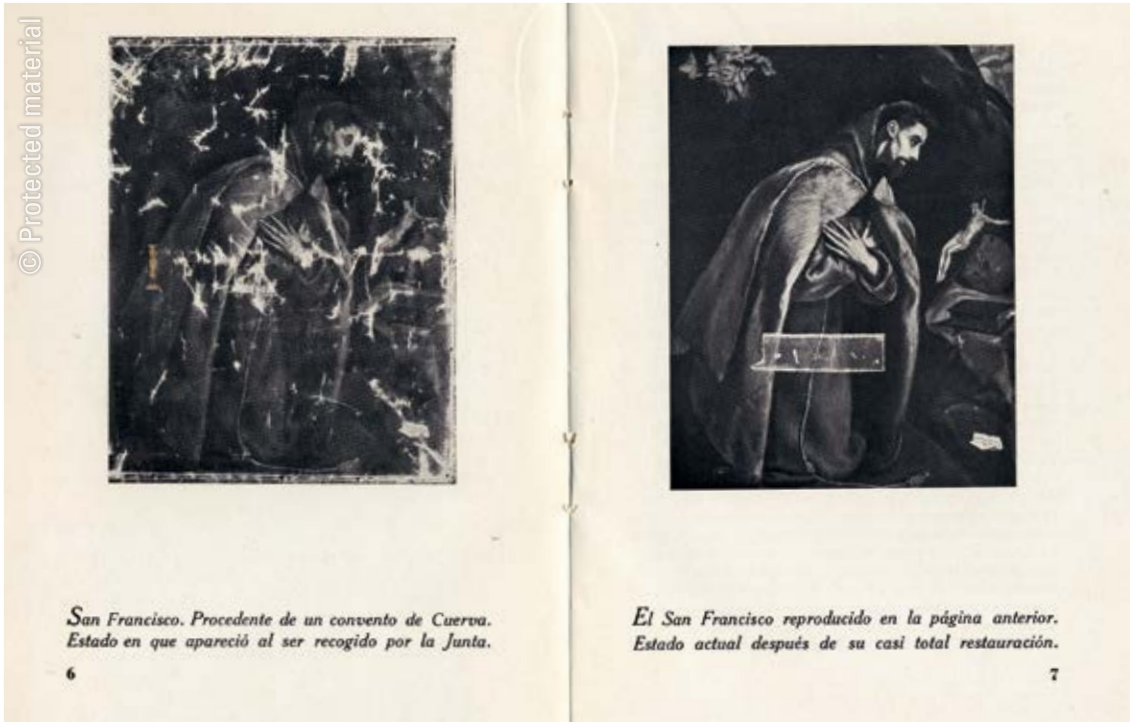
27 "[...] those present were greatly pleased by their examination of the panel by Jan Gossart that Mr. Losada himself brought back, while the painting by El Greco remained in Madrid awaiting suitable packing for it to be brought to Bilbao by the Transportes España shipping agency, as the insurance premium has already been paid". Minutes for 7 February 1940, p. 73. *Book of Minutes, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum*, 21 August 1923-24 January 1947.

28 Crescencio Gardeazábal to Manuel Losada, 20 January 1940, D 1427.

29 "Macarrón has finally done the packing and Agencia España has taken charge of the El Greco painting, which might by now already be in Bilbao, as the lorry left at 6 o'clock this morning. [...] no painting has ever enjoyed such protection as this. You must know that two guards, rifles in hand, stood night and day at the door of the room at the Ministry where it was kept". Crescencio Gardeazábal to Manuel Losada, 1 March 1940, D. 1431. It is not clear exactly what perils the painting faced for it to be guarded round the clock at rifle-point.

30 On this painting, see Bilbao/Madrid 1997.

31 For a further insight into the subject, see Álvarez Lopera 1982; also Álvarez Lopera 1990 [online, consulted: 21/07/2010].



3. Photographs of the Saint Francis at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum during restoration work published in *Nuevo descubrimiento del Greco*, February 1938

In just one year, the Delegate Board of Madrid has brought in seven Grecos of prime quality: one in Cuerva; another in Daimiel; five in Illescas.

Also featuring in the pamphlet were some rather striking images of all the paintings undergoing restoration, specifically while they were being cleaned. Two photographs show the *Saint Francis* from Cuerva, one of them with the stuccos covering paint losses in place and the following caption: "State in which the painting appeared when confiscated by the Board". To the right is another image with restoration practically concluded and the following caption: "State after the painting's almost total restoration" [fig. 3]. It is difficult to accept that the first photograph shows how the painting really looked when the Board confiscated it in Cuerva, as the image certainly does not show the canvas creased or "crumpled", as Malonyay describes it in his report. In fact it looks flat, even at the edges where it was fixed to the stretcher, already relined, with cleaning finished, the stuccos applied on the paint losses and prepared for reintegration; in other words, in the full process of restoration when it was in the Prado in October 1937. The pamphlet refers to the painting in the following terms:

The Saint Francis from Cuerva, work of the early period though it may be, remains vitally important in the thoroughly rewarding experience of discovering El Greco; it actually helps to complete the case. If the Grecos from Daimiel and Illescas shine thanks to their dazzling colour, the Saint Francis from Cuerva is executed in a remarkably muted range, of lyrical intimacy, that we might almost call 'silent'. That doesn't mean it is any less rich in colour and nuance, or any less worthy of admiration, or that we should pass over the subtle colouring. But we couldn't see it and appreciate it if the painting were not available, as it now is, in the full youth of its colour<sup>32</sup>.

32 *Nuevo descubrimiento del Greco*, Delegate Board for the Art Heritage, Blass, C. O. Workshops, Madrid, February 1938. See pp. 1, 3, 6 and 7. The photographs are now in the General Archive of the IPCE.

Understandably enough, the other side in the war, the Nationals, were eager to respond to this pamphlet with another painting by El Greco, the *Portrait of Cardinal Tavera*, found by its troops in a dreadful state when they entered the Hospital Tavera in Toledo. The painting had been repeatedly slashed and the head cut out. But the war came to an end before restoration was complete and the story could be published<sup>33</sup>.

On 23 August 1938 *The Times* of London published an article entitled "The treasures of Spain. Preservation and repair. Rescue from the war". As the newspaper's Madrid correspondent reminded its readers, nearly a year had gone by since the visit to Spain of Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, ex-director of the British Museum, accompanied by James G. Mann, keeper of the Wallace Collection. They had been invited by the Republican government, which had been accused of not taking good enough care of the country's artistic heritage; the government was determined to show them at first hand the protection afforded the works<sup>34</sup>. The correspondent noted that, since the visit, little had transpired concerning the subsequent fate of the paintings. Under the heading "The people's Grecos", after mentioning the Grecos from Illescas, he wrote about the *Saint Francis* from Cuerva: "The San Francisco was in a shocking state of neglect". The two photographs illustrating the article seem to be the same as the ones published in the Republican pamphlet six months before, and most likely obtained through the Prado. But in *The Times* the one of the painting stuccoed makes it look to be in a deplorable state. As Álvarez Lopera suggests, the photograph may have been retouched to maximise the damage done; the image reproduced is itself of poor quality, as is the other illustration, in which the painting is supposed to be fully restored [fig. 4]. They share the caption: "The San Francisco from Cuerva before and after cleaning and restoration. The painting is in the early style of El Greco". Shortly after the article was published, on 3 and 4 September 1938, *The Times* published two articles on the work being done by the Republican authorities.

With the war over, the painting was premiered in all its splendour at an exhibition that ran from 6 July 1939 in galleries at the Prado with "paintings belonging to churches and museums from several places in Spain" that had been restored by the professionals at the museum<sup>35</sup>. *Saint Francis* featured in the catalogue drawn up for the occasion by Sánchez Cantón: "*San Francisco in Meditation*, Convent of the Carmelites at Cuerva (Toledo). Signed. Work from the early Toledo period"<sup>36</sup>.

From then on, news of this particular Greco began to spread around Spain and internationally. Christian Zervos was one of the first foreign experts to publish it in 1939 in his book *Les oeuvres du Greco en Espagne*<sup>37</sup>, where it appears in a chapter headed "Grecos found during the Civil War"<sup>38</sup>. The chapter includes an illustration showing the fully restored work with the following caption: "*St. Francis before the Crucifix*. Found in Cuerva. I saw this painting too briefly to be able to confirm its authenticity". Zervos clearly preferred not to commit himself<sup>39</sup>.

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33 Álvarez Lopera 1990.

34 See *Visita e informe de los técnicos de arte Frederic Kenyon ex-director del British Museum y James G. Mann, conservador de la Wallace Collection sobre el tesoro artístico de Madrid y Valencia*, Valencia : [Central Board for the Artistic Heritage], 1937 (Valencia : Tip. Moderna), <http://bibliotecadigital.jcyl.es/i18n/consulta/registro.cmd?id=12855> [consulted: 19/08/2013].

35 These paintings were destined to fill the gaps left by "one hundred and fifty major works from the rooms and galleries of the Museum", according to Sánchez Cantón. The missing paintings were the masterworks from the Prado then being exhibited in Geneva and which were returned to Madrid on 9 September 1939. See Madrid 1939, p. III.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, plate XXI. The painting was hung in room XI.

37 Zervos 1939.

38 "Oeuvres du Greco trouvées pendant la guerre civile", *Ibid.*

39 "S. François devant le crucifix. Trouvé a Cuerva. J'ai vu trop rapidement ce tableau pour donner sur son authenticité un avis certain", *Ibid.*, p. 219.

## THE TREASURES OF SPAIN

### PRESERVATION AND REPAIR

#### RESCUE FROM THE WAR

From Our Madrid Correspondent

It will soon be a year since Sir Frederic Kenyon, at the invitation of the Spanish Government, visited the Peninsula accompanied by Mr. Mann and was able to give some account in *The Times* of the manner in which the art treasures in general and the inestimable Prado collection and the priceless Raphael tapestries in particular were being cared for. Since then little has been heard of their fate, though it might be surmised that the vicissitudes of war would affect them. That surmise can now be confirmed.

The carefully prepared details at Valencia stand empty. The paintings and tapestries have undergone the hazard of further travel. They are the greatest in Europe of the bombed and machine-gunned road from Valencia to Barcelona. All got through safely and are at present housed, sharing the shelter in Catalonia provided for the Generalist collections. Some are at Giron, others at Vic and Prats de Lluçanès. The Spanish Government seems to have taken to heart Sir Frederic Kenyon's remark that the treasures in its charge must be considered as the patrimony not only of Spain but of the whole world.

#### TO-MORROW'S ARMOUR

The Junta del Tesoro Artístico Nacional has its headquarters in one of the noblest palaces of the merchant princes of Barcelona in the Plaza de San Gerónimo. There recently Señor Fozes Rubio, who directs the work of the Junta with a devotion and intelligence for which an Ibero the world over may be grateful, explained many interesting particulars in connection with the work in hand. The Junta's responsibilities are extremely extensive as local authorities, museums, public, syndicates, or individuals send in works of art or objects requiring such collection both in discipline and in their own. Specially damaged pieces are distributed to discourage destruction. One reads: "Books are to be your sons of the museum, preserve them." In the hard-fought Manresa campaign, also, it is to be feared that much has been destroyed, although the collections among others at Castellón and Segorbe were removed, even intricate carvings of carved and painted wood being dismantled.

The duties of the Junta are wholly preservative. It has nothing to do with questions of ownership beyond recording carefully the source and date of acquisition. Its card indexes mention any circumstances connected with transfer or change in condition of the objects. The most important pictures are periodically examined to see their state of preservation. Before moving there is a special examination to ascertain if transport would be harmful. In one case, that of the astounding "Family of Charles IV" by Goya, which besides being a pictorial masterpiece is a human document of historical importance, transfer from Madrid was delayed many months until the fragile condition of the canvas had been ascertained.

In most cases the Prado pictures were removed complete with their frames. Practice and experience are helping the experts to favour detaching canvases from their frames and rolling on wooden rollers as before pictures of safety in transport. Besides cataloguing and caring for the objects in its custody the Junta carries on a constant study of phenomena observed in the course of the varied work, resulting in preventing, restoring, or repairing damaged paintings. The effects of fire, smoke and gas are recorded and information is thus for collection. Useful knowledge of varieties is being acquired.

#### THE PEOPLE'S GREGOS

It would be an altogether false impression to conclude from the publicity given to the preparations of the Prado and Escorial collections that the Republican Government is content with shifting all the treasures it can lay its hands on. Although the best known works of art are no longer there, the Prado, nevertheless, houses to-day a larger number of canvases than ever before. In other towns new museums have been created. At Oloturia, a still tranquil district in the province of Alicante, the XVIII-century mansion of Marqués de Salfar has been repaired and is now ready to house paintings and objects of all sorts collected in the Levantine region. There are sculptures by Solórzano, many fine pieces of church plate and ornaments as well as paintings, including a splendid picture identified by experts as a Velázquez. Tenos, Lucá, Jordan and Malifa, as well as Vicente Lopez are there. The collection described in a booklet issued by the Junta is correspondingly indeed.

The famous five Grecoes from Valencia, taken to Madrid, have been cleaned and restored. Their story is a romance. For years, indeed centuries, they hung in the hospital of the small Castilian town midway between Toledo and Madrid where El Greco placed them. When Franco approached it was with the greatest difficulty that the Valencia villagers could be persuaded to let them go. Did not everything in the village from the facts to the Grecoes now belong to the people? Finally they were packed in a great barrelled boat on the river of the marshes and peasants and the key solemnly delivered to the Alcalde with the receipt signed deposit in the hundred foot deep vaults of the Bank of Spain. That was on October 7, 1936.

Several months later the Junta became anxious about the state of the pictures as the boat showed signs of damp. The Alcalde of Valencia, though called for by wireless failed to appear. Special authority therefore had to be sought to enable the Governor of the Bank of Spain to deliver up the pictures. Photographs bear witness to their condition, which made Mr. Frederic Kenyon exclaim: "Damp does by some date a work!" A long and careful process of cleaning has restored the canvases to better condition than before. Two other Grecoes from the remote provincial towns of Carra and Daimiel, one a self-named San Francisco in Donatello Treveschi's early style, the other a brilliant Addition of his later years, will be new material for students when they are exhibited in turn at their own home. The San Francisco was in a shocking state of neglect. Other fine works hidden hitherto from the public gaze are those from the abandoned convent of the Encarnación in Madrid, founded by Philip III and Margaret of Austria, in particular a Holy Family of the Leonardo da Vinci school, a magnificent signed Greco, a Flemish XVII-century canvas from a religious foundation in Comera, centuries of

trips of which the wings are missing, and a Spanish saint of the same century brought in by soldiers from a convent in Extramadura.

The Nationalists approach the Spanish Government with not having quite the Prado collection and the safe refuge of the vaults of the Bank of Spain, rather than remove it from the capital. The state of the Escorial Grecoes on emerging from four months there indicates that the Government was well advised not to have attempted it, though prompt action was obviously necessary after the Prado had been hit by incendiary bombs and two explosive bombs had landed a bare hundred yards away. Besides, the circular canvases in the vaults, about seven feet in diameter, would not allow the passage of most of the paintings, except panels. There have also been accusations that the "Red Government" is preparing to sell art treasures belonging to the nation. Such suggestions are denied in Barcelona. Possibly an exhibition held in Madrid last year of "process" to be sent to Russia from Spanish Collections or other adherents, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, may have been the origin of the accusations. It



The San Francisco from Carra before and after cleaning and restoration. The picture is in the early style of El Greco

common with the general public foreign correspondents visited the exhibition, where there were many sympathetic odds and ends together with wondrously of pictures, painted hats, embroidered cloths and some tapestries, pictures and furniture. But the Commission would not allow the world to hear where what all Madrid could see.

Censorship has no effect in present circumstances. Each side would be best advised to leave it alone and cooperate so far as possible in saving the common heritage of a glorious past. In this connection, certainly, the Junta de Protección del Tesoro Artístico Nacional is rendering signal service. When the Communist militia ordered the Duke of Alba's ill-fated Palazzo de Lara they found Titian's vivid portrait of the Great Duke sealed. Is it still in some corner in Madrid known only to its owner? Did it perish or has it been recovered? Here is an example of a world-wide interest as the reputations both of the first painter and of the great

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4. "The treasures of Spain. Preservation and repair. Rescue from the war", article published in *The Times*, London, 23 August 1938

Several Spanish researchers described the work as being of high quality. In 1943, Manuel Gómez-Moreno considered it "Perhaps the best version of this particular composition [...] it was badly damaged in the war"<sup>40</sup>; much later, in 1982, José Gudiol described it as an autograph version, stating: "The face of this Saint Francis is impressive in the basic drawing and, above all, in the handling"<sup>41</sup>. Unfortunately, despite the evident quality of the Bilbao version, other El Greco specialists were much less judicious, unjustifiably spreading the falsehood that the painting was badly conserved and repainted, giving rise in the 1950s to a kind of *leyenda negra*, a black legend of its own that did it genuine harm. Two German researchers, Halldor Soehner<sup>42</sup> and Hubert Falkner von Sonnenburg, did further damage, as their adverse opinions were taken pretty much as gospel by experts in the following decades. Soehner, advised by Sonnenburg, art historian and restorer at the Doerner Institut in Munich, wrote in 1956 that other experts had not taken into account the state of the work when it was found and gave it as his opinion, after examination, that it was a "model of total restoration" and that "most of the painting has been repainted to such an extent that all we are left with are a few fragments of about five square centimetres of original painting, including El Greco's signature. [...] El Greco's personal style is unrecognisable in the few remnants of original painting left to us"<sup>43</sup>. In note 74 of his essay he quotes almost word for word what Sonnenburg had said: "The way the seriously deteriorated painting was restored amounts to little less than a falsification". But the really surprising thing is that Sonnenburg's expert eyes "missed" the real condition of the painting, which is paradoxical, when he himself was fully aware that something more than a simple visual examination was required for a rigorous

40 Gómez Moreno 1943, p. 120.

41 Gudiol 1982, p. 152.

42 Soehner 1956. My thanks to Dietlind Kubein for support in the translation of this article.

43 Ibid., p. 56.

opinion: “[...] to clarify all this physical means are required (quartzo and Röntgen)”<sup>44</sup>, i.e. ultraviolet and X rays, the two types of analysis that would provide reliable data as to the degree to which the work had been damaged.

Such sweeping statements amounted to harsh criticism of the work done by the restorers at the Prado. But the restorers had done a fine, highly professional job, showing the greatest respect for the work in the process. As Álvarez Lopera said, their work was so important that the painting, found “in a lamentable state, would be reborn [...] in the workshop at the Prado”<sup>45</sup>.

At this point, mention needs to be made of the essential and influential essay on El Greco Harold Wethey published in 1962, in which he catalogued seventeen versions of the “Saint Francis kneeling in meditation” models, a total including originals, workshop productions and old copies<sup>46</sup>. Of these he points to just three as being by El Greco, mentioning first the work in the San Francisco Fine Arts Museum (Kress Collection) [fig. 5], which he considers “the finest version of this model known today”; the one belonging to the Art Institute of Chicago [fig. 6], which he catalogues as being by “El Greco and workshop”; and, finally, the Bilbao version<sup>47</sup>, which in his opinion is, like the Chicago work, by “El Greco and workshop, ca. 1585-1590”, a caption that, as we have verified, does not appear in the 1967 Spanish edition of his essay. While it is relevant that he should consider the Bilbao version as being by “El Greco and workshop” and that “the mediocre quality of the head and the hands” was worthy of mention, in comparison to the version in the museum in San Francisco, what really interests us here are his prejudicial comments on the conservation of the work. On his he said:

The picture had been almost totally ruined, as seen in the photograph published in the London *Times*, August 23, 1938, p. 12, before it was repainted with such thoroughness as to leave little of the old pigment visible<sup>48</sup>.

In forming this opinion, Wethey was evidently very much influenced both by the none-too-clear illustration in *The Times*’s article mentioned above and Sonnenburg’s utterly dismissive judgement. Such negative views had a major impact on the valuation of the painting and provided a platform for other El Greco specialists when giving their own opinions. None of them seems likely to have taken the precaution of actually checking for himself the painting’s actual state of conservation. Take for instance Tiziana Frati’s essay on the painter written for Rizzoli, where she describes the painting as “Much deteriorated and largely repainted”<sup>49</sup>.

A leading expert in El Greco, the late José Álvarez Lopera, did more than most to eradicate the *leyenda negra* surrounding the painting. In 1998, when he was preparing his great exhibition on the artist<sup>50</sup>, he contacted the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum to express his doubts about the suitability of including the Bilbao version, because of its reputation as a badly damaged work. In response to his enquiry, the Bilbao museum produced a report shortly afterwards that included X-ray and ultraviolet light, the two analytical systems mentioned above capable of providing conclusive evidence for determining the true extent of the deterioration<sup>51</sup>. The

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44 Ibid, p. 73, note 74.

45 Álvarez Lopera 1982, vol. II, p. 70.

46 Wethey 1962, vol. II, p. 122, no. 221 (Spanish edition, Wethey 1967, vol. II, p. 135, no. 221).

47 The authors of this essay took part in a comparative study of these three versions, plus the one in Meadows Museum in Dallas. See Kuniej Berry... [et al.] 2011.

48 Which strikes us as much closer to the truth of the matter than saying “that not the smallest fragment of the primitive painting was left visible”, as the Spanish translation has it. Wethey 1962 (Spanish edition, Wethey 1967, vol. II, p. 136).

49 Frati 1977, p. 108, cat. 102-c.

50 Madrid/Rome/Athens 1999.

51 Ana Sánchez-Lassa de los Santos, “Technical report issued by the Department of Conservation & Restoration”, 17 September 1998, Archive, Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.



5. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis Venerating the Crucifix*, c. 1595  
Oil on canvas, 147.3 x 105.4 cm  
Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco  
Donated by Samuel H. Kress Foundation  
Inv. no. 61.44.24



6. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis Kneeling in Meditation*, 1595-1600  
Oil on canvas, 92 x 74 cm  
The Art Institute of Chicago  
Robert A. Waller Memorial Fund  
Inv. no. 1935.372

analysis confirmed what the Museum had suggested after staff there performed a thorough visual examination: the assumption about the deficient state of conservation was completely unjustified. The report with the results was sent to Álvarez Lopera, who published extracts in the file on the painting for the catalogue<sup>52</sup>. The study determined:

The original support shows neither faults nor breakages [...], the losses [of paint], which mostly correspond with old folds of the canvas, barely affect the fundamental zones of the composition: the saint's head and hands, skull, crucifix, book and signature. The latter is conserved practically whole.

The conclusion was clear:

Concerning the actual paint, the existing faults are not very important either in terms of size or location<sup>53</sup>.

On the basis of this information, published in 1999 and echoed by Richard Mann in 2002<sup>54</sup>, the painting received the credit previously denied it; the removal of the yellowed varnish during the restoration performed at the museum in Bilbao in preparation for the exhibition curated by Álvarez Lopera, also helped it to shine anew in all its splendour. Considering the painting's technical features, Álvarez Lopera described it as "the earliest of the known originals and it is possible that it was the first of the series. [...] But there is no doubt whatsoever, and this is something all scholars and experts agree on, about the magnificent original quality of the painting"<sup>55</sup>.

Besides the versions in San Francisco, Chicago and Bilbao that Wethey picked out, other relevant versions include one in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Lille [fig. 7]<sup>56</sup> and another in the Meadows Museum, Dallas [fig. 8]. Camón Aznar also mentions one in the Ramón de la Sota collection, now in the Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art in Vitoria [fig. 9]<sup>57</sup>, which he considers "a magnificent work" and a probable workshop piece<sup>58</sup>; and one from the church of Saint Nicholas, from around 1590, now in Toledo's Santa Cruz Museum. Juan Luna cites the versions from the Hospital Tavera, Toledo, and others in the Spanish Ministry for Home Affairs, Madrid, the University Museum of Princeton, the University of California in Los Angeles and those in private collections in Spain, including Medina Sidonia and Zumaia.

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52 "The examination by radiography and ultraviolet light performed in September 1998 by Ana Sánchez-Lassa, head of the Department of Conservation & Restoration at the Museum in Bilbao, has proved that the statements made by Soehner and Wethey were exaggerated in the extreme". José Álvarez Lopera in *Madrid/Rome/Athens 1999*, p. 395.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

54 "However, Sánchez-Lassa's scientific examination of 1998 established that there are only minimal losses of original paint. Despite Wethey's doubts, the Bilbao painting is now generally regarded as an autograph work". Mann 2002, p. 104.

55 *Madrid/Rome/Athens 1999*, p. 395.

56 Camón Aznar 1970, vol. 1, p. 390.

57 In deposit since 1982 at the Museum of Sacred Art in Vitoria, it once belonged in the Marquis of Remisa's collection and also to Ramón de la Sota y Llano. See *Vitoria-Gasteiz 2005*.

58 Camón Aznar 1970, vol. 1, p. 390.





7. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis Kneeling Before the Crucifix*, c. 1590  
 Oil on canvas, 122 x 97 cm  
 Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France  
 Inv. no. P.51



8. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis Kneeling in Meditation*, 1605-1610  
 Oil on canvas, 75.9 x 63.5 cm  
 Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, Dallas  
 Inv. no. MM.99.01



9. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis Kneeling in Meditation*, 1590-1596  
 Oil on canvas, 147.3 x 105.4 cm  
 Diocesan Museum of Sacred Art, Vitoria-Gasteiz.  
 Deposit by the Alava Provincial Council

## Key technical factors in the painting process

Plenty of El Greco's works are to be found in public collections, which is why, in historical and technical terms, he is one of the most closely studied Spanish artists. Carmen Garrido published one of the most complete essays to date on the artist, one which brings a broader approach to the subject<sup>59</sup> to mark the exhibition entitled *El Greco and his workshop* held at the Cycladic Art Museum in Athens in 2007, which included the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum's *Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*. The most thorough technical study to date on this particular painting was the one published by the authors of the present essay in cooperation with researchers from other museums and comparatively with three other versions of the same composition now in American museums<sup>60</sup>. Besides a visual examination and macrophotographs, X-rays [figs. 10, 12 and 13], infrared reflectography [fig. 11], a stratigraphic study and microchemical analyses [figs. 14-20]<sup>61</sup> were all performed for the report; the methodology, involving the crossing and critical study of all this technical information, coincided with the methods used in the examination of works of similar characteristics and age and, in particular, by the same artist.

So the 1998 X-radiographical study revealed the true extent and location of paint losses. The X-rays taken for this report provided higher quality images, and comparison with the infrared reflectography facilitated an even more accurate analysis, confirming once again the hypotheses formulated during the restoration the same year: the original support was intact and the paint losses much less extensive than formerly thought, leaving important features and the iconography of the work untouched. The saint's figure was only affected by a gap in the forehead [fig. 12]. From the shape of the gap it would appear that other losses were the result of knocks or folds in the canvas, but there is nothing to suggest that it might have been folded in two or rolled up. Two parallel vertical gaps in the centre of the upper half of the work were undoubtedly caused by the edges of a crosspiece of the original stretcher. The direction of the gaps, parallel to the longer side, and the 4.5-centimetre width between them, suggest that the stretcher, despite being in a relatively small format, had a crosspiece, each part of which would be approximately this width. A stretcher, then, of the sort habitually used in Spain around the 18th century, consisting of simple, rectangular-sectioned strips joined at the middle or, at the most, by a mortise and tenon joint, and strengthened with nails in these areas, but certainly without the system using wedges, which appeared in the 19th century<sup>62</sup>.

The canvas was relined at the Prado in 1938. Everything points to the restorers using a sort of Italian *gacha* glue<sup>63</sup>, one of the most popular for lining canvases in Spain until well into the 20th century, the strengthener being a fabric made from industrial linen. Along its lower edge the canvas was cut, and this affected the

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59 Garrido 2007.

60 The versions now in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Meadows Museum in Dallas. See Berry... [et al.] 2011.

61 X-radiography was performed with the cooperation of Bilbao-based firm SGS Tecnos S.A., at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum under the technical supervision of the Conservation & Restoration Department. A portable apparatus was used with Agfa Structurix D4 X-ray plate. X-radiographies were taken at 69 Kv, 10 mA, with exposures of 3 minutes and 20 seconds at 300 centimetres, with automatic developing. Infrared reflectography was done on an Osiris from Opus Instruments Ltd. The stratigraphic and microchemical studies were carried out by Arte-Lab S.L. and involved studying microsamples under optical microscope with incident and transmitted light, selective staining and microchemical tests, high performance thin layer chromatography (HPTLC), Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), scanning electron microscopy and microanalysis by energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDX). Layer thicknesses were measured using a micrometric 10 X / 0.25 lens in the widest part of the layer. The same firm also performed fabric identification from microscopic characteristics in transversal and longitudinal sections, and reaction with cuproammonium.

62 Bruquetas 2002, pp. 234, 247 ff.

63 A paste of flour and skin-based animal glue. There are a number of formulas with additives in variable amounts and proportions, such as Venice turpentine, ox gall, vinegar, molasses and antifungal agents.



10-11. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
X-radiograph and infrared reflectography



12. Detail of the X-radiograph showing gaps in the paint (black areas) and the marks of the original stretcher (two more or less parallel vertical lines on the left). The clearer areas are due to brushstrokes more heavily loaded with lead white, applied to give light. Two clear, curved lines running diagonally from the lower left hand corner to the upper right corner are the traces left by the spatula used to spread the ground.



13. Detail of the X-radiograph clearly showing the areas of light (clearer areas), which coincide with layers of greater lead white content. Also visible are the brushstrokes applied in modelling the habit to reproduce the tactile qualities of the fabric. The horizontal band marks the crosspiece of the present stretcher.



14-15. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Sample no. 6: thread from support. Longitudinal and transversal sections identifying it as linen fibre.

painted area, which explains why the cord is so close to the edge of the painting when compared with other versions of the same theme. Although hidden by the lining fabric, the characteristics of the original fabric may be verified along the other edges and through X-radiography. It is a 10 x 10 threads/cm<sup>2</sup> taffeta fabric, although both weft and warp have threads of differing thicknesses, typical of hand-loom supports of the time. Physical and chemical testing of a sample of the fibre taken from one edge suggests that it is linen [figs. 14 and 15]. This type of fabric, taffeta, coincides with what the artist used for small paintings; for larger works he used damask-textured twills, which, being made with greater widths, enabled larger formats with fewer seams<sup>64</sup>.

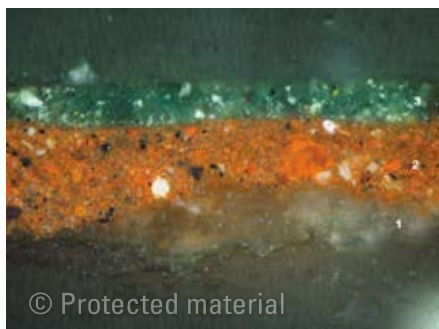
For the stratigraphic and microchemical study of the actual paint, five paint samples were taken: from the green of the ivy leaves, from the blue of the sky, from the grey of the habit and two from the grey-brown of the ground [figs. 16-20]. By crossing these results with the other technical information (radiography, reflectography and macrophotography), the painting process can be partially reconstructed. For example, the white ground was found to contain gesso, a low proportion of silicates and an animal glue as binder. The X-radiograph shows a series of curved lines of greater radiographic density forming arches that coincide with no feature of the composition, but which suggest that a scraper, a kind of spatula, or possibly a knife, was used to spread the first ground. These traces, highly visible in the lower half, are the overspill left as the scraper moves on and show where it has passed. Ground was applied in this way so it would penetrate in the weft of the fabric to level it up and produce a surface as smooth as possible to receive the subsequent layers of paint. Layers were a maximum of 100 µm thick in the samples analysed.

On this first ground, the artist applied a reddish priming between 25 and 70 µm thick in the samples taken and consists above all of red, iron oxide-rich earths and lead white. Also found in the samples were low proportions of minium, red lake (although we were unable to identify the red colouring), verdigris, vegetable

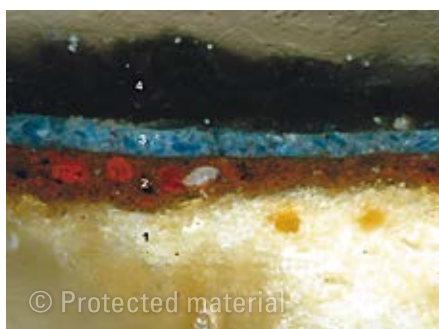
64 They were fabrics with combined weaves giving damask-style patterns. Also known as "Germanic cloth" or "Venetian cloth", they often had more or less complex designs, the most usual one making diamond shapes. The artists are often held to have deliberately tried for this texture, so that it could be appreciated on the paint surface, but it seems more logical to think that they used these fabrics because they were wider than taffetas, which avoided or at least considerably reduced the seams. For a discussion on the subject, see Bruquetas 2002, pp. 233 ff. On the canvases used by El Greco, see also Mantilla de los Ríos 1977; Garrido 1987, p. 100; Sánchez-Lassa 1997, pp. 60 and 61.



El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Microsamples of paint for the stratigraphic study



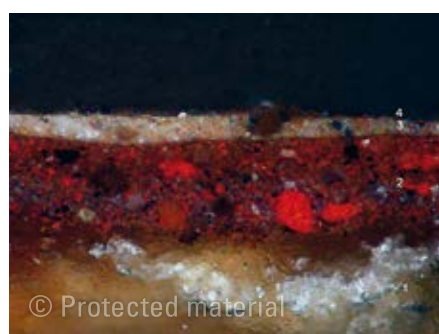
16. Sample no. 1: green from an ivy leaf.
1. Ground (30  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of gesso bound with animal glue.
  2. Red coloured priming (70  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of red earth, white lead and low proportions of verdigris, red lake, minium and carbon black.
  3. Paint layer (20  $\mu\text{m}$ ) of white lead, verdigris, lead-tin yellow, and a low proportion of calcium carbonate.



17. Sample no. 2: blue from the sky.
1. Ground (200  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of gesso bound with animal glue.
  2. Red coloured priming (25-30  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of red earth, white lead and low proportions of verdigris, red lake, minium and carbon black.
  3. Paint layer (20  $\mu\text{m}$ ) of white lead, azurite and calcium carbonate in low proportion.
  4. Rosin varnish (50  $\mu\text{m}$ ).



18. Sample no. 5: grey from the ground.
1. Ground (10-100  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of gesso and traces of silicates with animal glue as binder.
  2. Red coloured priming (30  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of red earth, white lead and low proportions of verdigris, red lake, minium, carbon black and calcium carbonate.
  3. Paint layer (15  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of white lead, low proportions of earth traces of umber, calcium carbonate and carbon black.
  4. Rosin varnish (5  $\mu\text{m}$ ).



19. Sample no. 4: grey from the ground.
1. Ground (70  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of gesso and traces of silicates with animal glue as binder.
  2. Red coloured priming (60  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of red earth, white lead and low proportions of verdigris, red lake, minium, carbon black, calcium carbonate and lead-tin yellow.
  3. Paint layer (20  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of white lead, low proportions of earths and traces of umber, calcium carbonate and carbon black.
  4. Rosin varnish (5  $\mu\text{m}$ ).



20. Sample no. 3: grey from the habit.
1. Ground (80  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of gesso and traces of silicates with animal glue as binder.
  2. Red coloured priming (40  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of red earth, white lead and low proportions of verdigris, red lake, minium, carbon black and calcium carbonate.
  3. Paint layer (30  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of carbon black, white lead and very low proportions of earths and calcium carbonate.
  4. Paint layer (10  $\mu\text{m}$ ) made of white lead, earths and very low proportions of calcium carbonate, verdigris and carbon black.
  5. Rosin varnish (5  $\mu\text{m}$ ).

carbon black and traces of calcium carbonate and lead-tin yellow. Pigments like red lake, verdigris and lead-tin white derive from the use of palette “sweepings”, i.e. using up remains of paint that would otherwise be wasted. The low proportions of some of the pigments, specifically lead-tin yellow and calcium carbonate, which in this case might be impurities associated with the earths or other pigments or the filler, explains why they were not detectable in all samples. Pigment granules in this layer are quite irregular: very large particles, some measuring up to 20-25 µm in diameter, are mixed up with smaller ones, suggesting that they were ground up unevenly. Lead pigments such as lead white, minium and lead-tin yellow were added to make the priming dry faster, as this is how they affect linseed oil, the binder used in this layer.

Like most painters of the time<sup>65</sup>, El Greco used this type of coloured priming for most of his works. Priming tones varied from the greyish ones of his Toledo period to the more or less orangey ochre he subsequently moved towards, the range of reddish tones and finally browns, depending on the amount of yellow or black pigments added. Only at the beginning of his career and in some exceptions, such as the *Immaculate Conception* in Toledo’s Santa Cruz Museum and in the *Holy Family* at the Hospital Tavera, also in Toledo, did he start with white grounds<sup>66</sup>. In the other versions of *Saint Francis in Prayer* in American museums, the equivalent priming is a greyish brown<sup>67</sup>, dark ochre in a version in a private collection in Alava and the same reddish tone in the one in the Diocesan Museum in Vitoria<sup>68</sup>. Such coloured primings played a major role in the works of El Greco, as he would often leave them visible at places all over the painting. Far from indicating an unfinished work, this expedient takes on a visual function, giving the composition chromatic unity. Although detectable in all his output, for instance in the *Apostolado* in the El Greco Museum, a series with some unfinished works, one can see how the artist progressively covers the ground and how even in finished and signed works it remains visible at certain points in a very similar way to our *Saint Francis*<sup>69</sup>.

Infrared reflectography did not reveal the preliminary drawing, but this does not necessarily mean the paint was applied directly. He may have done such drawing using pigments (reds, for example) with insufficient reflectographic contrast against the background to enable differentiation, or it might be that the paint layer is too dense for infrared radiation to penetrate<sup>70</sup>. However that may be, this is habitual in works he produced on colour primings, although it is possible to visualise the preliminary drawing when he used white grounds<sup>71</sup>. At some points, like the rim of the hood or the head at fringe-height, the cord that runs down the saint’s habit or the edge of the book on the right of the painting, the shapes stand out partially from the background of unpainted priming. Such details suggest El Greco reserved the spaces on the canvas with great precision, for which he would undoubtedly have required some kind of preliminary drawing. The idea that the artist must have had the work well planned from the beginning gained further strength when the reflectography and X-radiography images were collated, an exercise that enabled us to confirm that he made no major compositional changes as he painted.

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65 In the 16th century most European painters began to use coloured primings instead of white backgrounds, with earthy and reddish colours being generally preferred. On this subject, see, e.g. Maltese 1993, pp. 27 ff.

66 Garrido 2001.

67 See comparative table in Kuniej Berry... [et al.] 2011, p. 129.

68 See the essay by Fernando Tabar de Anitua and María Pilar Bustinduy Fernández in Vitoria-Gasteiz 2005, pp. 41 and 62.

69 The depictions of Saint Jude Thaddeus, Saint Mathew, Saint Andrew and Saint Bartholomew are the least finished paintings, with extensive areas of ground visible. On this issue, see also Garrido 2008.

70 For a discussion of this subject in reference to the work of El Greco, see Antelo... [et al.] 2008.

71 See Garrido 1985.





21. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail

In the paint layer, whose bindre is also a drying oil, the following pigments were identified: lead white, azurite, verdigris, lead-tin yellow, iron oxide-rich earths, umber and vegetable carbon black. There is a slight proportion of calcium carbonate in almost all strata; calcium carbonate is a white, inert filler with little covering effect and when added increases the transparency of layers applied as glazes. In the absence of the analysis of flesh tones, we can say the artist used a very limited palette of neutral tones, in line with the content of the scene portrayed. The green of the ivy leaves in the upper left corner basically comprises verdigris mixed with varying proportions of lead-tin yellow, giving a gradation of transparent greens, with the red ground also playing a major role in their final optical effect [fig. 16]. For the cloudscape in the upper right-hand corner he used azurite, the most habitual of blue pigments, mixed with lead white in differing gradations [fig. 17]. But the most interesting thing here is the way the paint was applied, wet on wet, very dense, with the brush being rubbed over the ground to leave it visible to the naked eye in a number of areas, giving rise with remarkable ease to a smooth twilight effect<sup>72</sup>. The other three microsamples of paint, taken at the lower edge of the composition, are from the ground and the zone of shadow thrown by the habit. The

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<sup>72</sup> Both the green used in the leaves and the blue for the sky have similar compositions to the ones used in the versions in the American museums studied. See Kuniej Berry... [et al.] 2011, p. 130.



22. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail

first two give us an idea of the composition of the intermediate tones, greys and browns, of the backgrounds. A mixture of vegetable carbon black, orangey earths (composed of iron oxides and hydroxides), umber and lead white make up the general tone. Tonal gradation is achieved by varying the proportions of the latter pigment [figs. 18 and 19]. The black sample [fig. 20] is from the shadowiest border of the habit and coincides chromatically with the darkest backgrounds and the additional black the artist used to highlight the contours of various features such as the hands, the folds of the habit or the outline of the crucifix. It has an interesting structure, as it starts from one layer where the carbon black pigment predominates, mixed with a low proportion of lead white and traces of earths on which was applied a glaze that was slightly clearer owing to the greater proportion of white pigment with the addition of verdigris. The artist thus achieves the transition between the greys of the habit and the darker zones. Brushstrokes are imperceptible, as the paint was very liquid when applied in very fine layers, an effect evident in the dark background against which the figure and the crucifix stand out, and in the interior zone of the cloak. The addition of verdigris, a green copper pigment, contributes the particular tone and depth in these more shadowy areas, while the presence of calcium carbonate, as noted above, makes the paint layers more transparent for the glaze effects.

Observation of the paint surface, particularly in light of the X-radiography, reflectography and macrophotography, helps in reconstructing the method used to paint the picture, and also in detecting some of the technical resources peculiar to El Greco. Specifically, the abundant use in the mixtures of lead white, a highly radiopaque pigment, points up the process clearly in the X-rays. However, this work is one of a group where general radiopacity is not particularly high. It is fair to say that the work was painted, almost in its entirety, "wet on wet"; in other words, the artist did not wait for the first layers of colour to dry completely, working

quickly and probably in a few sessions. By way of example, for Saint Francis's habit, broad areas of straight colour were applied to begin with, the brushstrokes being blended together (a dry white brush may have been used to blur them) to make the actual texture of the brush imperceptible. Next some details were defined, including the striated texture of the actual material (the "rough serge" mentioned by Pacheco<sup>73</sup>), as can be appreciated at the height of the saint's right shoulder [fig. 21]. Fine brushes and diluted paint were used to reproduce the weft of the material with an almost tactile quality. Some free strokes clearly appreciable under the hands suggest that the artist used a flat, relatively wide brush of about 10-15 mm. The lights and the woolly effect of the material were also done with rapid, zigzag touches of liquid paint on the still-fresh base, but this time with fine 2-3 mm brushes. The edge of the left sleeve and of the cloak on that shoulder show this technique perfectly, which also enabled the artist to integrate these features with the background. In other zones of the cloak, for instance in the fall on the right shoulder, the paint seems "scratched", with fine lines of ground left visible at some points. This effect was undoubtedly caused by the use of thick paint and hard brushes. In some zones at the limit between lights and shadows, unpainted priming can be made out, which supports the idea suggested above that reserve zones were kept for each feature via some sort of drawing. An entire irregular line, for example, is visible with this priming on view defining the outline of the hood [fig. 22], where the paint was applied by rubbing the brush in zigzag strokes. This is also appreciable at the edge of the cloak, as it falls down the saint's back against the dark background [fig. 23]. Also appreciable in these zones is another particularly interesting ploy; to smooth the cloak's edge by integrating it into the background, the dark paint of the background was "combed" towards the interior of the former, possibly with a broad, dry brush, so that a slight dark stippling can be seen on the lights. Something similar is appreciable in the folds of the hood around the saint's neck and on his shoulder [fig. 22]. This blurring of the colour planes is evident at many points and is a basic constructive feature.

The face [fig. 22] was built up with great economy of colour and painted wet on wet blurring the transition between lights and shade, following the direction of the actual facial features. This can be appreciated very well in the shadow beneath the cheek, where the texture left by the brush defines the form of the cheekbone. Some finely judged touches of carmine were applied to the upper line of the eyelid, the bridge of the nose, the mouth and the concavities of the ear. In the absence of a specific analysis, their optical qualities, tonality and transparency powerfully suggest a lake-type pigment. In constructing the eye, the artist applied grey tones of shade at the back of the eyebrow, on the upper eyelid and the dark shadow under the eye, then he highlighted the light of the upper eyelid and defined the lower part with a single touch; the white of the eye was added next and finally he drew the eyebrow, lashes and iris with the same black tone used in the backgrounds. Mouth and ear were worked in the same way. Some touches may have been added to the lights on the ear, the nostril and the lower lip. Finally, beard, temple and head hair was done in paint, possibly with the base almost dry and with very fine brushes. In the area of the head, touches of clear paint were alternated with black, lifting the fringe and lighting the hair in parts with criss-cross and zigzag strokes. As with other areas of the composition, the red priming is visible to the naked eye, for instance at the upper edge of the head and more lightly in the line defining the upper eyelid and the bridge of the nose.

The hands [fig. 21] were painted in the same way and the same colours. The artist achieved the transition between the shadows and lights by blurring the paint and progressively bringing out the lights with rapid touches of the brush in the direction of the fingers. He thus managed to arrange the left hand, with the fingers extended straight out, the middle and ring fingers together, something to be found in other well-known Grecos like the different versions of *The Disrobing of Christ*, *Christ Embracing the Cross*, and *Gentleman with*

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73 See note 2.



23-24. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Details

*his Hand on his Chest*. To reinforce the chiaroscuro effect he applied a slight light in the shadow zones of the fingers: this is the light reflected by the surrounding elements. The shadows cast on the habit by the saint's hands were given an intense boost with the same black colour used in the backgrounds, especially below the left hand and wrist, bringing out the relief even further. This expedient, used here to stress the way the hands are posed against the saint's chest, is a Venetian taste<sup>74</sup>. In these zones, he continued working on the habit with highly expressive brushstrokes in different gradations of grey against the black. As in other areas, in certain parts of the outline of the hands the priming was left on view, although some very decided touches were applied between the ring and middle fingers, and to profile the index finger and thumb on the right hand. It is fair to say these touches are more graphic than painterly in nature and were applied to strengthen the drawing.

Something similar is to be found in the crucifix and the other objects arranged almost in a *vanitas* on the right oif the composition [fig. 24]. Once again it is clear that every element was painted against a specific reserve zone and was outlined in black to reinforce the drawing and the effect of three-dimensionality, as he did with the hands. Christ was painted directly, wet on wet, the anatomy being defined with almost Expressionist touches of the brush. The cross and the background were done afterwards, the figure of Christ being outlined with care taken not to overpaint the legs, where the artist left a fine line of priming on view on their outer edge. Some details of the anatomy were redefined with black. This particular feature stands

<sup>74</sup> Garrido 2007, p. 182.

out for its fresh handling, and its central role as a focus of iconographic attention. In the skull, painted with the same, although less clarified pigments, the nasal and spherical cavities are given identical treatment. The three-dimensional effect of the book is achieved through the canny use of chiaroscuro and even with great economy of colour and visual detail, to highlight the zone of light on the rock, which was painted last. The dark backgrounds were nuanced with clear, very transparent glazes, as we saw in stratigraphy number 5 [fig. 20], which gives some subtle textures to the elements further back.

All the features noted above, taken with the absence of *pentimentos* or major changes, verified by both X-radiography and infrared reflectography, result in an extraordinarily adroit execution that demonstrates the magnificent quality of this version and the utter confidence of the artist in the handling. Together with the lack of important corrections, they also imbue the painting with a visual immediacy enhanced by the artist's technical confidence, displayed in the almost breezy brushstrokes applied *a la prima*. The almost daring ease with which the artist wields the brush leads to great gusto in the drawing, very clear in the vivacity with which features like the crucifix, the extraordinarily Impressionistic face and the hair are resolved. They also fit what has been called "painting from the inside to the outside" in El Greco's technique. In other words, starting from a carefully worked base, he builds up textures, lights and shadows through brushwork superimposed with great liberty and expressiveness. With this method he manages to construct forms and volumes in a characteristic way, giving some highly specific X-ray images that enable us to detect studio works with which the maestro had very little to do or even of more or less fortunate followers who only reproduced the effects on the surface, while missing the artist's constructive complexity.

## Conclusions

El Greco and his workshop habitually produced literal (occasionally slightly altered) replicas, repeating models, iconographic types, compositions and details. The system enabled him to meet the intense, largely religious, demand for works for churches, convents and monasteries, and also speeded up the response to numerous commissions for works of private devotion from an occasionally cultured and refined Toledo clientele, as in the case in question here. But the truth is they are so similar that at times dating is by no means easy. On this subject Pacheco mentions in his treatise that, when he visited the artist in his Toledo studio, "Dominico Greco showed me, the year 1611, a cupboard of clay models by his hand, for use in his works and, what exceeds all admiration, the originals of everything he had painted in his life, painted in oils, on smaller canvases in a room that, on his word, his son showed me"<sup>75</sup>. It made work easier for the artist to have at hand in his workshop the replicas of the works most in demand, which he used as models as often as required, he was also thus able to use his models of figurines done in clay or wax, which he "dressed" with paper to simulate cloaks, chasubles or habits, a system used by many painters, as Pacheco notes: "[...] as I say, many others compose the robes with wet paper on the bare models of clay or wax [...]"<sup>76</sup>. This gives the folds in the fabrics with which he covered the figures a certain stiff quality, as if they really were made of paper, something that does in fact characterise El Greco's style. His son Jorge Manuel confirmed the existence of these figurines, when he set down in the inventory of goods on his father's death "twenty plaster models" and "thirty of clay and wax"<sup>77</sup>.

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75 Pacheco 1990, p. 440. This is true of the Annunciations by El Greco in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, considered "models" for the great Annunciation in the Prado, originally part of the retable in the College of *Doña María de Aragón*. See Bilbao/Madrid 1997 on this subject.

76 Pacheco 1990, p. 442.

77 Wethey 1967, vol. II, p. 173.



25. El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos) (1541-1614)  
*Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix*, c. 1585  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail

A good number of these versions are signed, like the one in Bilbao, where the signature is located near the bottom right-hand corner, on a small piece of white paper that seems to have been folded and stuck to the rock-altar with red sealing-wax. Written in confident lines in lower case italic Greek characters with the tip of a fine brush and diluted sepia paint are the words: “doménikos theotokópolis e’poiei” [fig. 25]<sup>78</sup>.

All of this makes dating difficult, particularly given, at least to the naked eye, the limited variations in the artist’s technique in these versions. Experts have proposed several different dates. For Camón Aznar it is from the early Toledo period and the oldest, although he gives no precise date; Soehner reckons it was painted between 1583 and 1585; Wethey puts it somewhere between 1585 and 1590; Gudiol, between 1587 and 1597; Lafuente Ferrari and Pita Andrade, between 1595 and 1605; Juan Luna, between 1585 and 1590; Richard Mann, between 1587 and 1597; and Álvarez Lopera, who judges it to be the series’s lead version, proposes 1587-1596, in line with the dates given by Gudiol and Mann, the dating maintained by the Museum up to now. Certainly, the image of a saint like Saint Francis of Assisi praying before the Crucified Christ, whose portrayal moved the devout to prayer and penitence, was particularly suited to an enclosed convent. Not everyone could afford to own a painting by El Greco, a highly regarded and valued artist, but it would have been little problem to someone with the protection and patronage of the powerful Lasso de la Vega family. This was true of the convent of the Discalced Carmelites at Cuerva, founded, as we know, by one of the members of the family, *doña* Aldonza Niño de Guevara. So it is more than reasonable to think that she commissioned the painting directly for her beloved convent, of which she was a member; this also provides further backing for proposing 1585 as the most likely date, the year the convent was founded.

78 This is the same formula the artist used to sign, among other works, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* in 1586-1588.

The version at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is, then, one of the finest and earliest of its type, painted at a time when El Greco had achieved absolute mastery of his technique, as details of the handling fully demonstrate. Despite the deliberately sober colouring, he achieves a vibrant wealth of tone in the saint's habit. The speed with which the crucifix was painted, and the subtle touches of carmine and light added to vivify the facial features, only appreciable from very close up, are typical of El Greco's highly personal style, hinting at the remarkable scope of the artist's genius and his unique, stand-alone status as a painter. This is where his sheer technical originality is to be found, in a highly elaborated immediacy that is Expressionist in the drawing and almost Impressionistic in its treatment of colour in the representation of reality. All these features, to be found in the *Saint Francis in Prayer Before the Crucifix* now in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, are proper to one of the most advanced, personal, original and daring artists of his time.

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