

Artistic aspiration and religious inspiration in El Greco's work: the evidence of his signatures

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The present paper is a preliminary report on work in progress that is still in the very first stages of its development.¹ My aim is to shed more light on the personality and work of El Greco, one of the most celebrated and enigmatic artists of the European heritage, by examining the cultural transitions and explorations that mark his life and by studying significant features of his work such as iconographic peculiarities and signature patterns. My main goal is to highlight the importance of his trans-cultural experiences in the formation of his idiomatic art and to underline the interrelation between artistic intentions and religious beliefs in his production. In other words, I intend to challenge the forced dichotomies that modern art historians often impose on El Greco's work and personality. Under the influence of their own theoretical interests and ideological backgrounds, such scholars often see El Greco either as a Greek or a Spaniard and primarily indebted to Byzantium or to Italy for the development of his artistic idiom,² and tend to identify him either as a fervent believer or an insightful intellectual.³ I propose that he is all of the above and recognizing this complexity opens the path to understanding better his idiosyncratic art. Such a comprehensive viewpoint gives us the opportunity to rethink our art historical methodologies, recognize the distorting effect of ideological binarisms and rediscover the interpretative potential of more holistic approaches to human personalities and their creations.⁴ In the present article I focus in particular on the religious devotion of the artist that is still contested in the literature.

El Greco started his career as Dominikos Theotokopoulos, a Greek icon painter working according to the Byzantine tradition on the Venetian-occupied island of Crete (where he was born around 1541). In his mid twenties he moved to Italy (1567-77) where he studied the great masters of his time. Ten years later he finally settled in Toledo, Spain (1577-1614), where he gradually developed his extremely idiosyncratic style, a unique fusion of East and West achieve through the catalyst of his artistic genius and personal

explorations.⁵ It is this uniquely original and idiomatic style of his Spanish period that made him so controversial and enigmatic from his own time onwards.

Byzantinists usually study only the Cretan and early Italian period of El Greco's production,⁶ while Western art historians focus on his Italian and Spanish work without the insight that a Byzantine specialist can bring into the discussion.⁷ However, the artist's own overarching trajectory challenges this dichotomy and calls for a more interdisciplinary approach. My hope is that as a Byzantinist with a complementary training in Western art history I can attempt to bridge the gap and follow the thread of El Greco's explorations from his earlier to his later achievements, in order to make some new suggestions that could contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion of his work. In the following pages I will briefly present what I believe to be a valuable key through which to unlock some of the secrets of the El Greco enigma. I am referring to the artist's signatures, which throughout his career were always written in Greek, and were often rendered in very conspicuous ways within the composition.⁸ It is surprising that scholars who hotly debate El Greco's artistic intentions and personal beliefs have failed to study systematically his signatures as powerful statements of self-perception or at least self-presentation.⁹ At times they even perceive artistic intellect and religious faith as entirely incompatible in the case of this painter, as if he could possess only the one or the other.¹⁰ This forced post-enlightenment dichotomy reflects modern preconceptions and has nothing to do with El Greco's world.¹¹ My reading of his signatures, their textual and visual aspects and their interaction with other parts of the composition, aims to illuminate the personal intentions and beliefs of a human being who did not compartmentalize his identity or the world around him according to modern categories, but rather perceived himself and his work in more organic and holistic terms. Indeed I would like to suggest that El Greco saw his religious paintings very much like his clients did: not only as great works of art, but also as instruments of spiritual ascent that could transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, connect heaven and earth, inspire prayer and enlightenment and eventually assist in the personal salvation of both their creator and their viewers.¹² Most of the following examples are from the artist's Spanish period, but I will start with one of his earliest works, from the time he worked as an icon painter.

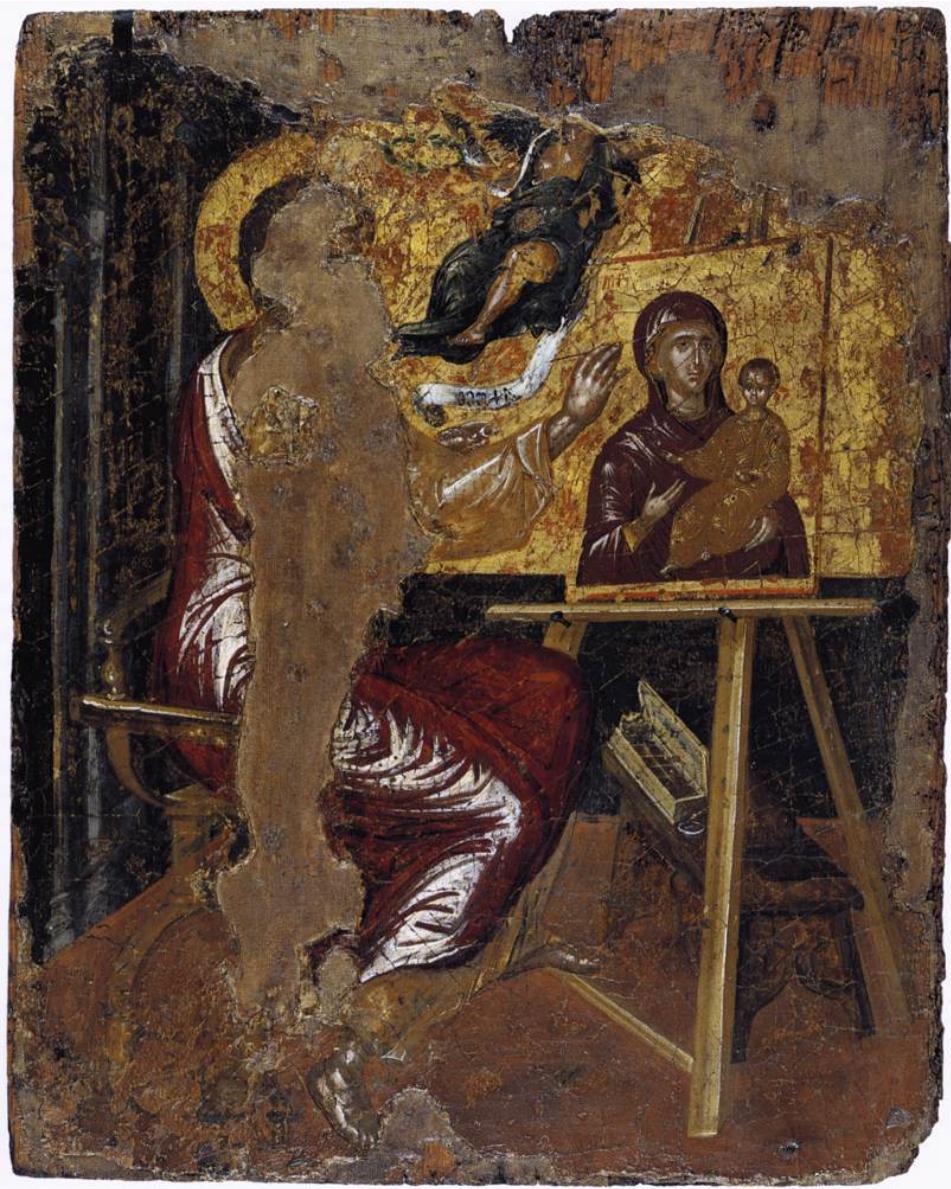


Fig. 1. El Greco, *St. Luke painting the Virgin and Child*, before 1567, Benaki Museum, Athens. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

St. Luke painting the Virgin and Child, dated before 1567, now at the Benaki Museum in Athens, can be considered emblematic of our artist's self-perception (Fig. 1).¹³ As already noted in the scholarly literature, the Evangelist is not depicted simply as the patron of painters, but as the alter ego of Theotokopoulos who is equally proud of the visual impact and spiritual power of his icon.¹⁴ The combination of Byzantine and Western iconographic and stylistic elements and the angel crowning the painter suggest that Domenikos'es holy images bridge different times and spaces (the Byzantine past and

the Creto-Venetian present) and continue the venerable tradition of the production of icons as objects with a combined aesthetic and spiritual value in the time of sixteenth-century Crete.¹⁵

The signature XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ ("cheir Domenikou", hand of Domenikos), on the stool right under the evangelist's box of pigments, further emphasizes the intended connection between Theotokopoulos and Luke.¹⁶ Scholars claim that when this typical Byzantine signature type is employed by icon painters it reveals the humility of the medieval artisan who presents himself as the instrument of divine will.¹⁷ I believe it is time to re-examine this widely-held notion through a more systematic study of Byzantine artists' signatures. My preliminary research indicates that painters often make statements of proud authorship and active agency where modern scholars tend to see evidence of humility and humbleness.¹⁸ However this subject is too broad to be discussed adequately in the context of the present paper, so here I will limit myself to a brief mention of two basic arguments.

The first is the importance of the hand as a reference to action and interaction in the Christian culture of Byzantium. God created and saved humanity through his hands according to both the scared texts and images that educated Byzantine Christians in their beliefs. From the description of Adam's and Eve's creation in Genesis to the narration of many of Christ's healing miracles through touch in the Gospels, God interacts with humans through his hands.¹⁹ In Byzantine images divine intervention in critical moments of history is also depicted through God's extended hand, from the delivery of the Law to Moses or the Baptism of Christ to the crowning of great rulers. During the Passion, Jesus offers his hands (and feet) to be nailed on the Cross; during his Resurrection he uses his hands to pull Adam and Eve out of the underworld.²⁰ Countless Byzantine images depict Christ Pantocrator delivering his words and therefore his blessing to the world through the gesture of his right hand. Likewise Mary and the saints pray for human salvation through their outstretched hands.²¹ In addition, the objects held by the hands of holy and imperial figures transmit important messages of status and identity.²² In general hand gestures constitute a powerful language of communication in the visual culture of Byzantium,²³ as is also the case in other earlier, contemporary and later traditions.²⁴ In this cultural context in which the hands were such prominent signs of action and

intention, it is logical to assume that an artist's reference to his hand as the medium through which holy images were produced can be an assertive reference to his creative power and a statement of contribution to the illumination and salvation of the Christian viewers who prayed in front of his creations. The specific content and placement of painters' signatures can at times reinforce the hypothesis that such an assertive reference is indeed intended.²⁵

This emphatic reference to artistic authorship and agency can be further sustained by the second argument I would like to mention here: the significant syntactical difference between the signatures of Byzantine painters and scribes, both of whom use the word "hand" to refer to their work. Byzantine scribes traditionally sign in the formula "through the hand of [this book was written]" (*διά χειρός*) because the subject in this case is the holy text, and they are just the instrument of its transmission.²⁶ By comparison the painters clearly declare the creative agency of their hand in the syntactical formula they prefer to sign with, in which "the hand of so and so" (*χείρ*) is the prominent subject.²⁷ This emphasis on authorship does not disassociate the artists from God and the religious function of their work. On the contrary, it highlights such a function from which the painters draw pride and dignity, and for which they are eager to ask both divine guidance and forgiveness.²⁸ But at the same time this relationship with God may be used to present the painters no longer as passive instruments of divine will (in the guise of mere craftsmen), but as active creators in the likeness and image of the divine Creator, as God himself declared in Genesis 1:26-28 for his human masterpiece.²⁹ In this respect the example of El Greco can provide a useful template by which to think of his Byzantine predecessors: if artistic aspiration and religious inspiration complement each other in his work (as discussed below), why should they be incompatible in the work of Byzantine painters?³⁰ It is the decision of modern scholars to take for granted their religious devotion and be reluctant to recognize their artistic assertiveness, in the same way that they might choose to follow the exact opposite approach when they deal with El Greco's work. Obviously his case and cultural context became very different from that of his Byzantine predecessors, but an attentive and well-informed juxtaposition might shed more light on both sides.

In the icon of *St. Luke painting the Virgin and Child* (Fig. 1), Theotokopoulos gives us additional evidence about the creative power of his hand by using an ingenious detail that to my knowledge does not appear in any other surviving depiction of the same subject:³¹ the golden background of the icon Luke paints fuses with the golden background of the entire icon, as if the evangelist is creating not only the world of Mary and Christ, but his own world as well. In other words, his hand, around which the fusion of the two worlds takes place, is the hand of Theotokopoulos, who is the real painter of the entire panel.³² While Western European painters might underline the connection between them and their art's patron by giving their physiognomic features to St. Luke,³³ Theotokopoulos highlights the same connection by focusing attention on the action of their hands. In this context his signature type, which makes an emphatic reference to the XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ, acquires particular significance.

In his Spanish works El Greco rarely uses the signature-type "hand of Domenikos", once more in order to make a powerful statement about the importance of his work. In the representation of *St. Anthony of Padua* (around 1580, now at the Prado Museum, Madrid, Fig. 2), El Greco signs XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ (hand of Domenikos) on the edge of the monk's Bible. Anthony was a famous preacher of the Gospel to the poor and uneducated and he is often depicted as here, holding a lily and a book, most probably the Gospel itself, on which appears the vision of Baby Jesus, symbolizing the Incarnation: the Word of God made flesh and made known to humankind through the word of the Gospel.³⁴ In this context the lily is a symbol not just of purity, but of Anthony as preacher of the Incarnation, in the role of both Gabriel Announcing and Mary Announced. He receives the Word of God and then delivers it to the world, continuing the salvific work of Christ himself.³⁵ So the two objects the saint holds in his hands carry the message of *his* agency and are painted naturally and tridimensionally as links between viewer and viewed. In addition, both the Gospel held by the invisible left hand and the right hand holding the lily seem to break through the painted surface and enter the space of the viewer in order to deliver their message.³⁶ By declaring the action of his hand on the edge of the book, a significant liminal position, El Greco highlights *his* agency and once more transforms the holy figure into a metonym of

the painter who through the art of *his* own hands brings the message of the Incarnation and of intercession into the world.



Fig. 2. El Greco, *St. Anthony of Padua*, around 1580, Prado Museum, Madrid. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

When discussing this painting, Leticia Ruiz Gómez expresses her puzzlement for the omission of the left hand that one would logically expect to see supporting the Gospel.³⁷ Indeed, as a result the book seems to float unrealistically in front of the saint's body. Ruiz Gómez further emphasizes the peculiarity of this omission by reminding her readers that El Greco usually gives great importance to the depiction of hands as rhetorical elements that shape the character of the figures depicted and give them greater expressivity.³⁸ She does not offer any explanation for this unusual omission, but I believe the signature type used on the Gospel provides the answer: by not depicting the hand of

the saint where one would normally expect to see it, under the book, and by making an emphatic reference to his own hand instead on the edge of that same book, El Greco draws greater attention to his agency as creator of this holy image, through which he continues the work of Anthony, by bringing the message of the Incarnation and of saintly intercession to the viewers. It is rather significant that the artist chose to place his signature, in other words his reference to the creation of this holy image, on the edge of the holy book of the Gospel: I believe this is a very emphatic reference to the traditional Byzantine iconophile belief in the equal value of holy texts and images for the illumination of the faithful.³⁹ El Greco was surely familiar with this idea through his Greek Orthodox background and his training as a Byzantine icon painter. He appears to reference it in a number of his works, in order to serve both the renewed emphasis on images promoted by the Catholic Counter-Reformation,⁴⁰ and his own prestige and pride as creator of such images.⁴¹

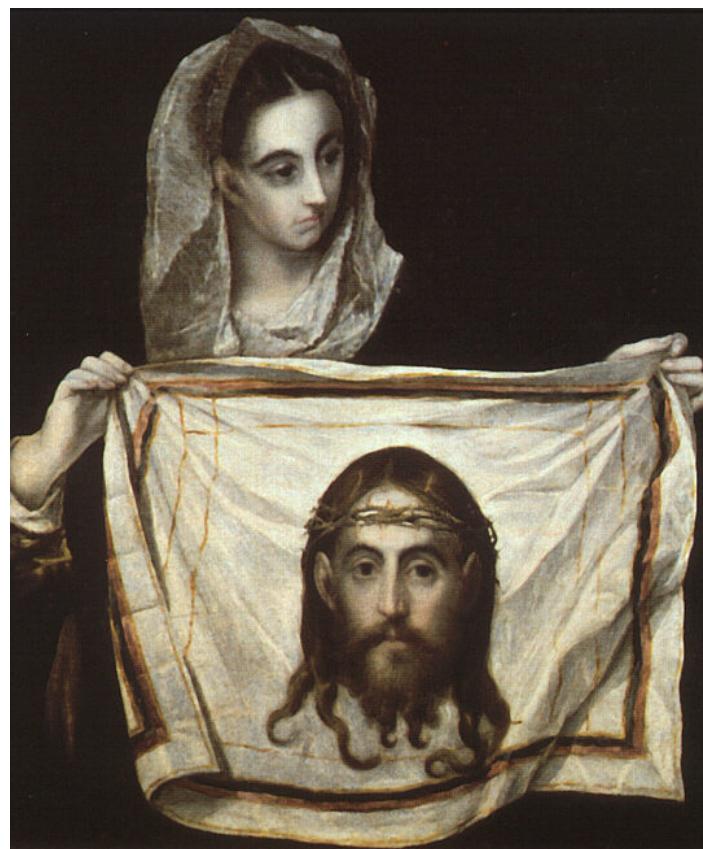


Fig. 3. El Greco, *Veronica holding the cloth with Christ's face*, late 1570's, Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo. Similar to the signed version formerly in the Caturla Collection in Madrid, now lost. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

Another case in which the painter uses the rare signature type XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ (hand of Domenikos) is the only known signed example of *Veronica holding the cloth with Christ's face* (late 1570's, formerly in the Caturla Collection in Madrid, now lost. Fig. 3 is of the similar painting of the Museo de Santa Cruz in Toledo, without the signature).⁴² This emphatic reference to the artist's XEIP through the signature seems intended to suggest that the hands holding Veronica's veil in front of our eyes are really El Greco's hands. Like Luke and Anthony, Veronica is another metonym for the painter who reveals the mystery of the Incarnation through the representation of the miraculous relic, created by the artist's hands.

On the contrary, in the only signed version of the Veronica theme in which the veil hangs on its own, unsupported by human hands (late 1570's, now in the Goulandris Collection), El Greco signed in a formula that is much more frequent in his Spanish works and omits the reference to his hand: ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΙ ("Domenikos Theotokopoulos epoiei", i.e. Domenikos Theotokopoulos was making).⁴³ He is the one who made the image for our eyes in a way that parallels Christ's own action of producing his holy image on the cloth. In both versions the realistic, tridimensional way the cloth is rendered emphasizes the reality of the holy relic and through it the reality of the Incarnation and of Christ's presence in front of the viewer through the agency of the artist.⁴⁴ And in both versions the placement of the signature, between the lower edge of the cloth and the edge of the whole painting (right-hand corner of the composition), is also of great significance: in fact it further highlights the artist's agency, not only because it appears at a liminal position between the painting and the viewer, but also because by its very presence and placement it simultaneously underlines and undermines the illusion of the tri-dimensional cloth. However, only in the image in which Veronica appears holding the holy cloth with her hands, El Greco chooses to refer to the agency of his own hands through the signature type XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ.⁴⁵

It is perhaps significant that in this case, as also in the other few surviving images in which he uses the same signature to emphasize his metonymic connection to the saint depicted, the painter omits his last name (which on the contrary he uses when Veronica's veil appears on its own and the signature type is different). The use of only the first name seems intended to reinforce the suggestion that the hand of Domenikos is the driving

force behind the action of the hand of Luke, Anthony or Veronica.⁴⁶ By presenting to the faithful the dogma of the Incarnation through an icon, a book, or a veil (all of which include an image of Christ), these saints reference the creative action of El Greco's hand, who is the one responsible for their depiction.⁴⁷

The above examples reveal the artist's pride in the religious function of his paintings, on the basis of the wording of his signatures in relation to the subject of his compositions. The following examples will focus on the issue of El Greco's personal devotion and hope for salvation, as revealed through the representation and placement of his signatures in relation to other features of his paintings. El Greco's devotional portraits of holy figures offer clear indications that he perceived his paintings as visual instruments of spiritual ascent, through which he did not simply serve his patrons' longing for enlightenment, but he also wished for his own personal salvation by declaring his faith and invoking the intercession of the saints depicted. In all the following paintings he signed (always in Greek) either simply by his full name or by adding the verb ἐποίει ("was making") after the name.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

Fig. 4. El Greco, *Christ carrying the cross*, late 16th-early 17th c, Prado Museum, Madrid. The signature is on the cross, framed by Christ's hands. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

Fig. 5. El Greco, *St. Paul*, around 1608-14 El Greco Museum, Toledo. The signature is on the blade of the sword, right below the hilt. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

In some cases, as for example on the devotional portrait of Christ holding the cross (Fig. 4)⁴⁸ and St. Paul holding the sword (Fig. 5),⁴⁹ his signature is written directly on the instruments of martyrdom, through which the figures served their mission, proved their faith and won salvation for the world (Christ) or themselves (saints). By the placement of his name on these instruments El Greco suggests that his paintings can also serve a similar role of spiritual enlightenment by presenting the saints as models of Christian behavior and as recipients or mediators of prayers. In addition the artist claims martyria: literally proof of his faith through his art.⁵⁰ Perhaps El Greco also suggest that his work as painter involves suffering and sacrifice. It is an arduous process in which the master spills his very soul on the canvas, striving to create visions of sanctity that will touch other souls with the same power. His paintings become painful confessions of human needs and longings, as much as they are powerful impressions of human virtues and blessings.

In the following pages I will focus my attention on devotional portraits of St. Francis in which the interrelation between the saint, the artist's signature and other elements of the composition highlights El Greco's pride in the spiritual function of his images and at the same time expresses his personal longing for forgiveness and salvation. In these paintings the artist signs on a cartellino, a piece of paper that is inserted as a physical object in the composition and through its presence in the space of the saints emphatically declares the agency of El Greco in their depiction. The device of the cartellino was widely used by Italian artists in various inventive ways.⁵¹ My intention here is not to trace how El Greco might have been influenced by their example, but how he employs the cartellino signature to construct profoundly meaningful personal statements about his work.

My first study-case is one of the typical portraits of *St. Francis standing in meditation* exemplified by the painting of Fig. 6 (dated around the last decade of the sixteenth century, now in the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska).⁵² Here the position of El Greco's signature on a cartellino close to the lower edge of the painting creates a close interaction with the saint: St. Francis gestures towards it with his left hand while resting the right on his chest and turning his gaze towards Christ crucified, as if to indicate that he is praying in perpetuity to the Savior for the salvation of the artist. The wrinkled depiction of the cartellino and its proximity to a scull and crucifix could also refer to the concepts hinted to in the

previous paintings by the placement of the signature on martyrdom instruments: El Greco's suffering and sacrifice, and in addition perhaps his anxiety about death and mortality.⁵³ Moreover, the saint's gesture towards the prominent signature reminds the viewers of the



Fig. 6. El Greco, *St. Francis standing in meditation*, around the last decade of the sixteenth century, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

image that they can address St. Francis thanks to the work of El Greco. In gratitude they should also pray for the painter , generating a line of energy between their world and that of the saint, which has as its nexus the signature of the artist.⁵⁴ In fact, the saint's left hand seems to break through the pictorial surface and into the physical space of the

viewer, right above the artist's signature, as if to suggest that El Greco's hand is behind the gesture of St. Francis, making possible the transcendence of boundaries and the intercession of the saint both for the artist and the viewers.

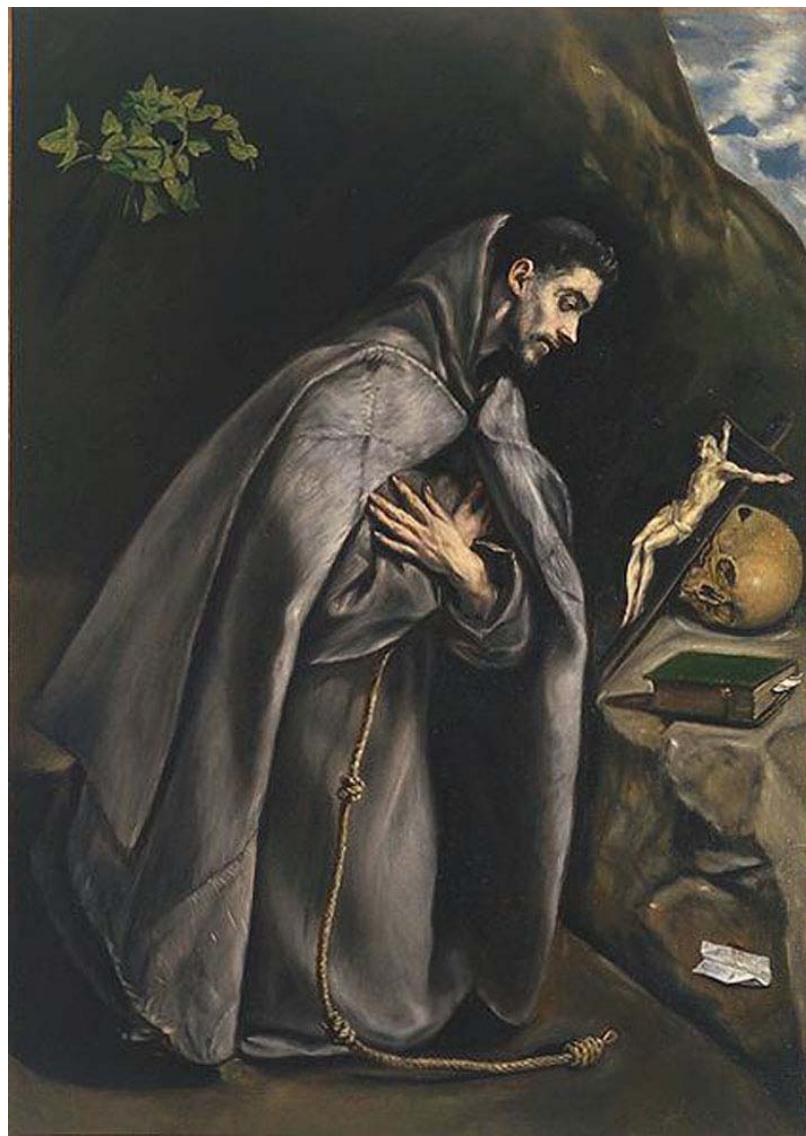


Fig. 7. El Greco, *St. Francis kneeling in meditation*, around 1595-1600, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

In the case of the portrait of *St. Francis kneeling in meditation*, the references are even more complex.⁵⁵ The cartellino belongs to a vertical hierarchy of images that is more clearly articulated in comparison to the previous painting. It begins with heaven's bright blue, the destination of prayers and saved souls; it continues with the sacrifice of Christ and the word of God (the crucifix and the Bible), both of which pave the path to

salvation; and it ends with El Greco's signature, in other words a reference to his painting as another instrument of enlightenment and salvation. A piece of paper similar to his cartellino is used to mark a specific passage in the Bible that has inspired the saint's meditation,⁵⁶ alluding to the equal value of holy texts and images in spiritual ascent.⁵⁷ In addition the signature lies on the same diagonal axis with the praying hands of the saint and the evergreen ivy behind him, as if to suggest that through the painting the intercession of St. Francis is perpetually activated, asking for the eternal salvation of painter and viewers.⁵⁸ Even the belt of the saint, which in this period was venerated and represented as a link between earth and heaven,⁵⁹ is pointing to the signature. The suggestion is perhaps that the painting is another such link and the artist is hoping for the saint's protective intercession that will ensure his place in heaven.

The charged emotional dialogue that El Greco constructs between the saints and himself (through the way they interact with his signature) becomes even more apparent if we compare his paintings with those of other artists who also sign on cartellini, but do not display the saints emphatically gesturing or looking towards them. Compare for example the portraits of St. Francis in Figs. 6-7 with Mantegna's small devotional painting of St. Mark in Fig. 8. As Debra Pincus has observed, the signature on the cartellino at the face of the window ledge clearly emphasizes Mantegna's creative agency, while "the close-up view and the pushing forward of the image so that it virtually breaks through the picture plane bring the viewer into intimate, forceful contact with Mark",⁶⁰ highlighting the concept of mediation that the saint and his icon serve as recipients of prayer. Even the use of a marker inside the Gospel book that seems of the same material as the cartellino might have been intended to emphasize the equal value of holy images and texts in Christian devotion.⁶¹ The prominent placement of the cartellino and its reference to the labor of the artist could suggest that Mantegna reminds the praying viewers of their debt to the creativity of the painter, and perhaps even implicitly asks to be included in those prayers.⁶² But even if we assume this might have been the artist's intention, it is not at all as clearly articulated as in El Greco's portraits of St. Francis, because St. Mark himself is not praying towards the direction of the signature. In fact he is not praying at all, and in addition he does not seem to acknowledge the presence of the cartellino below and in front of him, since he looks and gesture in a different direction.⁶³ As an example of a

devotional painting that employs similar visual devices but treats them rather differently, Mantegna's painting highlights by contrast El Greco's emotional reference to his own personal devotion, through the connections he weaves between his signature and the saint.⁶⁴



Fig. 8. Mantegna, *San Marco*, around 1450, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt. Image in the public domain (www.wikipedia.org).

Another interesting feature of El Greco's cartellino signatures is their prominent physicality and tridimensionality in a space that by comparison appears flat and bidimensional. The contrast confers to the cartellino a prominent reality, presenting it as an actual object that belongs to the artist's world and has been inserted by him in the pictorial world of the saints. A link between the two realms, it emphasizes the idea that the painter is the mediator between the material world of the viewer and the spiritual world of the viewed.⁶⁵ In addition it creates the impression that El Greco has been physically present in the space of the saints and left behind his visiting card, before returning to our world in order to represent his experience for the sake of his viewers. This does not simply emphasize his agency in the creation of the pictorial vision, it even suggests that it is a vision that he has actually seen himself as an eyewitness before

reporting it in his paintings. With this bold statement (obviously rhetorical rather than literal) he highlights the ability of icons and especially his icons to make available to the faithful the reality of holy figures, emphasizing the devotional and theological value of images according to both Byzantine and Counter-Reformational ideals.⁶⁶ In this specific case of *St. Francis kneeling in meditation* (Fig. 7), the oblique depiction of the cartellino, with its lower right corner illusionistically folded, echoes the oblique representation of the Bible and the crucifix, both of which approach the edge of the painting (especially through the page marker and the outstretched left arm of Christ). Together these three objects create the illusion of a break through the pictorial plane, reaching over to the world of the viewer, to reinforce the connection between the two realms.



Fig. 9. El Greco, *St. . Francis and the vision of the flaming torch*, around 1600-5, Church of the Hospital de Nuestra Señora del Carmen, Cádiz. Image in the public domain (www.wikipaintings.org).

On the contrary, in the painting of *St. Francis and the vision of the flaming torch* exemplified by Fig. 9 (around 1600-5, at the Church of the Hospital de Nuestra Señora del Carmen, Cádiz),⁶⁷ the cartellino is painted parallel to the pictorial plane, as if it is not only affixed on the rock within the saint's world, but it is also attached on the surface of the painting itself, casting its shadow both inside the landscape and on the skin of the image: a studied ambiguity, once more intended to break through boundaries and bridge over different realms.⁶⁸ In addition, El Greco's devotion and plea for saintly intercession are revealed by the placement of the signature within the energy field of prayer and sanctity that is created by the open arms of the saint and the curve of his belt cord. They encompass the signature into a protective embrace, in the most privileged position of the painting where the devout viewers themselves would wish to be. Thus they are reminded once more of their debt to the painter who created this vision for their sake and deserves their gratitude and payers for his salvation.

The wax used to attach the cartellino reflects a workshop practice that emphasizes the materiality of the painting, its production by the hands of the artist.⁶⁹ At the same time there might be a spiritual dimension to the red wax: the only other area of the painting with the same color is the stigma on the saint's left palm. With those hands St Francis performed charity and prayer, suffered and triumphed in ways that earned him the mark of God. Through his hand's work El Greco was also serving God and the salvation of his clients, toiling and hoping to receive God's favor in return. Although the signature here reads Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος ἐποίει (Dominikos Theotokopoulos was making), the red wax and blood wound draw attention to the action of hands in the same emphatic way that that signature type XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ does, giving special emphasis to the agency of both the saint and the artist as servants of God.

Modern scholars at times refute El Greco's religiosity as if it would blemish his artistic and intellectual brilliance.⁷⁰ They argue his lack of faith on the basis of his arrogant and proud personality, amply attested by the sources.⁷¹ They forget that, in his own words, Christ came to the world to heal the sick, not the healthy.⁷² El Greco's signatures offer us valuable insight into the artist's beliefs and appear to give us solid evidence about his religious devotion.⁷³ As significant personal statement, they reveal a

man who was proud of the visual and spiritual impact of his art, but was also painfully aware of his shortcoming and limitations as a human being and hoped to address them through the power of his paintings to transcend the boundaries of time and space and create links between earth and heaven. We cannot know if El Greco earned salvation, but he certainly earned posterity, which is another aspect of his art's power to transcend time and space.

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² The scholarly literature on this subject is quite extensive and here I mention only a few publications that contain useful reviews of previous publications on the issue. See Triantaphylopoulos (1995) for an overview of the discussion of El Greco's "Greekness" or "Byzantinism" in the context of modern Greek history, culture and politics. For a similar historiographic overview of the artist's "Spanishness" see Brown (1982a). See also Hadjinicolaou (1999). I was not able to consult the recent publication by Storm (2011). In the last three decades, new discoveries and developments in scholarship on El Greco's Cretan period and on the island's artistic production in the 15th-17th centuries have illuminated various connections between the painter's idiosyncratic production in Spain and his Byzantine heritage. I find particularly useful the discussion by Davies (1995). For a more extensive bibliography on the subject and the examination of a few relevant issues anew see Evangelatou (2012, forthcoming) and the literature mentioned in note 4 below.

³ See for example Marías (1999), esp. 167-8, 178, 182, 184, for emphasis on intellectual interests to the exclusion of religious faith. See also Hall (2011), 228 for the mention of Jonathan Brown's and Richard Kagan's similar intellectual emphasis in contrast to the mystical interpretation promoted by David Davies. Hall suggests that the two "are by no means incompatible" and she highlights the transcendent character of El Greco's abstract style and non-naturalistic use of light in his mature Spanish period as evidence of his religious beliefs (e.g. pp. 240, 246-7).

⁴ Lately the belief that El Greco's training as a Byzantine icon painter had some influence on the development of the idiomatic style of his Spanish period is gaining wider acceptance, but more systematic research on the subject is still needed. See for example the contrasting approaches by Marías and Davies in El Greco (1999). See also the recent exhibition catalogue *El Greco* (2009). Certainly the belief in the importance of El Greco's Byzantine training in the formation of his Spanish style is not a new one. For insightful observations on this subject see, for example, Chatzidakis (1955/1990), esp. p. 106; Brown

(1982b), 145; Mouriki (1991), esp. 24-30; Papadaki-Oekland (1995); and Marinelli (1995), 249. For some new observations on the subject see also Evangelatou (2012, forthcoming). On the contrary, iconographic parallels drawn between El Greco's Spanish works and Byzantine painting, for example by Kelemen (1961) and Hadermann-Misguch (1995), are not always convincing, since similar motifs were also known in Western art. In itself this does not disprove the possible Byzantine influence, but the Western models must also be acknowledged. Cf. Hadjinicolaou (1990), 94-101. In this context I should also mention the very significant and in my opinion thoroughly-argued conclusion by Nano Chatzidakis that the quadro dorato El Greco sold on 1566 in Crete should be identified with an icon of the *Pietà with angles* now at the Velimezis Collection: as Chatzidakis argues, this painting suggests Domenikos had started developing his personal style, based on a creative fusion and reinvention of Byzantine and Western elements, while he was still in Crete, and he took up the thread again when he retreated in Toledo, where he enjoyed a liberating distance from both artistic traditions that enabled him to develop more freely his own artistic idiom (Chatzidakis [1998], 184-227, esp. 202-3).

⁵ For a critical overview of previous literature on El Greco see Hadjinicolaou (1990), Álvarez Lopera (1999) and more recently Hadjinicolaou (2005). The classical monograph on El Greco by Wethey (1962) has been recently complemented with two volumes (the third remains unpublished) by Álvarez Lopera (2005/2007). A useful concise chronology/biography is included in *El Greco* (2003), 32-43 and *El Greco* (2008), 296-98. For a brief and informative overview of El Greco's transformation see Hadjinicolaou (2009).

⁶ See for example the in-depth discussion of the Modena triptych with disputed attribution to either the Cretan or Italian period of the artist by M. Constantoudaki-Kitromilides, *El Greco* (1990), 156-91 and *El Greco* (1999), 351-6.

⁷ David Davies is perhaps the only Western art historian and El Greco specialist who has looked more carefully into the Byzantine background of the painter in connection with the issue of the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on El Greco's Spanish production. See the literature mentioned in note 12 below. In the following two examples a greater knowledge of Byzantine visual culture and theology would have significantly increased the author's understanding of the issues involved. In his insightful analysis of the paintings for the Seminary of the Incarnation in Madrid, Richard Mann discusses a number of iconographic details as inspired by the meditations of the Blessed Alonso de Orozco and ignores the possible connections that can be drawn with basic iconographic and theological themes of El Greco's Byzantine background (including the theme of the burning bush and the veil of the Temple in the Annunciation, the relationship between the manger and the Eucharistic altar in the Nativity, or the prominence of angels and the axe in the Baptism. He acknowledges a Byzantine source only in the depiction of both water and blood running from Christ's side in the Crucifixion). See Mann (1986), 82-110. Casper (2007) rightly suggests that El Greco treated all his religious paintings as icons, but his analysis of representations of Veronica's veil by the artist includes a number of problematic statements that in my opinion are not supported by the image itself and are incompatible with Byzantine iconophile theology and practice as it would have been experienced by El Greco in his native culture of Orthodox Crete. If we take into consideration that cultural background, we can afford a very different reading of the image. See below, note 45.

⁸ See for example the overview of his signature types in Chatzidakis (1964/1990).

⁹ For a number of significant observations on the issue of artists' signatures (but not in the case of El Greco), including further literature on the subject, see Matthew (1998) and Goffen (2001).

¹⁰ This dichotomy is promoted, for example, by Marías (1999), esp. 184: "For the products of the eyes of the soul and the products of the eyes of reason must have been very different." See also the references in note 3, above.

¹¹ The anachronistic matter-spirit dichotomy expounded by Post-Enlightenment scholars studying older cultures is discussed with reference to previous scholarship in Evangelatou (2010). How inaccurate this dichotomy is for El Greco's time is also revealed by the way spiritual and political considerations were combined in the foundation of religious institutions (*El Greco* [2008], 125). The term 'Enlightenment' in itself is rather biased about what came before it. For criticism of this anachronistic approach to the Pre-Protestant Christian understanding of a holistic material and spiritual world see for example Kee (1983), 150, 163 and idem (1986), 76.

¹² For the anagogical function of images in the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in connection to El Greco's art see especially Davies (1973); idem (1990a); idem (1999); idem (2005), 135-39, 143-49. See also Moffitt (2007).

¹³ *El Greco* (1990), 146-49, 331-33; *El Greco* (1999), 342-43; *El Greco* (2003), 76-77.

¹⁴ *El Greco* (1990), 146-49, 331-33, entry by Constantoudaki-Kitromilides; eadem (1995), 105-106; eadem (2007b), 49. See also Mouriki (1991), 13-14. For the iconophile use of the legend of St. Luke as painter, in order to support the antiquity, importance and divine sanction of the veneration of icons, see Pentcheva (2006), 124-27 with references to earlier scholarship.

¹⁵ For the cultural climate in Venetian-occupied Crete that lead to a very fertile interaction between Greek and Italian traditions see the essays by various scholars in Panagiotakes (1986), 163-315, Maltezou (1993) and Maltezou (2009); also Maltezou (1991) and Panagiotakes (2009), 1-12. For a discussion of this subject with emphasis on painting see Constantoudaki-Kitromilides (1999), Vassilaki (2000/2009), Constantoudaki-Kitromilides (2007a), and Drandaki (2009).

¹⁶ Casper (2007), 140-42, with reference to further literature, including Panofsky's reading of Renaissance depictions of the painter St. Luke as a figurative self-portraits of the artist.

¹⁷ For example, Chatzidakis (1964/1990), 152, Gratziou (1995), 69, 73.

¹⁸ For example, Constantoudaki-Kitromilides (2007), 25-26, suggests that when Greek painters depict Luke creating an icon of the Mother and Child and include detailed depictions of the instruments (pigments, brushes, etc.) of their trade, they represent themselves (through the evangelist) as craftsmen, contrary to the elevated status of the artist that El Greco emphasizes in his rendering of Luke, where in addition to a detailed depiction of pigments we also see an angel crowning the painter/evangelist. On the contrary, I believe that the detailed depiction of the painting instruments serves *in all cases* to emphasize the identification of the painters with the evangelist who appears working like them, and this is intended to elevate the icon-painters' status as disciples of Luke, to give prestige and value to their creations and highlight their contribution to the illumination of the Christian viewers (compare Cormack [1997], 48-49 for a similar observation). When angels appear serving Luke in heaven as apprentices working in a painter's workshop in a 17th-century icon now in Zante, why should we assume this delegates the creator of the icon into the status of a mere craftsmen (Constantoudaki-Kitromilides [2007], 25-26) rather than recognize this image as an exaltation of his profession? We tend to see what we are looking for (and that applies of course to my interpretations as well). Other examples of alternative readings of the evidence are mentioned in notes 25 and 29 below.

¹⁹ Genesis 2:7-9, 2:21-22 for the creation of Adam and Eve. Concerning Christ's healing miracles through the action of his hands, see for example the following accounts (not an exhaustive list): Mark 8:22-26 and John 9:1-7 about blind men; Matthew 8:1-3, Mark 1:40-42, Luke 5:12-13 about a leper; Luke 13:10-13 about the bent woman; Mark 7:31-35 about a deaf mute.

²⁰ In the standard Byzantine iconographic type of the Resurrection known as the Anastasis. For various representations see for example Kartsonis (1986).

²¹ See for example the insightful comments of Pentcheva (2006), 111-7 about the gesture of Mary in the iconographic type of the Hodegetria (the same type in which she appears in the image painted by St. Luke in El Greco's icon of the evangelist).

²² Examples of images that illustrate the above cases abound in any handbook of Byzantine art, but to my knowledge a systematic discussion of gestures in Byzantine visual culture has not yet appeared in the literature, with the exception of a few thematic discussions mentioned in the next note. Compare the publications mentioned in notes 24.

²³ I thank Professor Henry Maguire for the following bibliographic references: Neil Moran, *Singers in Late Byzantine and Slavonic Painting*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986 (with references to gestures). Henry Maguire, "The Depiction of Sorrow in Middle Byzantine Art", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977), 123-74, which focuses on gesture of mourning in visual representations. Idem, "Women mourners in Byzantine art, literature, and society", in *Crying in the Middle Ages : tears of history*, ed. Elina Gertsman. New York: Routledge, 2011, 3-15 (which focuses on the social context of the same theme). To these add the article on the Madrid Skylitzes mentioned in the following note.

²⁴ In recent years a number of publications that discuss the meaning of gestures from antiquity to the present have appeared in the scholarly literature. Some indicative examples: Veronica La Porta, *Il gesto nell'arte : l'eloquenza silenziosa delle immagini*. Roma: Logart Press, 2006. Marcus Mrass, *Gesten und Gebärden : Begriffsbestimmung und -verwendung in Hinblick auf kunsthistorische Untersuchungen*.

Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2005. Barbara Pasquinelli, *Il gesto e l'espressione*. Milano: Electa, 2005. *Manus Loquens : Medium der Geste, Gesten der Medien*, ed. Matthias Bickenbach, Annina Klappert and Hedwig Pompe. Köln : DuMont, 2003. *Gesture in medieval drama and art*, ed. Clifford Davidson. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2001. André Chastel, *Le geste dans l'art*. Paris: L. Levi, 2001. Gigetta Dalli Regoli, *Il gesto e la mano : convenzione e invenzione nel linguaggio figurativo fra Medioevo e Rinascimento*. Firenze: L. S. Olschki, 2000. *Il gesto : nel rito e nel ceremoniale dal mondo antico ad oggi*, ed. Sergio Bertelli and Monica Centanni. Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie, 1995 (with an article of Byzantine interest on "Gesti di comunicazione nel manoscritto miniato della Cronaca Bizantina di Giovanni Skilitze", by F. Tinnefeld"). *A Cultural history of gesture : from antiquity to the present day*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

²⁵ This is of course a matter of interpretation, but unless we are prepared to consider all the possibilities, we might be misreading the intentions of the artists: if we are preconditions to recognize only the humility of a humble craftsman, we ignore signs that might suggest the artists thought of themselves in different terms. For example, Gouma-Peterson (1983), 160, discusses the dedicatory inscriptions of the 15th-century painter Mael Phokas in churches of Crete as examples of his humility "vis à vis the saints, the emperor, and the donors" because the painter mentions himself last in the text, describes himself with adjectives like "ignorant", "unskilled", "sinful", and contrary to the well-written large capital letters of the main part of the inscription, he uses small, careless, cursive script in the last part that refers to him. However, all these features can be also seen as ways the painter uses to draw attention to the value of his work and to himself as the creator. His script is an emphasis to his authorship, an autograph that refers to the work of his hands, (contrary to the impersonal upper case script used to refer to the church, the donors etc.) The humble adjectives actually become a boast of Christian humility rather than evidence of his low self-esteem as painter. In fact, they can be compared to the rhetorical tropes of Byzantine authors who often claim to be unworthy of the lofty task of speaking about the glorious event or person they are actually discussing in their text. (I thank Emmanuel Bourbouhakis, Assistant Professor of Classical and Byzantine Literature at Princeton University for confirming that the "topos of the writer's authorial humility" is a practice the Byzantines inherited from antiquity and is "mostly, but perhaps occasionally not, disingenuous"). The fact that the painter mentions himself last means that he also has the last word in the inscription: his name could be the one the viewers remember the most after they read the text, so that they can fulfill his plea and include him in their prayers. In addition the painter mentions himself in conjunction with references to a "divine and most venerable church" (which was painted by him), dedicated to a "glorious" saint (who was honored through his paintings). These associations certainly exalt the painter even if he signs as "ignorant", "unskilled" and "sinful" (and in fact the stark contrast generated by the choice of words further highlights the rhetorical quality of all the text, including the self-references of the painter).

²⁶ See the many signatures of scribes collected by Evangelatou-Notara (1978), *eadem* (1984), the majority of which follow the formula "through the hand of...".

²⁷ I am referring here to the most common painters' signature type (XEIP, i.e. hand) on icons versus the most common scribes' signature type (διά χειρός, i.e. through the hand) in codices, that reveal a significant trend; but there are also instances of the reverse usage. For example, in inscriptions accompanying their work wall-painters usually mention first the church, donors and date of execution before they refer to their own names. In these cases they might sign in the formula διά χειρός (through the hand), since the subject of those dedicatory inscriptions is the building paid by the donors. Yet even in those cases the artists can find ways to emphasize their authorship. See the discussion of the material published by Gouma-Peterson (1983) in note 25 above.

²⁸ For painting as a devotional offering on the part of Byzantine artists, who ask for salvation, forgiveness and the prayers of the viewers on their behalf in the dedicatory inscriptions, see for example Gouma-Peterson (1983), 160, and Kalopise-Verte (1997), 130-5, 144-6.

²⁹ This is once more a matter of interpretation. For example, Todić (2001), esp. 652 ff, sees the inscriptions of the late 13th- to early 14th-century Byzantine painters Michael and Eutychios Astrapas simply as personal notes that declare humility, religious devotion and hopes for saintly protection and God's forgiveness. However, religious fervor is not incompatible with but can be linked to the artists' high self-esteem and their pride in their work as an act in the service of God. For example, some of Michael's and Eutychios's inscriptions are written with large legible letters and appear on the clothing, shield or sword of military saints who are represented close to the eye-level of the viewers (Todić [2001], 646-9). These inscriptions follow the assertive signature-type XEIP (hand of ...). Especially when they are written on the

blade of the saint's sword, right next to his hand, they might cast the painters as soldiers of God, serving him with their brushes as the saints serve him with their swords, toiling for the well-being of his chosen people. (Compare El Greco's signatures on instruments of saints' martyrdom, discussed below). Both the saints and the painters follow the will and guidance of God, but the visual language of military dynamism employed in these images emphasizes agency and action on the part of both the holy figures and the artists who sign on their swords. See for example the very striking image of St. Mercurios from the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ochrid (Todić [2001], fig. 1). Todić (*ibid*, pp. 658-9) sees the following poem written by the 16th-century Serbian painter Longinos as another example of religious humility and devotion comparable to the one he attributes to the two Byzantine painters: "Rejoice, Stephen and Nicolas, for it is thanks to the divine Providence and to your intervention that I learned as much as I could; rejoice, my grand intermediaries, benevolent and holy, for many times I painted with my hand your holy faces." It seems to me that far from humility these lines speak of the pride of the artist in his divinely-inspired work, so much so that the saints, who appear to have chosen him as their portraitist (since they inspired his learning), are also invited to rejoice because such a painter is representing their likeness. *Ibid* (p. 652) Todić refers to Ephesians 2:8-9 as the way to understand the spirit of these artists' humility in the service of God: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." However, there are cases in which Byzantine artists use the citation "gift of God" and still manage to exalt themselves by association, in a rather boastful way. The painter of the 14th-century murals in the church of St. Demetrios in Pec writes in a prominent inscription next to the Virgin of the apse: "The gift of God from the hand of John" (not a small thing to make available a divine gift through one's own human hand)! Likewise, the painter in the church of the Cross in Platanistasa of Cyprus declares "The gift of God and the hand of Philip the painter..." in which case the syntactical arrangement puts on the same level the divine gift and the artist's hand! For the Greek texts see Kalopise-Verte (1997), 127-8, n. 6.

³⁰ Compare Cormack (1997), 69-73, where he also suggests that the Byzantines appreciated icons both for their religious significance and their aesthetic value.

³¹ Not even in a later copy of his icon that today is kept at the Loverdos Collection in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (*El Greco* [1990], 148-9, fig. 2, and p. 333).

³² For a more detailed discussion of this feature and comparative material see Evangelatou (2012, forthcoming).

³³ See for example Schaefer (1986), with reference to earlier bibliography.

³⁴ See Ruiz Gómez (2007), 58.

³⁵ On the contrary, Ruiz Gómez (*ibid.*) sees the lily as a probable reference to the content of Anthony's meditation on the Incarnation. I believe we should recognize a more active reference to his preaching of the same subject, as is suggested by the visual elements El Greco uses to emphasize the interaction of the saint with the viewers (see below).

³⁶ In a similar vein, David Davies has discussed the very naturalistic roses and lilies at the lower part of the otherwise ethereal and otherworldly *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* for the Oballe Chapel, noticing how the flowers function as a link between the spiritual world of viewed and the material world of the viewers (in which real flowers would have stood in front of the painting). See Davies (1973), 243; *idem* (1990a), 53-55; *idem* (1999), 213, fig. 17; *El Greco* (2003), 200.

³⁷ Ruiz Gómez (2007), 60: "Otra cuestión que llama nuestra atención es la exclusión de la mano izquierda que, en buena lógica, debería aparecer bajo el libro y que tampoco aparece en la radiografía."

³⁸ *Ibid.*: "El Greco dio una gran importancia a las manos como elemento retórico que conformaba el carácter de los personajes representados y se vale de ellas para aumentar su expresividad."

³⁹ For the equal, or even superior status of images in comparison to texts according to iconophile authors see Brubaker (1989), 70-75; Corrigan (1992), 135-139; Giakalis (1994), 55-59; Parry (1996), 156-65; Brubaker (1999), 44, 46-49.

⁴⁰ Which was in fact inspired by Byzantine iconophile theology, as mentioned by Davies (1990b), 215.

⁴¹ One more example is mention below in the case of St. Francis kneeling in meditation (Fig. 7). Another characteristic case appears in the Assumption for San Domingo el Antiguo where the cartellino with the signature is placed on a book held by St. Peter (see the more detailed reference in Evangelatou [2012, forthcoming]). The portrait of Saint Luke holding a Gospel in which both his text and an image of the Virgin and Child appear side by side could be considered another example (for a photo see *El Greco* [2002], 146). Also, the portrait of St. Paul in the El Greco Museum, Toledo, where the signature of the

artist appears on the sword right next to the paper on which the end of Paul's letter to Titus is transcribed, and both texts (the signature referring to the artist's work and the epistle referring to Paul's work) are written in similar cursive Greek letters. For images see *El Greco* (2002), 36, 97. This painting is also briefly discussed below and reproduced in Fig. 5 but the signature is hardly visible in the image. The reference to the equal value of holy texts and images in El Greco's religious paintings will be treated in more detail in Evangelatou, *Innovation* (forthcoming).

⁴² Caturla (1944). The signature appeared at the lower right corner, between the cloth and the edge of the entire composition. The painting was exported illegally out of Spain after the death of its owner and its current location is unknown. For the similar painting without the signature, now kept in the Museo de Santa Cruz in Toledo, see *El Greco* (1999), 373-4 and *El Greco* (2003), 140-41.

⁴³ *El Greco* (1999), 372-3 and *El Greco* (2003), 140-1.

⁴⁴ For an overview of the various traditions on the creation of this miraculous image of Christ's face on Veronica's veil see the literature in the previous two notes, as well as *El Greco* (2001), 162-3.

⁴⁵ I disagree with Casper (2007), 143-8, who thinks that El Greco is antagonizing the original holy relic by denying its acheropoietos nature (i.e. "not made by hands") just because he mentions his own hand in the signature. On the contrary, I believe the artist emphasizes the reality of that miraculous relic by presenting it illusionistically as a naturalistic cloth, but since it is understood that this is a representation and not the original, he also takes credit for inspiring the meditation of the viewer in front of this image by emphasizing the action of his hands in creating the painting. In this way he also proclaims the value of all icons as agents in spiritual ascent, because they make available to the viewers representations of holy figures that would otherwise be unavailable - a practice sanctioned by Christ himself when he miraculously produced an image of his face on Veronica's veil.

⁴⁶ El Greco uses his full name in the icon of the *Dormition of the Virgin* from his Cretan period and in various works of his Italian and Spanish career (for examples see *El Greco* [1990] 142, 194, 214, 218, etc. In fact, most Cretan painter use their full name with the signature type XEIP, although the first name alone is also attested in rare cases. See Chatzidakis (1964/1990), 149-50, where it is also suggested that the few painters who omit their surname, like El Greco, had rare first name and therefore they wouldn't be confused with another painter.

⁴⁷ The signature type XEIP ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ survives in three more paintings, in which I believe El Greco is also making a statement about his agency in relation to the subject of the image, but not in the direct and obvious way we see in the three paintings discussed above. I will treat this theme in more detail in Evangelatou, *Innovation* (forthcoming). The three paintings are: 1. The Nativity of around 1560-67 now at the Benaki Museum in Athens (Cretan period), where the signature appears on the face of the lower step on the left, below the Virgin presenting Christ to the Magi (*El Greco* [1999], 343). This might be a reference to El Greco himself presenting Christ and the truth of the Incarnation to the viewers, serving their spiritual elevation through his art. 2. The representation of Mount Sinai on the Modena Triptych, where the signature appears on the base of the mountain, above a group of pilgrims on the right (*El Greco* [1999], 355). On the central peak of the mountain Moses is depicted receiving the tablets of the Law. Most of the images on the triptych refer to the New Living Law, Christ, who through his Incarnation delivers a new divine message to the world. The triptych presents this message to the viewer on tablet-like panels that have been written through the work of El Greco's hands. 3. The Penitent Mary Magdalene of the early 1580s, now at the Worcester Art Museum, in which the signature appears written on the rock above the skull and empty glass vase and below the evergreen ivy, a bit higher than the adjacent hands of the saint that are interlocked in a gesture of prayer and intense contrition (*El Greco* [2003], 136-7). The iconographic details of the painting, especially the empty myrrh container intersecting with the empty sockets of the skull in juxtaposition to the watery eyes of the saint brimming with tears, place emphasis on penitence as a path to salvation and on this image in particular as an instrument of spiritual enlightenment and ascent (see the analysis in Evangelatou [2012, forthcoming]). Perhaps the signature type is in this case intended not just to emphasize the agency of the artist but also his own struggle with the pain of penance (drawing a parallel with the hands of the saint). Later devotional portraits of saints discussed below give clear evidence of El Greco's wish to invoke the saints' mediation for his salvation, reflecting perhaps a level of anxiety about his spiritual affairs.

⁴⁸ Like the paintings in the Prado Museum in Madrid, the National Museum of Catalonian Art in Barcelona, and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, dated around the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th

century, in which the signature is at the lower part of the cross, close to Christ's hands. See *El Greco* (1990), 244-7, 374-5; *El Greco* (2001), 172-5; *El Greco* (2003), 149-50.

⁴⁹ Like the painting in the El Greco Museum in Toledo, *El Greco* (2002), 36, 96-97, 183-4. Another example is the portrait of St. James in the Apostolate of the Marquis of San Feliz, Oviedo, in which the initials of the painter appear on the club by which the apostle was beaten to death, *El Greco* (2002), 30, 76-7, 181.

⁵⁰ Martyrdom, μαρτυρίου in Greek, has exactly the same meaning of proof and testimony. See *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*, <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=67240&context=lsj&action=from-search>.

⁵¹ In addition to the cases discussed by Matthew (1998) and Goffen (2001) see the example of Mantegna's St. Mark discussed below and also in Pincus (1997), with reference to one more prominent case in her note 11, p. 145.

⁵² Manzini (1969), 100, fig. 51a. The same type survives in various other examples. See also the version in a private collection in Barcelona, *El Greco* (1999), cat. no. 53.

⁵³ Another case indicative of such feelings is the signed version of his popular portrait of St. Francis receiving the stigmata (now in the Collection of the Marquise of Pidal, Madrid). The signature appears right below the skull which is framed by the protective embrace of the saint's arms and hands. The impression is that El Greco relates himself to the skull as a reminder of his mortality and hopes that St. Francis, a saint whose stigmata prove his special relationship with God, will intercede on his behalf for the eternal salvation of his soul. For a detail of the skull and signature and a photo of the entire painting see Soehner (1958/59), 156, 180.

⁵⁴ In their signatures Byzantine painters often invited the viewers to pray for the artist's salvation. See the evidence presented by Gouma-Peterson (1983), 160-1 on painters' inscriptions from the island of Crete. This practice would have been familiar to El Greco who was raised in Crete and was trained as a Byzantine painter. In his Spanish devotional paintings he seems to make a similar request not through the wording but though the placement of his signature in relation to the praying saints. I do not see similar evidence in earlier works of the painter. Perhaps this development suggests a growing anxiety about the salvation of his soul that might have to do with his advancing age and may be even related to his anomalous (for the customs of the time) personal life: the painter lived with but never married Jerónima de las Cuevas, mother of his son Jorge Manuel. Assuming that he would have liked to give legitimacy to his child, and based on evidence about his earlier life, Panagiotakis (2009), 55-56, suggested that El Greco might have been already married when he left Crete, leaving his wife behind, and if she was still alive, he was unable to remarry.

⁵⁵ *El Greco* (2003), 180-181. The same type survives in various other examples.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁷ See above, notes 39-40.

⁵⁸ For the ivy as a symbol of eternal life in the Christian painting of the time see Levi-D'Ancona (1977), 131.

⁵⁹ *San Francesco* (1982), 163-7.

⁶⁰ Pincus (1997), 138-9, 143-4. I thank Professor Pincus for drawing my attention to this article.

⁶¹ This idea might be even alluded by the fact that the book (referring to the holy text) and Mark's right elbow (referring to his presence through the agency of the icon and the artist) are the two elements that seem to break through the painted surface to reach over to the viewer. In addition the cross-reference between the Gospel marker and the cartellino might have been also used to emphasize the elevated status of the words included in the upper part of the inscription, a reference to the "praedestinatio" tradition supporting Mark's special connection with Venice (for which see the discussion by Pincus [1997], 139-42).

⁶² See Pincus (1997), 139 for that part of the inscription that includes the full name of the artist and the word LABOR. According to Pincus, ibid, the text written on the cartellino "is exceptional in its transmission both of the artist's name and of a message that extends the import of the image", which of course highlights the function of the signature as a proud statement of authorship and agency.

⁶³ For a discussion of the meaning of Mark's gesture and gaze as allusions to the "praedestinatio" tradition see Pincus (1997), 139-44.

⁶⁴ The above comparison is simply meant to highlight through juxtaposition the more personal references of El Greco's devotional portraits, exactly because although both artists were very proud of their work and in this case they employ similar devices, they use them in divergent ways that reflect different needs and

intentions. It is rather unlikely and in any case impossible to prove that El Greco would have ever seen Mantegna's image, since it was destined for private devotion and would not have been displayed in a public space.

⁶⁵ Compare the comments of Davies about the naturalistic flowers in the *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* for the Oballe Chapel, mentioned in note 36 above. In that case the object that functions as a stepping stone between the physical and the pictorial world is not directly related to the identity of the painter. By comparison the prominently physical cartellino highlights the agency of the artist as the mediator between the two worlds. On the contrary, in Italian paintings, like for example Mantegna's St. Mark reproduced here in Fig. 8, all the elements of the composition are depicted in a vivid and detailed tridimensional way, revealing a different mentality in their construction of holy presence. In those cases the signature, although very prominent, does not stand out in the same way it does in El Greco's images.

⁶⁶ Davies(1990b), 215. I agree with Casper (2007) that El Greco conceived and perceived all his religious paintings as icons, that is links between earth and heaven and instruments of spiritual enlightenment and communication with the holy.

⁶⁷ *El Greco* (2003), 184-5. The same type survives in various other examples.

⁶⁸ The same features appears in other El Greco paintings. See for example the cartellino in the *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John*, painted in the mid 1580's, now at the Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, *El Greco* (2003), 144-5. The same feature is very common in Italian paintings, one characteristic example being Mantegna's St. Mark discussed above.

⁶⁹ Wax was also used to seal letters with the imprint of the author's seal, another reference to authorship and identity. In addition it was used to produce candles lit in honor of saints, accompanying the prayers of the faithful for protection and salvation. Both these function might be implied in the prominent representation of the wax used in this painting to attach the cartellino with El Greco's signature (a reference to his authorship but also to his work in honor of St. Francis, before whose depiction candles would be lit and prayers recited). In real life the process of pressing the cartellino on the wax would produce at least a partial transfer of the artist's fingerprint on the soft material, creating yet another reference to the action of his hands and his identity. I thank Bruce Picano for suggesting to me the reference to fingerprints. Of course, wax is often represented holding up the cartellino in paintings (including Mantegna's St. Mark discussed above, Pincus [1997], 138), but that does not exclude the possibility that references such as the ones suggested here could have crossed the mind of El Greco (or other painters) in addition to simply following a common practice of representation.

⁷⁰ See for example Marias (1999), esp. 167-8, 178, 182, 184.

⁷¹ Ibid., 182, where Marias mentions El Greco's fierce pride and powerful sensualism as incompatible with mysticism and asceticism which could prove the artist's religiosity.

⁷² Matthew 9:12, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:31.

⁷³ The personal religious feeling El Greco demonstrates in his paintings does not reveal his convictions in more detail. We cannot tell if he was a sincere convert to Catholicism or not (see Panagiotakes [2009], 63-77 for evidence that he was raised Eastern Orthodox). Nor can we say which trend of Catholicism he sided with (programmatic Counter-Reformational or something else). On this issue I agree with Alvarez Lopera (1999), 51 and Hadjinicolaou (2005), 285, 294.

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