

Global Art History

The Greek of Toledo in New Spain: Local, European, Transcultural

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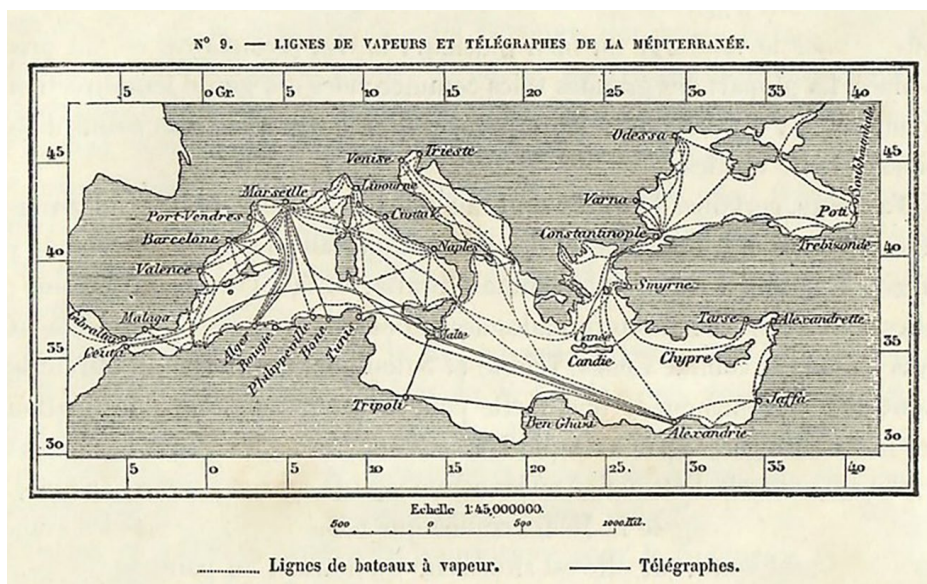
The Greek of Toledo in New Spain: Local, European, Transcultural

Yannis Hadjinicolaou

Localism has always been, and continues to be a propulsive force not only in terms of selfcare and existence, but also as an ideology. When driving towards Rethymno from Heraklion, the birthplace of Domenikos Theotokopoulos, one still sees the road sign for the village of Fodele stating that this is where he was born, even though it has been proven since decades that this is not the case. The artist's Cretan origins, which he explicitly stated in some of his paintings, is an equally important aspect concerning his self-identity: ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΣ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ ΚΡΗΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΙ ("Domenikos Theotokopoulos of Crete created this"). However, nationalistic projects, such as the Greek postal service's stamps, attempted to elevate his Greekness to the ultimate purpose of his *raison d'être*.

I. The Greek National Gallery did not place Greco's works after its reopening in 2021 in its section of

European paintings, despite owning only paintings that belong to his non-Cretan years, but rather under the awkward categorization *post-byzantine*, in other words as part of a Greek heritage. However, similar attempts are not limited to this institution. The Palazzo Barberini in Rome still exhibits Greco under the heading "Venice" with two works that he conceived in Spain, as if the *Serenissima* was the sole place where he found his fulfilment as a painter. That the Prado still displays the painter along with other Spanish masters of the so-called "Golden Age", is one of the many indications of how much museums still develop their narrations in strict national frames. The painter, who reached in Toledo his artistic peak, beyond the fact that this was the town where he spent most of his life, may be considered in this train of curatorial thought, as Spanish. That during his own times his manner was occasionally considered as being strange and even "unspanish" is another striking



| Fig. 1 |
Mediterranean
Steamships and
Telegraph Lines,
in: Élisée Reclus,
Nouvelle Géographie
Universelle,
Commerce et
Navigation, Paris
1876, p. 50

aspect, the other side of the same coin. A kind of compromise has been found by using at the exhibitions of 2014 the denomination “El Griego de Toledo” (“The Greek of Toledo”), whereas the catalogue in English remained “El Greco of Toledo” (Exh. Cat. El Griego de Toledo/El Greco of Toledo 2014).

Despite the critical work that has been done in conferences and exhibitions (Hadjinicolaou 1999; Storm 2016), nationalistic approaches persist, albeit in less simplistic narratives. The treatment of phases by connecting them with the respective “national” identities in the career of an artist like Greco separates the one phase from the other rather than trying to peel out their connectivity or their entanglement. This fetishism of identity may also be a way to resist the international processes that become increasingly visible in the sense of a global socio-economic uniformity. Jonathan Crary recently encapsulated this issue in his 2022 book *Scorched Earth*: “the violent processes of western modernization have always targeted the survival of local or regional singularities” (Crary 2022, 19).

Greco’s local, national and nationalistic claims have thrived in institutions that are more interested in his biography than in his art (Cretan-Greek, Venetian-Italian, Castilian-Spanish). These claims deeply involve art historiographies or museological narrations as aesthetic ideologies. It is worth asking why art historical narratives cannot be developed based on common European intersections. One example would be artists, both south and north of the Alps, who oppose the Vasarian paradigm (Hadjinicolaou 2019).

II. Greco thematizes his origins to a certain degree and incorporates them into his art, but, at the same time he transcends and transgresses the boundaries of a clear-cut artistic identity by incorporating his experiences into new ones (for example, Byzantine elements in his Spanish paintings and Venetian in his Cretan works). To what extent can these layers be understood as parts of a whole, a dynamic palimpsest, where the micro is part of the macro and vice versa? In his *Spanish Journey* (1910), which was deeply

influential for German modern artists at the beginning of the 20th century, Julius Meier-Graefe remarked: “This Greek, who came from Italy and painted in Spain without becoming Spanish – an astonishing study on the popular theme of art and nationality could be linked to this – seems *European*” (Meier-Graefe 1926, 111). His statement is of special importance in this context. The blending of different elements to create something singular rather than hybrid relies on the various visual cultures and art theories/practices Greco absorbed during his southern European itineraries.

He experienced the entanglement between Venice and Crete already in Heraklion, and then most notably in Titian’s workshop and within the artistic life of the Serenissima. The latter’s position as a transmission point between the West and the East was not only a product of trade, a topic that has been thoroughly investigated, but also greatly reflected in the visual arts. The circulation of artefacts and patterns in the Venetian colonies exposed Greco in Crete to Italian prints and paintings, such as a *Mary Magdalene* attributed to Titian. These were the respective ‘technologies’ of connectivity in Greco’s time, alongside other media such as sculptures of Venetian inspiration in Crete. In Aby Warburg’s parlance, these were *Bilderfahrzeuge* (image vehicles, Beyer et al. 2018). They can be compared with the telegraphs and shiplines in the Mediterranean – visually represented in the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* of 1876 as a densely populated kind of “island” reaching from Barcelona to Alexandria and from Tripoli to Odessa. | Fig. 1 |

Venice was a crossroads between not only East and West, but also northern and southern Europe. Once again, Meier-Graefe elaborates: “I have found a man, a great man, an inconceivably great genius: El Greco. A man of the company of Rembrandt and as close to us as a contemporary” (Meier-Graefe 1926, 111). This is not just a way of expressing oneself. The art critic argues that the Cretan painter was essentially a northern European artist (see the recent reception of his work in Scandinavia: Exh. Cat. El Greco and Nordic Modernism 2023).



| Fig. 2 | Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez, Nun's Badge with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, ca. 1710. Oil and gold on copper, tortoiseshell and silver frame, 12,9 and 21,9 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art [↗](#)



| Fig. 3 | Detail of Fig. 2

III. Despite the aforementioned issue, Greco's work in a European context will not be discussed further here, although this remains a project for the future. The relevance of a specific object provides an opportunity to explore the impact of his art beyond Europe. Given that he worked in Spain for decades and had a few notable pupils, it makes sense to examine his legacy in the Hispano-American world. Such research has already yielded fruitful results in the case of artists such as Rubens, Zurbarán and Maerten de Vos, to name just a few (Hyman 2021; Porras 2023). A painting, supposedly by Greco and featuring his popular subject of *St. Francis and Brother Leo in Meditation*, a theme frequently repeated by the artist's studio, has recently been identified in Lima, Peru. [↗](#) Two works by Greco are also mentioned in the inventory of Manuel de Mollinedo y Angulo from 1673, when he

became Bishop of Cuzco. Luisa Alcalá has emphasised that these works could hardly have had an impact on local artists since they did not circulate outside the owner's private spaces (Alcalá 2014, 56). The same could probably be said of the painting in Lima. But there is an even more striking evidence: While visiting the section dedicated to the "Arts of the Spanish Americas (1550–1800)" at the Metropolitan Museum in February 2024, a colourful piece caught the beholder's eye. It is a nun's badge depicting the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception surrounded by saints, produced ca. 1710, approximately a century after Greco's death. | Fig. 2 | The signed work is the creation of Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez. The object's impressive feature is not so much the main subject of the Immaculate Conception, which Greco painted several times, but rather the figure of St. Lawrence, in which the artist has placed his signature. | Fig. 3 | The figure is mirror-like to a painting by Greco with the same saint (*St. Lawrence's Vision of the Virgin*), not only in the way the saint looks towards the Virgin, in a more baroque introspective manner than Greco's figure, but also in his clothing, with its dazzling yellows and reds, and the way his attributes are handled. | Fig. 4 | The entire painting has been condensed into a single figure measuring just a few centimetres on a mobile object: a nun's badge. A question of scaling par excellence.

IV. The artist's pictorial choices regarding the figure's colouring and physical presence, testify to his knowledge of Greco's work. Not only do the hood and the texture of the garment resemble each other, but the spatial disposition of the figure does too. The way the saint is drawn towards the Virgin is also notable. It is as if he were forming together with the other *dramatis personae* a *sacra conversazione*. In Juárez's case, the Virgin is not depicted as a distant vision, but as the central character. Further telling similarities include the prominence of the ear, the way the head is turned, the formation of the hair and the gaze. Greco's depiction of the Virgin blends an early Titianesque motif with the way late Titian handled colour.



| Fig. 4 | El Greco, *St. Lawrence's Vision of the Virgin*, 1577. Oil on Canvas, 119 × 102 cm. Monforte de Lemos, Colegio del Cardenal. [Wikimedia](#)

Juárez's representation of the other saints surrounding the Mother of God, on the other hand, derives from different visual worlds, all of which refer to Spain and New Spain.

The similarities are so forceful that Nicolás must have seen the painting, or at least a replica of it. The following considerations and hypotheses are based on this premise. Nicolás Rodríguez Juárez (1667–1734) was born in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which then included present day Mexico. He came from a family of painters spanning four generations, who first arrived during the 17th century in "Mexico" from Spain, so that knowledge of the artists and arts at the Iberian Peninsula is granted (Brown 2014). José Juárez (the grandfather of Nicolás, 1617–1661, who was baptized in 1617 and became an independent master in 1649 in Mexico City; Brown 2014, 130), owed much to Zurbarán; some scholars even believe that he went back to Spain to complete his education. He had a Spanish apprentice named Lucas de Coba,



| Fig. 5 | José Juárez, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, 1650. Oil on Canvas, 5,05 × 3,29 m. Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Arte. [Wikimedia](#) ↗

and he maintained contact with Spain, as evidenced by his sending an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the Spanish town of Agreda (Brown 2014, 131). Was it José who knew Greco's work, or was it Nicolás's maternal great-grandfather, Luis Juárez (who lived between 1585 and 1639 and was first documented in Mexico City in 1609 when he got married; Alcalá 2014, 26)? Did either of them make a copy of Greco's work? This hypothesis cannot be dismissed. Further research is mandatory. Nicolás's father, Antonio Rodríguez Beltrán, was a painter, as was his brother Luis (Katzew 2014, 156–157). In this sense, one could speak of an artistic dynasty.

V. José Juárez's work, which depicts the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* and is therefore related to the *escudo* in question from an iconographic perspective, is dated 1650. | Fig. 5 | José appears to use Caravaggistic effects in the middle of the canvas, a technique he

may have learnt from Luis Tristán, Greco's versatile pupil, who acknowledged both the Venetian and Caravaggesque painting traditions. A Venetian echo can be found in both the upper (Titian) and lower (Bassano) parts of the painting, with the characteristic face of a man blowing on the fire, which enhances the nocturnal effect and the dramatic nature of the martyrdom (Exh. Cat. Luis Tristán 2001; Exh. Cat. Luis Tristán 2024). Jonathan Brown also mentions Bassano as an important 'influence' on José (Brown 2014, 131). This combination of three artists makes it all the more plausible that the Juárez family was acquainted with works by Tristán.

But there is also another echo of Greco's pupil concerning our main area of interest, which can be seen at the centre of the MET's *escudo de monja*. It is not only St. Lawrence that stems from a Greco context. The main figure, the Virgin Mary, is reminiscent of the work of Pacheco, Zurbarán, and most notably, Tristán. This is evident not only in her hair and her gaze towards heaven (her eyeballs mirror those of St. Lawrence), but also in the striking way in which she places her little fingers on top of one another without interlacing them. This detail derives from Tristán, who painted the subject with the same motif at least three times (Exh. Cat. Luis Tristán 2001, 208–209). | Fig. 6 | | Fig. 7 | There are strong similarities with Greco's *Immaculate Conception* in Toledo (Velarde 2024, 40–41). | Fig. 8 | Thus, Nicolás Juárez's *escudo* contains two references to Greco: one explicit and one implicit.

VI. St. Lawrence was a highly venerated subject at the court in Madrid and at the Escorial, whose patron-saint he was. In 1600, the Spanish cardinal Don Rodrigo de Castro bequeathed Greco's painting, dated between 1578 and 1581, to the Colegio del Cardinal, a Jesuit seminary in Monforte de Lemos, Galicia (Dunphy Wind 2005). It was part of a missionary network that included Mexico and Peru, among other places. This provides an additional way of connecting the small town of Galicia with New Spain. De Castro's relation to Toledo and more specifically to Diego de Castilla, some scholars believe it was a gift from



| Fig. 6 | Luis Tristán, Immaculate Conception, first quarter of the 17th century. Oil on Canvas, 165 × 110 cm. Toledo, Santa Olalla, Parroquia de San Pedro Apóstol. [Wikimedia](#)



| Fig. 7 | Detail of Fig. 2



| Fig. 8 | El Greco, The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception and St. John, 1580–85. Oil on Canvas, 236 × 115 cm. Toledo, Museum of Santa Cruz

the latter to the former, suggests that the work was created during Greco's early period in Toledo, after he had abandoned his dream of becoming Philip II's court artist. The sculptures and paintings decorating the Escorial and the Cathedral of Toledo were objects of religious but also of artistic 'pilgrimage'. Further research is required to establish the probable itineraries of the Juárez family within the Iberian Peninsula. Nicolás' *escudo* is an image in circulation, both in matters of medium as well as content, in the sense of an 'image vehicle'. For example, it is known that Nicolás incorporated his knowledge of European prints into his works (Katzew 2014, 158). The *escudos de monjas*, which were supposedly worn by nuns in 17th- and 18th-century Mexico and were mostly painted on copper and framed in tortoiseshell, were

indeed image vehicles. They were a kind of literal *imagen de vestir*, since they were worn almost like talismanic devotional images around the neck or at least there were nuns who were portrayed, as if they were wearing them, even if research today considers that this was not the case. | Fig. 9 | In this sense, they were colonial images, bringing forth a hybrid alliance with nature, such as the tortoiseshell (known as *carrey*), which originated in the Caribbean, on the Pacific coast, or in the Gulf of Mexico, thereby underlining the formative role of trade for the artistic production under Spanish colonial rule (Torres 2024).

It is intriguing, that when this migration of motifs and formal characteristics occurred, Greco was used from the perspective of a Hispanic heritage of Catholicism and was implanted into a project in New Spain.

In other words, the local 'national' was embedded in the colonial. One could speak of an intermediate stage, namely what has become known as 'glocality', whereby the balancing act of reconciling local specificity within a transcultural context is undertaken (Pandey 2025). But does this terminology apply to Greco? In his case, it is more accurate to speak of a palimpsest of artistic practices predominant in several localities, which in turn can be placed in a broader context. For instance, his use of colour is rooted in a European tradition that extends to the vast territories of New Spain.

VII. While the discovery of interconnections and intersections is fascinating, acknowledging existing disconnections is equally important; otherwise, the respective entanglements tend to become invisible. An entanglement requires an analysis that includes all its constituent parts. The point that Tripoli or Alexandria are much closer to Crete than Venice, not only from a contemporary perspective, does not seem to be a fruitful observation for the historiography of art, which has an astonishing inclination towards the west of the Mediterranean ignoring the east to a large extent. An example related, only indirectly, if at all, to Greco may exemplify this in form of a conclusion. In a 16th-century gospel book leaf depicting St John, painted by an unidentified Ethiopian artist who was probably a contemporary of Greco, the viewer's attention is drawn to the saint's anatomy and proportions, which owe much to the Byzantine painting tradition, despite the figure being located in a space derived from an 'Ethiopian' visual culture, characterised by resplendent, patterned, abstract ornaments. These analogies can be condensed into a single detail: Greco's depiction of the fingers and hands, with Lucas holding his brush and John holding his stylus. **| Fig. 10 | | Fig. 11 |** The motifs, anatomies, and the feeling for form (thinness, fragility, elongated proportions) allude to a Mediterranean-Red Sea Entanglement.

Since the 2023 exhibition *Ethiopia at the Crossroads* in Baltimore, it has become evident that, during the



| Fig. 9 | Andrés Islas, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1772. Oil on Canvas, 105 × 84 cm. Madrid, Museo de América. Wikimedia [↗](#)

early modern period, works from Mughal India, and more importantly in the present context, from Crete were brought to Ethiopia. For example, an Italo-Cretan painting, dating from the 15th century, was imported from Jerusalem to the Ethiopian Orthodox Gundä Gunde monastery, located close to the sea, during the same century (Exh. Cat. Ethiopia at the Crossroads 2023).

It is clear that everything depends on how one historically engages with whatever subject one deals with, and what kind of methodological tools are used to define and approach a phenomenon. To a greater or lesser extent, this depends on art-historical schools of thought. However, national and local narratives still prevail in museums and art historiographies. Even when placed in a broader geographical context, the common intersections do not entirely replace national, or sometimes even nationalistic, narratives. Nevertheless, a parallel alternative could inspire



| Fig. 10 | El Greco, St. Luke, 1602–05. Oil on Canvas, 100 × 76 cm. Toledo, Cathedral. Wikimedia ↗



| Fig. 11 | Unidentified Artist, Evangelist Writing. Leaf from a Gospel Book, Ethiopia, 16th Century. Tempera and Ink on Parchment. Private Collection. Exh. Cat. Ethiopia at the Crossroads 2023, p. 97

future art-historical projects. The tendency to unify disparate artistic phenomena under a global narrative, eliminating differences by subsuming them under universal concepts, creates a horizon that does not engage with people who have different perspectives, speak different languages and consequently have different approaches towards images. This way of reasoning creates many obstacles (Juneja 2023). The global narrative is one-sided arbitrarily ignoring side roads and diversity. It fails to reconsider the limitations and potentials of the discipline. Interdisciplinary collaboration is the key here. Some critical distance is needed, in the sense of Aby Warburg's "Denkraum der Besonnenheit" (Thought Space of Contemplation), to more clearly reflect on what the contemporary "Zeitenwende" means for art history and its future as a discipline.

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