

*Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy.* Andrew R. Casper.  
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Andrew Casper's book makes an important contribution to the bibliography on El Greco. El Greco's Italian period (ca. 1567–77) has usually been neglected (Hadjinicolaou, 1995 and 1999; Marías, 1997 and 2013), with much more devoted to his Greek years and to his longer Spanish period. Nevertheless, chapter 1 of Casper's book discusses Theotokópoulos's *Saint Luke* (before 1567?) and his early Toledan *Holy Face* and two

*Saint Veronicas* by projecting onto his formative Italian period certain assumptions that are rooted in the most traditional mystical interpretation of El Greco's religious works in Spain. Casper begins by asking himself whether El Greco, having arrived in Venice as an icon painter, would have ever stopped painting icons. But if he was just a common icon painter, how is it that his Evangelist is crowned not by an angel but by a bare-breasted female personification of Fame/Victory (its source, a print of Victory crowning the Vestal Tucia, mentioned on page 5, is not incorporated into his discussion), who bestows a laurel wreath on Saint Luke as if he were a classical poet? This could never have been considered a traditional icon. Regarding the other paintings, Casper overlooks that the *Holy Face* was painted on a mirror-like convex surface, and that all of them negate the timeless nature of icons through the movement of the cloth, one of them showing Christ's face with no crown of thorns or any sign of the Passion.

In chapter 6, dedicated to the first retables in Toledo, the author attempts to demonstrate how the renewed and Italianized altarpiece became an epitome of the artful icon, which seems to deny previous understandings of that categorization, and does not fully appreciate that the material conditions of the art objects, dimensions, display, and perception, not to mention their patrons and their ideas about the function and status of painting, had changed from Rome to Toledo.

Using the concept of artful icon, Casper tries to explain El Greco's evolving and ultimately permanent approach to art and sacred images, and to consider this Greek aspect not as an exception, but as a "vantage point to reevaluating the religious image." To that end, "iconicity" is not attributed to a single style but determined by an image's capacity to function as a devotional aid for the beholder (and yet how can that be determined?), and there is a potential for any image to "act as an icon *because* it is a work of art." It would be difficult to deal with such a devotional object as providing access to the prototype it portrays when at the same time, as modern art, it would not have been "regarded in itself as an object of reverence."

It is unlikely that El Greco had any interest in the creation of "powerful devotional aids that were an indicative for a new esteem for painters to garner both artistic and religious prestige" (12), none of which he achieved while he was in Italy or on the island of the Cretan icons he left behind. And it is equally unlikely that this topic can be fully resolved without a discussion of what was understood as a devotional image, in relation to concepts such as *Andachtsbilden* and *Kultbilden* and their liturgical status, and *istorie* for meditation (Casper's "narrative icons"?). Casper does not take into account the various degrees of the cult of images and that this scale shifted according to time and place (from Guardini, 1900, to Pereda, 2007). Furthermore, not all divine images received, at any time or place, a devotional cult (*latría*), while images of the Virgin Mary and the saints, respectively, received *hiperdulia* and *dulia*. Missing as well is a discussion of what El Greco could have thought about devotional images, and the author assumes that El Greco shared certain conceptions of art as a form of divine inspiration through the intellectual vision of the idea. The problem is that of the 18,000 words written by El Greco, not once does the word *idea* appear.

Casper pays scant attention to biography, including that the artist belonged to an Orthodox Greek community in Candia (Panagiotakes, 2009), and the agendas and culture of his known clients; similarly neglected are such important sources for El Greco's art thought as his commentaries to Vitruvius (11,000 words), while his notes on Vasari's *Lives* (7,000) are not mentioned until chapter 3. And yet there is not a single word in them on icon, image, religion, devotion, faith, prayer, meditation, or Christ. If there is some contradiction between El Greco's statements and his practices maybe it is caused by our wrong interpretation of the latter, and our neglect of some of El Greco's own documents, contrary to our wishful thinking and historiographical position.

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