El Greco – Still Not Well Known?*

Domenikos Theotokopoulos, generally known as El Greco, died 400 years ago, on the 7th of April 1614, at his home in Toledo. A few days earlier, on the 31st of March of that year, expecting the approaching end of his life, he ceremonially confessed his faith: “I, Domenikos Theotokopoulos, painter, inhabitant of the city of Toledo, while bedridden, struck by illness whose burden God and Our Lord willed to put upon me, being conscious and compos mentis, I hereby confess that I believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity and in all that is taught by Our Holy Mother, the Roman Catholic Church, in whose belief I live and shall die as a good, faithful Catholic Christian. I declare that due to the grave state of my illness I can neither make nor order my testament to be put in writing, as it should be done in the service of our God, the Lord, and for the salvation of my soul; therefore, having eased my conscience and conveyed to Jorge Manuel Theotokopoulos, son of mine and doña Jerónima de las Cuevas, who is a person worthy of trust and who is of good conscience, of what I know well, so that he can fulfil my will, I hereby transfer my authority to him...”¹

It is possible to find the remark on El Greco's death in the *Liber mortuorum* of the parish of Santo Tomé in Toledo, of the years 1601–1614, on the 7th day of April. It occurred soon after he received the last holy sacraments. The painter's funeral took place in the church of the monastery of the Cistercian nuns, Santo Domingo el Antiguo, and had an extraordinary character. Many Toledan brotherhoods took part in it, among others Santa Caridad and Nuestra Señora de las Angustias, as did the inhabitants of the parish of Santo Tomé in Toledo. On the day of the funeral a solemn Mass was sung in the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo. In the same sanctuary a solemn Triduum was also celebrated following the funeral of the artist, including a daily Mass sung for his soul, and in the monastic churches of St. Peter the Martyr and of the Holy Trinity ten Holy Masses were celebrated at the privileged altars. Moreover one hundred Holy Masses were said for the soul of El Greco, of which twenty five Masses were celebrated in the parish church of Santo

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* Trans. by Marta A. Urbańska.

¹ J. Álvarez Lopera, *El Greco. Estudio y catálogo*, I: *Fuentes y bibliografía*, Madrid 2005, p. 283–286.

Tomé, and the remaining ones in the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo. The Death of Theotokopoulos moved the inhabitants of Toledo greatly. Hortensio Félix de Paravicino y Arteaga and Luis de Góngora y Argote wrote sonnets especially for that occasion which were dedicated to their late friend.

The jubilee of the 400th anniversary of El Greco's death was celebrated in a particular manner. In a few countries, above all in Spain, a range of unusually interesting exhibitions devoted to that exceptional artist were organised. The exposition *El Griego de Toledo: Pintor de lo visible y lo invisible*, i.e. *The Greek of Toledo: Painter of the Visible and the Invisible*, prepared by Fernando Marías in Toledo, enjoyed unseen popularity and was considered indeed the greatest achievement in the entire history of Spanish exhibitions. Also the exhibitions *El Greco y la pintura moderna* at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid and *El Greco: Arte y oficio* at the Museo de Santa Cruz in Toledo enjoyed a great interest.

The 400th anniversary of death of the pre-eminent painter was also celebrated in Poland in a particularly festive way. On that occasion even *The Year of El Greco* was announced and it was accompanied by a range of events of scholarly and cultural character. The greatest organiser of the events in this respect was the Diocesan Museum in Siedlce, the institution in whose collection there is a picture painted by the Toledan artist, indeed the only one in Poland. It organised, among other events, a cycle of monthly lectures on El Greco by pre-eminent Polish art historians, moreover a *plein air*, and competitions devoted to El Greco – in the disciplines of knowledge, literature and photography. The Museum even organised a marathon on the occasion – “40 km for 400 years of El Greco”. An exceptional role in the popularisation of the artist's *oeuvre* was played by two presentations of the painting by the master of Toledo which is now kept in Siedlce: at the Royal Castle in Warsaw and at the National Museum in Krakow.

Within the framework of the Year of El Greco, the Institute for the History of Art and Culture of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, along with the Krakow branch of the Cervantes Institute, organised a seminar on Spanish art in the time of El Greco which was considered to be the most frequented cultural event in the history of the Spanish institution in Krakow. The event, with the participation of a few pre-eminent Spanish scholars of the universities in Malaga and Seville, gained such a great interest that several hundred lovers of Spanish culture could not find a place in the halls of the Cervantes Institute. The recently published book *W przedsionku niebios. Sztuka w Hiszpanii doby El Greca*² became the fruit of the seminar. The cover of the book is adorned by the image of the Most Holy Saviour (ill. 1) which was found in the last years of the pontificate of the

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² Ed. by A. Witko, Kraków 2015.

1. El Greco, *Jesus Christ*, around 1600, Rome, Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano

Saint John Paul II, in the private Papal Apartments of the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City. The picture painted by El Greco is well preserved and artist's signature is clearly visible on the canvas. The history of the painting remains unknown until today; one is uncertain when and how it found its way into the Papal collection and it is indeed still beyond any scholarly research. Due to the 400th anniversary of El Greco's death it was presented on the occasional stamp of 85 Eurocent issued by the Vatican post in two hundred thousand copies. Actually, already earlier, in the year 1970, the picture found its way onto the stamp of 90 lira commemorating the 50th anniversary of ordination of the Pope Paul VI (even though its provenance was not disclosed).

Undoubtedly, the most important scholarly event of the Year of El Greco in Poland was the international congress *Art in the Time of El Greco* which was organised by the Institute for the History of Art and Culture of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, the Royal Castle Museum in Warsaw and the Diocesan Museum in Siedlce. It took place at the Royal Castle in Warsaw and at the Ogiński Palace in Siedlce on the 28th–30th of May 2014. More than forty outstanding academics from Greece, Spain, Germany, Belgium and Poland participated in the congress.

Discussion of the issues of art in the time of El Greco inspired us to prepare the next volume of *STUDIA DE ARTE MODERNA* which is published by the Institute for the History of Art and Culture of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. Facing the plethora of the gathered materials we decided to publish the volume in two parts. The first part which is presented here is a collection of works written in the so called congress languages: English, Spanish, German and French. The second part shall contain the articles which were written in Polish.

This tome consists of nine studies which were prepared by the researchers from Greece, Spain, Germany and Poland. They focus on the reinterpretation of the *oeuvre* of El Greco which is based on such source materials which often reveal research fields that were yet unknown. Moreover, new attempts at placing the work of Domenikos Theotokopoulos in the context of Cretan, Italian and Spanish art appear to be interesting, as does the reference to the theological thought of St. John of the Cross. The analysis of the iconography of the Poor Man of Assisi which is so important for the artist's *oeuvre*, also could not be lacking, as the picture *St. Francis in Ecstasy* which is kept in a Polish collection is an example thereof.

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This volume is dedicated to Professor Dr. Hab. Juliusz A. Chrościcki, the pre-eminent connoisseur and researcher of European art of the Early Modern Period, who has ties with the Paris-Sorbonne University, and who is a merited lecturer of many years at the

Institute of History of Art at the Warsaw University and at the Institute for the History of Art and Culture of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, and President of the National Committee of History of Art in Poland.

Rev. Andrzej Witko