

# El Greco's Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind: Chronology Reconsidered

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**A** CHRONOLOGY for the three extant paintings by El Greco representing the Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind was first proposed by A. G. Xydis in 1958.<sup>1</sup> He believed that the earliest version, now in Dresden (Figure 1), was executed in Venice about 1569–70; that the next picture, now in Parma (Figure 2), was painted in Rome about 1572; and that the Metropolitan Museum's canvas (Figure 3), the last of the three, was made during the artist's earliest years in Spain, about 1576–77. The chronology of these works has never been reconsidered or questioned.<sup>2</sup> However, the dating of the Metropolitan Museum's version has been debated: some writers believe that it was painted in Rome before 1576;<sup>3</sup> others think that El Greco might have painted it in Venice, during his putative second stay there, between 1572 and 1576.<sup>4</sup> Alfred Frankfurter regards it as "self-evident that El Greco began the picture in Venice," about 1570, and finished it in Spain, about 1581–82. He catalogues the other two variants as "unoriginal" works of the artist's early Venetian years.<sup>5</sup> Even though some scholars date these three paintings over a range of ten or twelve years, others suggest that they might have been painted during a much shorter period of time.<sup>6</sup> But no matter when or where these three works are placed in El Greco's oeuvre, everyone seems to agree that they are the product of his experiences in Italy and especially of his Venetian training.

In the past all three paintings were attributed to other Venetian artists.<sup>7</sup> The rich Venetian color plays an important role in the pictorial conception. As in many works by Titian, the religious drama is conveyed through the movement of colors and gestures. However, El Greco owes more to Tintoretto, as seen in the overall agitation and the dramatic perspective of the background. Along with many other

Venetian artists of that time, El Greco showed an interest in Sebastiano Serlio: a step in the pavement and a gatelike structure in the background (Figures 1, 3) are quotations from his stage sets for comedy and tragedy (Figures 4, 5).<sup>8</sup>

The painting that looks the least Venetian of the three is the Parma version (Figure 2); in it the color scheme is subdued and the quotations from Serlio have been eliminated. The Parma picture contains, instead, allusions to Roman monuments: the remains of a vaulted structure in the background to the right (replacing the motif after Serlio) recalls the Baths of Diocletian; a tripartite triumphal arch, like those of Septimius Severus or Constantine, appears behind Christ's left shoulder; the building at the left looks like the porch of the Pantheon;<sup>9</sup> the nude figure in the group at the left could have been modeled after the Farnese Hercules; and the head behind him is reminiscent of the Laocoön. These derivations from the Roman monuments are not surprising, if, as is generally accepted, the work was painted in Rome. However, if we are to accept that the Metropolitan Museum's version was painted later, it would seem odd that in it El Greco abandoned virtually all the Roman elements and returned to the lessons of Venice.

The Metropolitan's painting is, in fact, the most Venetian of the three versions. Its coloring has the greater variety, luminosity, and richness.<sup>10</sup> The figures rushing into an arcade are a direct quotation from Tintoretto's *The Removal of the Body of Saint Mark* (Venice, Academia). The gatelike structure in the background is the same as the one in the Dresden version; but in the Museum's picture El Greco has added an obelisk behind it, thus making a more secure reference to Serlio.

I do not believe that the distinctive Venetian elements can be explained by the artist's hypothetical second stay in Venice or by a change of heart, because a comparison between the Metropolitan Mu-

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Figure 1. El Greco (1541–1614), *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*, dated here ca. 1566–68. Oil on wood, 66 × 84 cm. Dresden, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie (photo: Pfauder)

seum's version and the one in Parma shows that the treatment of the composition and the figure style are more advanced in the Parma picture. It therefore seems likely that the Metropolitan's canvas precedes rather than follows the one in Parma, and that it was painted in Venice in about 1569–70.

El Greco must have started working on the Metropolitan Museum's version soon after the Dresden painting, which he must have executed in about 1566–68. Over twice as large as the Dresden painting, the Museum's picture has the same principal elements, including an opening in the foreground, although two half-figures have replaced the dog,

gourd, and sack. The sense of depth is increased in the greater extension of the architecture. The two men in the middle ground sit on the step in the pavement, as in the first version, but they are smaller in size. The artist increased the number of figures on the left and extended the row of the buildings toward the foreground, thus creating a spatial complication in the front left corner. The arrangement of the figures behind does not allow for the columns to come down, and it is not clear where these figures are standing. It is not surprising that he left this section unfinished, because there seems to be no way to resolve the relation of this crowd to



Figure 2. El Greco, *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*, ca. 1570. Oil on canvas, 47 × 61 cm. Parma, Galleria Nazionale (photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

the architecture behind it. El Greco literally painted himself into a corner.

It is true that certain features in the Metropolitan Museum's version are more peculiar to the Roman than to the Venetian school of painting, such as a semi-nude man seen from behind (to display the artist's mastery of human anatomy), the unfinished head (to the left of Christ), reminiscent of one of the sons in the Laocoön group, and the two half-figures in the foreground. El Greco might have taken the picture with him to Rome in 1570, where he might have continued to work on it, and eventually to Spain in 1576.<sup>11</sup> But it is possible that he left it in-

complete when he departed from Venice. The Roman features may be explained by the fact that in Venice in the second half of the sixteenth century, many artists (especially Tintoretto) attempted to reconcile in their works Roman *disegno* and Venetian *colore*. Roman masterpieces were available through prints and casts. For instance, in Tintoretto's studio there were copies of Michelangelo's Medici statues and antique casts, including those of the Laocoön and the Farnese Hercules.<sup>12</sup>

In the use of truncated figures El Greco is thought to have been influenced by works of Roman artists such as Francesco Salviati, Pirro Ligorio, and



Figure 3. El Greco, *The Miracle of Christ Healing the Blind*, dated here ca. 1569–70. Oil on canvas, 120 × 146 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1978, 1978.416

Federico Zuccaro.<sup>13</sup> However, this device, favored by Roman Mannerists, was also employed earlier by artists to the north, for example, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Andrea Mantegna.<sup>14</sup> In fact, El Greco's treatment of this motif is closer to that in Mantegna's *Crucifixion* (Paris, Louvre) than to that in Salviati's *Visitation* (Rome, San Giovanni Decollato). In Mantegna and El Greco these figures appear to be participants in a religious event, whereas in Salviati they are portraits of members of the confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, and they are spectators.

The artist must have started painting the Parma variant soon after he reached Rome in 1570. It

closely resembles the Metropolitan's picture, although it is less than half its size. The Parma painting has a decisively Roman look, achieved by the increased monumentality of the figures as well as the reminiscences of ancient buildings. El Greco could have seen casts of antique statues in Venice, but he must have seen the architectural monuments—the triumphal arch and the Baths of Diocletian—in Rome.

In the Parma painting El Greco achieves a greater mastery of the figure style, which is especially clear if we compare the figure on the right, seen from behind, with its counterpart in the Metropolitan



Museum's version. In the Museum's picture the light on the drapery is concentrated on the left, whereas in the Parma canvas it is spread over the drapery with assurance and models the body underneath. El Greco resolves the spatial problem of the left corner by placing the figures at the back on steps, thus making their relationship to the architecture clearer and their arrangement more logical. The group on the right is also improved: the artist eliminates a strange, wrapped figure on the far right<sup>15</sup> and an obtrusive, contemporary-looking head at the top,<sup>16</sup> which is out of proportion to the rest of the group. The amplified scale of the foreground figures and the reduced size of the canvas left insufficient space for the two men in the middle ground. Therefore, El Greco puts these figures several steps below the pavement, reducing them still further in size and thus achieving the radical separation of the foreground figures from their spatial environment that

was noted by Everett Fahy, who called it "prophetic of the direction El Greco's style would take in his subsequent works."<sup>17</sup> If we are to treat the Parma painting as the second version, this feature would indeed appear accidental. But if we accept this painting as the third version of the subject, it would be neither accidental nor prophetic, but a logical next step in El Greco's artistic development.

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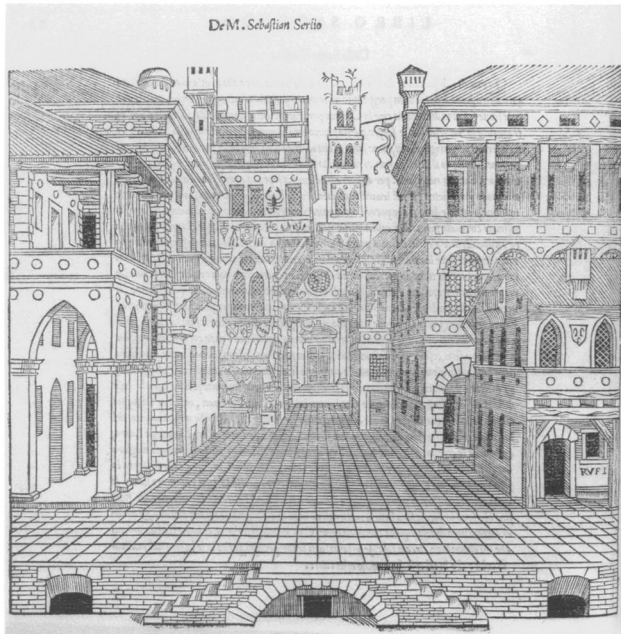


Figure 4. Sebastiano Serlio, *Architettura*, II, "La Scena Comica," p. 28v, Venice, 1551–57. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941, 41.100.144



Figure 5. Sebastiano Serlio, *Architettura*, II, "La Scena Tragica," p. 29v, Venice, 1551–57. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941, 41.100.144

## NOTES

1. A. G. Xydis, letter to the editor, *The Times* (London, May 17, 1958) p. 7, col. 5.

2. For a discussion of the three versions in this chronological order, see Harold E. Wethey, *El Greco and His School* (Princeton, 1962) II, pp. 41–43; José Guidol, *El Greco 1541–1614* (New York, 1973) pp. 33–34; Everett Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection* (New York, 1973) V, pp. 100–102; Katharine Baetjer, “El Greco,” *MMAB* (Summer 1981) pp. 11–18; J. Brown, *El Greco of Toledo*, exh. cat. (Toledo, Ohio, 1982) pp. 88–90.

3. Baetjer, “El Greco,” pp. 12, 18; Brown, *El Greco of Toledo*, p. 90.

4. Terisio Pignatti, *The Golden Century of Venetian Painting*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, 1979) pp. 150, 152; Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Da Tiziano a El Greco*, exh. cat. (Venice, 1981) p. 265. Some authors agree with Xydis, that the Metropolitan Museum’s version was done in Spain: Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, p. 43; Tiziana Frati, *L’opera completa del Greco* (Milan, 1969) p. 94.

5. Alfred Frankfurter, “El Greco: An Autobiography in Paint,” *ArtNews* 59 (Summer 1960) p. 36.

6. Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection*, p. 100; Pal Kelemen, *El Greco Revisited: Candia, Venice, Toledo* (New York, 1961) p. 126.

7. The Dresden version was purchased in Venice in 1741 for the Saxon Royal Collection, as by Leandro Bassano; the Parma canvas was bought by the Galleria Nazionale in 1862, as by Veronese; the Metropolitan Museum’s picture was sold at Christie’s, London, in 1888, as by Tintoretto, and, in 1958, as by Veronese (Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection*, p. 98; Baetjer, “El Greco,” p. 12).

8. See C. Gould, “Sebastiano Serlio and Venetian Painting,” *Journal of Warburg and Courland Institutes* 25 (1962) pp. 56–64, figs. 11c, 12c.

9. I am indebted to Joan Mertens, Curator of Greek and Roman Art at the Metropolitan Museum, for her comments on the ancient Roman monuments depicted in this painting.

10. It should be noted, however, that the bold combination of such a variety of warm and cold colors is El Greco’s own, which is characteristic not only of his Venetian training but of the artist’s entire career.

11. There are two copies of the Metropolitan Museum’s version in Madrid. Their existence is the only fact which suggests that the artist might have taken the painting to Spain, for it is not listed in the inventories of his property made in 1614 and in 1621, and no traces of its presence in Spain have been found (Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection*, p. 103).

12. Marco Boschini, *La Carta del Navegar Pitoresco, a la cura di Anna Pallucchini* (Venice, 1966) p. 164.

13. Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection*, p. 102; Brown, *El Greco of Toledo*, p. 90.

14. Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, p. 42.

15. One should note, however, that such a figure might have been eliminated when the Parma painting was reduced in breadth along the right side sometime in the past (Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, p. 42).

16. This could be the head of a patron. In the Parma version, El Greco had apparently placed a patron on the far left; see Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, pp. 43–44, for a discussion of this figure.

17. Fahy, *The Wrightsman Collection*, p. 100.