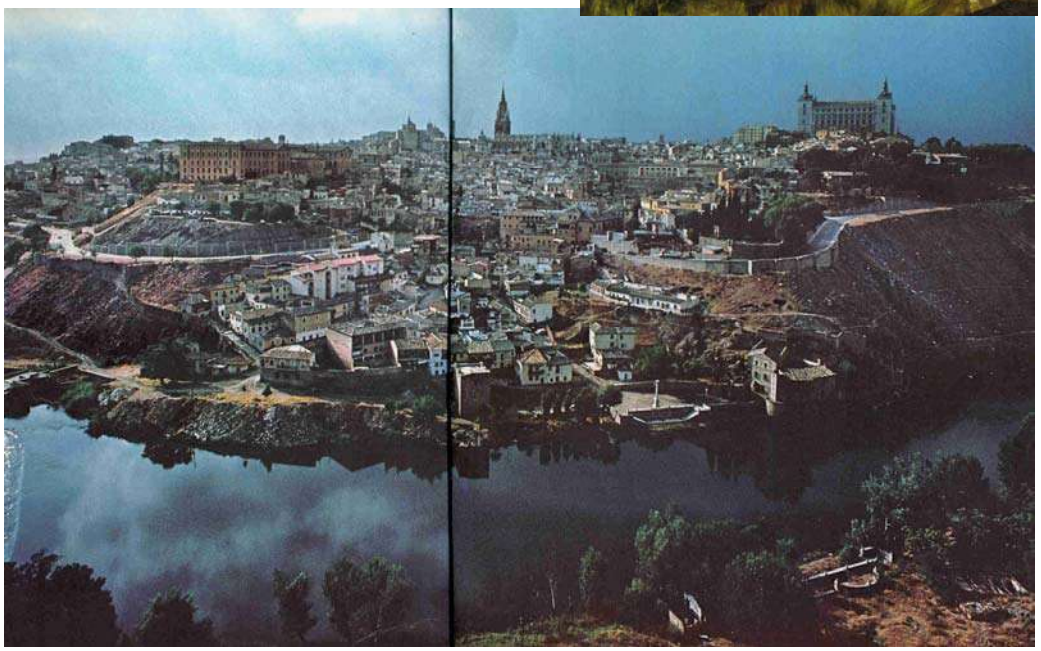
Toledo—
El Greco's Spain Lives On

By Louise E. Lavathes,
National Geographic, June 1982

The morning was cool, a merciful relief from weeks of relentless heat that scorched Spain's summer wheat harvest. I decided to take a walk along the Tagus River just north of Toledo. Twenty years ago Toledans swam in the swiftly flowing waters. Now factories in Aranjuez upstream and wastes from Madrid and Toledo itself have turned the stream to a lifeless brown. Still, the shimmering poplars and graceful weeping willows on the banks attracted picnickers and provided shade for a siesta.



On one of the bluffs at a bend in the river several Gypsy families were camped for the summer. They had come to pick tomatoes and green peppers, but because of the poor harvest there was little work. Donkeys dozed in the shade. Several women in their full, colorful skirts bent over a fire stirring a stew. As I entered the cluster of carts, an authoritative man approached me. He was not friendly, but he was not unfriendly.

"You have found a nice place," I said.

"There is a breeze...," he said.
I went to the edge of the bluff. My eyes followed the silent stream to the graceful arches and towers of the Alcantara Bridge a quarter of a mile away. The walls and rooftops of Toledo rose sharply on the right side of the bridge, and on the left was the castle of San Servando, an old Moorish fortress taken over by the Christians after the reconquest of the city by Alfonso VI in A.D. 1085. The scene looked familiar, and yet I surely had never seen it before. Or had I? Suddenly I realized that this was the view, the famous "View of Toledo" El Greco completed about 1600. Nothing had really changed in almost 400 years.

"To think El Greco might have walked here," I said.

"El Greco? I don't know him," said the man. "Is he a gitano?"

Gitano, or Gypsy, in fact, might have been a rather tame epithet for the outspoken, flamboyant Greek painter named Domenikos Theotokopoulos, who, as a young art student in Italy, dared to criticize the great Michelangelo. In about 1577, in his mid-30s, El Greco journeyed to Spain to seek his fortune. In time his adopted land would claim him as one of its greatest artists, and the identities of El Greco (The Greek) and Toledo would become closely linked. Temperamentally, the man and the city were much alike—brooding, tempestuous, romantic, proud, contradictory.

Although El Greco was admired by his contemporaries, they may have wondered about his extravagant habits. He made a lot of money in Toledo but lavished it on large living quarters and musicians who entertained him like a prince while he ate. The artist was forever in debt, and argued with his patrons about the price of his paintings.

As I stood on the bluff, I saw that El Greco had taken some liberties with the landscape, making the city grander and more dramatic in the "View of Toledo" than it really is from this perspective. Some scholars believe that this might have been

El Greco's contribution to the citywide campaign to woo back to Toledo the court of Philip II, which had departed for Madrid in 1561. Those efforts failed, and—fortunately for us—Toledo has remained frozen in time.

Anticipation had built up for weeks. Workmen hoisted canvas canopies high above Toledo's crooked streets. Colorful banners, flags, and embroidered mantillas were hung from balconies. Finally, the day before the feast of Corpus Christi, garlands of wild thyme that had been collected in the surrounding hills were crushed in the streets and filled the air with their fresh, pungent scent.

A canon paced up and down in front of the side entrance of the cathedral, whispering commands into a walkie-talkie, and then suddenly the river of people began to move. The procession had begun.

Soldiers lining the route dropped to their knees when the dazzling, jeweled monstrance containing the Sacred Host passed. Women wept and prayed aloud. Others leaned from their balconies, showering the precious receptacle with rose petals.

What I will never forget were the faces in the parade. The innocence and shyness in the scrubbed faces of the boys' choir. The fierce pride in the faces of the Mozarabs, descendants of Toledo's early Christians. The faces of the nobility, aloof and reserved, framed in the lavish cloaks of their medieval orders. The solemn faces of priests.

Great artists such as El Greco remind us that the palette of human emotions has varied little through the centuries. In perhaps the most splendid group portrait in the history of art, "Burial of the Count of Orgaz" in Toledo's Santo Tomé Church (page 3), there is a similar procession of faces and stunning range of inner feeling on display.

The painting depicts the miraculous appearance of St. Augustine and St. Stephen at the funeral of Don Gonzalo Ruiz de Toledo, the philanthropic second lord of Orgaz, in 1323. In 1586 the parish priest of Santo Tomé, having won a large support settlement from the town of Orgaz, commissioned El Greco to paint the famous burial scene. The cream of Toledan society in the 16th century is believed to be represented in the group of mourners at the gravesite.

Every spring on Corpus Christi, when Don Gonzalo Crespi de Valldaura, current bearer of the title of Count of Orgaz, puts on the scarlet cloak of the charitable holy order of the Infanzones de Illescas, he looks as if he has stepped out of El Greco's painting. "Ah, these robes are too heavy, and it is always a very hot day on Corpus Christi, " said the 46-year-old nobleman, who bears a slight resemblance to his famous ancestor. "But, I do what I can for Toledo."

The count said that he is the first member of his family to hold a job in addition to managing the family properties. He heads his own small advertising agency in Madrid. He insists that all of his five children, ages 16 to 21, work for their allowances. According to the family tradition, his first sons were named Augustine and Stephen, for the saints who appeared at the funeral.

"I am among the more open-minded of my generation," said the count. "My daughter is studying for a university degree, which some noble families would consider a waste of time. They believe that the only duty of a daughter is to marry well.

As El Greco delved into the personalities of the noblemen who commissioned his portraits, he carefully studied the clergymen he painted as well. In his exquisite portrait of his close friend, scholar Fray Hortensio Felix Paravicino (page 3), he saw the compassionate side of the clergy-tolerant, urbane, understanding. In other portraits El Greco captured the face of a church that also produced the horrors of the Inquisition.

Off the usual tourists' paths in a northern barrio of the city are many of Toledo's 46 convents and monasteries. With the help of Dr. Fernando Marias of the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, I was granted access to the cloistered Convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo. In the convent church are magnificent altarpieces designed by El Greco. Of the nine original canvases, only three remain in place. The others have been replaced by copies.

Here is where El Greco's life in Toledo began—and ended. The promise of this important commission probably influenced his decision to come to Spain. Clearly El Greco also hoped to work for Philip II on the monastery at the Escorial, near Madrid. When El Greco's "Martyrdom of St. Maurice" (circa 1580-82) failed to win King Philip's patronage, the artist settled down in Toledo.

"In a time when paintings were supposed to inspire prayer and teach theological tenets, El Greco sometimes did not faithfully follow the Scriptures," said Dr. Marias. "In the 'Disrobing of Christ' he painted the three Marys, though there is no justification in the Bible for their being there [page 2]. He put Roman soldiers in 16th-century armor and set biblical scenes in Toledo."

In the last decades of his life El Greco's patrons were private chapels and smaller religious institutions in Toledo and the surrounding province. "I believe that these patrons, less concerned about theological indiscretions, allowed the artist to do some of his best work," Dr. Marias said. And if El Greco had received the patronage of the Spanish king, would he have found the freedom he needed to develop his unique style? It is doubtful.

El Greco died in 1614 and was buried in Santo Domingo el Antiguo under the large "Adoration of the Shepherds" (1612-14), which he had painted as a memoria1to himself. The brushstrokes are loose, the figures fluid, and the colors brilliant—hallmarks of El Greco's late style.

In 1619, because of a dispute with the nuns, El Greco's son, Jorge Manuel Theotokopoulos, moved the family vault to San Torcuato in Toledo. The church was destroyed in the last century, and El Greco's tomb has been lost.

Unlike Titian, El Greco had no contemporary biographers. The artist's own theoretical writings have never been found. It was therefore with great excitement that Dr. Marias and his colleague Dr. Agustin Bustamante in 1977 discovered El Greco's handwritten notes in the margin of a 16th-century edition of Vitruvius's treatise *On Architecture*. Dr. Marias believes the notes, in El Greco's mix of Italian, Spanish, and Greek, negate the two prevalent theories about his elongated figures: that the distortions were due to astigmatism or to the artist's mysticism.

"El Greco clearly rejected the Renaissance concepts of perspective and proportion," said Dr. Marias. "He called an artist who followed them pretentious, 'a donkey covered with a lion's skin.' He wrote that the ladies of Toledo who elongated their figures with chapines [high-heeled shoes] knew more about beauty than contemporary artists who painted with mathematical formulas. For El Greco, only two things were important in painting: light and color."

Whereas traces of Toledo's Arab past are everywhere—in the Oriental gardens and tiled patios, in Toledans' taste for rich almond pastries, and even in the Castilian language sprinkled with Arabic words—footprints of Jewish Toledo are faint. No one knows who founded Toledo, but one of the theories is that it was first settled by members of the tribes of Israel fleeing the Holy Land in the sixth century B.C. The Jews called it Toledoth, their "city of generations. " Toledo became one of the most important Jewish centers in Spain, with about 200 families in A.D. 1300.

During more than 300 years of Muslim occupation and the first centuries of Christian reconquest, Toledo experienced a period of religious toleration rare in Western history. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived relatively peacefully together, all allowed to practice their own religions and live by their own laws. The arts and sciences flourished. Alfonso X (the Wise) supported a school of translators in the 13th century that helped to bring Aristotelian philosophy and classical scientific texts to the West. The cross-fertilization of cultures also produced the distinctive Mudejar style of brickwork and sculptured plaster that still dominates Toledo's architecture.

In the mid-14th century, however, during a time of economic hardship and religious revival in Castile, intolerance flared. As sweet as the flowering of mixed cultures had been, bitter was the repression. Toledo is above all a city of contradictions.

Jews were forbidden to carry on trade with Christians, carry arms, or hold public office. The Jewish quarter, or Juderia, was sacked and burned in 1391. Some years later, after a fiery sermon in Santiago del Arrabal, Vincent Ferrer led a bloody massacre in Toledo's oldest synagogue, which then became a Catholic church, Santa Maria la Blanca. The tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition to deal with false Christian converts was established in 1485 in Toledo, and within 40 years Catholic monarchs expelled all unconverted Jews and Muslims from Spain.

The memory of those times still haunts the Street of the Bitter Well in Toledo, where people believe they can still hear the weeping of Raquel, the beautiful daughter of Levi, who lived there. According to legend, Levi killed his daughter's Christian lover as he stole into the Jew's garden one night to meet Raquel. She wept for many nights, and finally, in her despair, threw herself into the well at which the lovers had kept their secret trysts. The waters were said to have turned bitter with Raquel's tears.

There is some speculation that Dona Jeronima de las Cuevas, El Greco's mistress for 37 years and mother of his son, Toledan architect Jorge Manuel, was related to Jewish conversos, or converts, by marriage. She is believed to be the beautiful and mysterious woman in El Greco's portrait "Lady in a Fur Wrap." What is certain is that El Greco and his mistress lived in Toledo's Juderia.

They made their home not in the small reconstructed 16th-century house now called the Casa del Greco, but in a 24-room apartment in a palace of the Marques de Villena overlooking the gorge of the Tagus. The palace was torn down early in this century, and the site is now part of a park, the Paseo del Transito, where mothers bring small children on summer afternoons.

El Greco was believed to be a frequent visitor to Buena Vista, the handsome cigarral of Cardinal Sandoval y Rojas, Miguel de Cervantes' patron. There El Greco surely conversed with his friends Antonio de Covarrubias, son of the famous Toledan architect, scholar Fray Hortensio Felix Paravicino, and the poet G6ngora. He may also have met Father Pedro de Ribadeneira—biographer of Ignatius of Loyola—and Cervantes, and Lope de Vega, who lived and worked for many years in Toledo.

A highly learned man himself with an impressive library of Greek, Latin, Italian, and Spanish texts, El Greco would have felt comfortable in such illustrious company.

“He was a great philosopher, penetrating in his observations," noted the Sevillian painter Francisco Pacheco, who visited El Greco in 1611, "and he wrote on painting, sculpture, and architecture."