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Review of Eric Storm, *The Discovery of El Greco. The Naturalization of Culture Versus the Rise of Modern Art, 1860-1914*

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Storm, Eric. *The Discovery of El Greco. The Naturalization of Culture Versus the Rise of Modern Art, 1860-1914*. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2016. 256 pp.

Eric Storm's book examines the establishment of El Greco as a canonic artist from the nineteenth century, when he was largely seen as a second-rate Italian painter, to his canonization as a central figure of sixteenth century art. Throughout the book, Storm weaves a narrative of how El Greco's style, or rather his multiple styles, provided conservative and avant-garde critics, artists, and historians from Spain, France, and Germany validation for their ideas about the importance of art in the past and its role in contemporary culture.

In each chapter, Storm hones in on a series of explicit instances that raised El Greco's repute: the publication of new research or a new biography, a critical review of paintings, and a number of anniversary celebrations or museum exhibit installations. Throughout, El Greco appears as a perpetual outsider. In terms of nationality he could hardly be categorized as belonging to a particular place: he was born in Crete, educated in Venice, and finally settled in Spain. As for artistic style, his work evolved from realistic depictions with indulgent color that evince his Venetian education, to a transcendental and highly individualistic style, later called Mannerist, that evoked fantasy and religious devotion. Storm traces how, partly due to the inability to define El Greco's work within existing schools or styles, he could be more or less easily inserted into a variety of historical narratives. As a richly adaptable figure, he served for multiple inventions of tradition and fulfills Hobsbawm's understanding of the concept. In Germany, for example, El Greco's work represented spiritual and personal expression for critic Julius Meier-Graefe, poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and some of the painters from Die Blaue Reiter Expressionist group. Meanwhile, painters like Ignacio Zuloaga or French critic Maurice Barrés saw El Greco's art as proof that Catholic devotion was a formational national quality of Spain. Storm also introduces the reassessments of El Greco's career in Spain, as Spanish intellectuals like Ceán Bermúdez or Manuel Bartolomé de Cossío and others connected to the Institución Libre de Estudios (including writers of the *Generación del '98* like Pío de Baroja or Miguel de Unamuno) revised biographical accounts that portrayed El Greco as a fanatic or victim to a mental or eye condition. Ultimately, these narratives compelled Spaniards to take ownership of El Greco's legacy and elevate him to the position of a founding father of the Spanish school of art.

The book has many strengths. Foremost is its readability. Storm sets up succinct arguments that move quickly. He also provides enough background to be accessible to both a general public and a more specialized public that may be unfamiliar with some of the niche details of the European art and cultural world of the time period. Through the focus on El Greco, Storm provides a summary history of some of the various conflicting voices of the art worlds of Spain, Germany, and France during the 1860-1914 period. He alerts readers to competing narratives and thus encourages readers to re-evaluate the current reputation, if not the importance, of El Greco.

That said, since it is foremost a study of El Greco's rise, it would have benefitted from a detailed analysis of the actual artworks. Had the author taken the time to look at El Greco's masterpieces and critique and re-evaluate the writings that led to El Greco receiving so much critical attention, the final product would have been much richer. He is overly cautious in his reliance on art historical analyses of other authors and the

unquestionable status of El Greco. It would have been helpful to have heard more of the author's own argument on the pitfalls or strengths of those past evaluations, and to compare them to the paintings themselves. Had Storm taken this risk, he could have broadened the impact of his work and shown how other art historical analyses, be that of El Greco or the nationalization of artists from the early modern period, may also be ripe for re-evaluation.

The book creates a great argument for the improbability of El Greco as a choice for critics to elevate as a founding father of the Spanish School, and by knowing the multiple and strong reactions to El Greco's oeuvre, it offers art lovers a chance to re-encounter the art with fresh eyes. Finally, the book comes out at a suitable time, as the celebrated *Lady in a Fur Wrap* (c.1570) attributed to El Greco is undergoing scrutiny by an international panel of experts in the hopes of learning more about its provenance and perhaps even reassign its attribution. The current research on the individual painting confirms the lasting impact of those writers and artists from 1860 to 1914 who, inspired by El Greco's work, inscribed his name into the art historical canon.

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