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from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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**FRICK COLLECTION OFFERS EXCLUSIVE FOCUS-EXHIBITION
THIS SPRING AND SUMMER
*EL GRECO: THEMES AND VARIATIONS***

MAY 15 THROUGH JULY 29, 2001

Following the critical acclaim of the recent small exhibition *Velázquez in New York Museums*, The Frick Collection offers another focused presentation this spring and summer, *El Greco: Themes and Variations*, organized by Guest Curator Jonathan Brown, Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Fine Arts, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. In an exhibition of seven paintings on view together for the first time, the Frick's own holdings, *St. Jerome* and *The Purification of the Temple*, will be shown with five other versions by El Greco borrowed from five national and international collections. Together, they present an opportunity to examine El Greco's artistic evolution over the decades he worked in Italy and Spain. Moreover, these seven paintings call attention to an intriguing aspect of the master's production – the recycling of compositions over long periods of time during an era when few artists did so – particularly interesting in light of the fact that his painting style was so very inventive. In the accompanying booklet, Brown addresses this intriguing issue, presenting his thoughts on how and why El Greco used theme and variation. Curator Susan Grace Galassi, who is coordinating the exhibition with Brown, contributes an essay on the development of Henry Clay Frick's interest in Spanish painting at a time when such works were appreciated in America by only a small number of collectors. She also illuminates the fascinating history of Frick's pursuit at home and abroad of works by El Greco. The presentation is on view exclusively at The Frick Collection from Tuesday, May 15 through July 29, 2001. *El Greco: Themes and Variations* has been made possible through the generous support of Melvin R. Seiden, Lladró, the Robert Lehman Foundation, the Arthur Ross Foundation, Helen Clay Chace, Iberia Airlines of Spain, Elizabeth de Cuevas, and the Fellows of The Frick Collection.

EL GRECO AS AN ARTIST DEFINED AND REDEFINED

El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos) remains today one of the most enigmatic artists of his time, owing in part to the unique path of his life. Born in Crete in 1541, then a Venetian possession, he was schooled as an icon painter in the post-Byzantine style. At twenty-five, he immigrated to Italy and began the process of recreating himself as an artist in the Italian tradition. After a period in Venice and Rome, he moved to Spain where he spent the remaining years of his life developing the inventive, painterly approach for which he is perhaps most widely known. El Greco died in Toledo in 1614. In his essay, Brown discusses the many ways this artist has been analyzed by art historians, poets, and collectors through the years. He touches upon various concepts that have been employed to define El Greco and understand his work, among them his interest in Renaissance art theory and issues such as nationalism and mysticism. He also describes the strong personality of El Greco and how his expectations of treatment and compensation as an artist – based on practices he witnessed in Italy -- placed him at odds with clients following his move to Spain. As a means to solve his financial problems, El Greco began to produce replicas of his original compositions.

SAINT JEROME AS A SUBJECT

One of the Four Doctors of the Latin Church, Saint Jerome (c. 345–420) is represented in the work of El Greco as a cardinal, a composition that was popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Three of the five versions of the saint as a cardinal attributed to El Greco are brought together by this presentation (the other two are in the National Gallery, London, and the Musée Bonnat, Bayonne). While these paintings vary in scale and reflect changes in the artist's evolving style, all versions are nearly identical. Usually dated about 1595–1600, the Frick canvas is the earliest of the versions, and the only one that bears El Greco's signature. Saint Jerome is depicted half-length in a brilliant orange-red robe, resting his hands on an open book, which probably represents the Vulgate, his translation of the Bible from Greek to Latin. He greets the viewer with a piercing stare, but his focus seems inwardly turned, and his lips appear to move as he follows the notes in the margin of the text with his slender right hand. El Greco endowed the idealized saint with such force of character and specificity of facial features that the painting was long considered a portrait of a particular cardinal.

Of a similar scale and nearly identical is the very fine autograph version of the Frick painting in the Robert Lehman Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, executed some fifteen to twenty years later (c.1610–14). Shown side by side for the first time, the two paintings challenge the observer to discern the subtle differences between them in the color of the robe, the distribution of white highlights, brushwork, and treatment of the figure's head, face, and beard. The third version in the exhibition, which comes from a private collection in Madrid, is presumed to be the earliest of three small paintings, although it is not known for what purpose El Greco made it.

THE PURIFICATION OF THE TEMPLE SERIES

While in the versions of *Saint Jerome* El Greco repeats a successful formula with a minimum of change, in the *Purification of the Temple* series, he grapples with a complex theme and composition over a period of many decades, making continual refinements to achieve greater clarity and intensity of expression. The story of the purification of the temple as related in the Gospels (especially John 2:13-15) gained currency during the Counter-Reformation as a symbol of the Church's purging of heresy. It evidently had special meaning for El Greco, as he painted at least six signed versions over the course of his career. These fall into two distinct categories: an earlier type that was painted in Italy before 1577, and a later type painted in Spain between roughly 1600 and 1614.

The small panel painting lent by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, is the earliest version and is presumed to have been painted during El Greco's short Venetian stay (c. 1567–70), not long after his arrival from Crete. Here he positions the dynamic figure of Christ between the agitated merchants to the left and the calm apostles on the right. The group is elevated on a step and set against a monumental portico in a classicizing style. In this painting, El Greco had just begun to confront the new Italian manner: the figural style of Michelangelo, and the dramatic perspective of Tintoretto. The Minneapolis canvas painted soon after shows how much El Greco had assimilated in a short period of time. The figures, borrowed from a variety of sources, now emerge from the group with greater clarity and expressiveness. In a touching tribute, he includes in the lower right of the canvas bust-length representations of those who inspired him: from left to right are Titian, Michelangelo, Guilio Clovio (a Croatian friend), and possibly Raphael.

It was not until after El Greco was well established in Spain that he returned to this theme and painted four additional versions, all of which are similar. Painted around 1600, the Frick canvas is small in scale and painted with fluid brushstrokes in glowing color. While echoing the composition of the Minneapolis version, here El Greco intensified the expression of the work by compressing the space, eliminating some of the figures, and placing Christ in the center. The figures here are more elongated and dominate the architectural setting. He has also eliminated the steps and some of the foreground figures, bringing the viewer closer to the action. The Frick work is the model for three additional paintings—a large painting in the National Gallery in London, one in a private collection, and the third in the Church of San Ginés in Madrid. The San Ginés canvas, which is part of this exhibition, is the last of the known versions of the *Purification* (c. 1610–14) that El Greco painted. Here he changed the format from horizontal to vertical, and, in keeping with his late style, the figures are more attenuated. He also transformed the architectural setting into an interior space, in which the imposing columns of the altar soar above the figures.

ILLUSTRATED PUBLICATION AVAILABLE

A fully illustrated booklet by guest curator Jonathan Brown, with an additional essay by Frick Curator Susan Grace Galassi, accompanies the exhibition. This softcover booklet is available for \$12 in the Museum Shop of The Frick Collection, which can be reached at (212) 288-0700.

FREE PUBLIC LECTURE

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF EL GRECO

Wednesday, June 6, 5:30pm

Speaker: Jonathan Brown, Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Fine Arts,
The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

The career of El Greco, which took place successively in Crete, Italy, and Spain, is unique for its time. At each stage, he transformed his art by a complex process of adaptation, which is analyzed in this lecture.

The lecture is open to the public without charge one half-hour before the event. If those planning to attend arrive earlier, they are expected to pay the regular gallery admission fee. Seating is limited.

ALSO ON VIEW THIS SUMMER:

MASTER DRAWINGS FROM THE SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

June 19 to August 12, 2001

Master Drawings from the Smith College Museum of Art features 68 drawings -- all examples of superior draftsmanship -- allowing visitors to view drawings ranging in time from Old Masterpieces to work of this century. Among those masterpieces included are drawings by **Fra Bartolommeo, Boucher, Cezanne, Degas, De Kooning, Fragonard, Gainsborough, Grünewald, Ingres, Matisse, Tiepolo, and van Gogh**. The show is on view at The Frick Collection through August 12, before traveling to the Uffizi, Florence, where it will open in the fall. A scholarly catalogue, published by Hudson Hills Press and featuring all works in color accompanies the exhibition, which was organized by the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.

ABOUT THE FRICK COLLECTION

In the elegant galleries of The Frick Collection – a museum housed in the former mansion of industrialist Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919) -- are some of the most exceptional works of Western art. Ranging from the Renaissance through the late nineteenth century, the Collection includes works by such celebrated artists as Bellini, Constable, Corot, Fragonard, Gainsborough, Goya, El Greco, Holbein, Ingres, Manet, Monet, Rembrandt, Renoir, Titian,

Turner, Velázquez, Vermeer, and Whistler. In addition to major paintings by these and other masters, the Frick's galleries contain fine French porcelains, Italian bronzes, sculptures, and period furniture. The permanent collection is further enriched by frequent presentations of special exhibitions. Inspired by the eye of an individual connoisseur, The Frick Collection has grown over the years. Greeted with awe when the doors opened in 1935, today the Collection is internationally renowned as one of New York's most remarkable cultural treasures. Designed by Thomas Hastings of Carrère and Hastings and constructed in 1913-1914, the building was changed after Mrs. Frick's death in 1931, with alterations and additions made by the architect John Russell Pope. A new Reception Hall, built in 1977, was designed by John Barrington Bayley, Harry van Dyke, and G. Frederick Poehler, as well as two temporary exhibition galleries. The Frick Collection also operates the Frick Art Reference Library at 10 East 71st Street, both a research library and a photoarchive. The Library is one of the world's great repositories for the documentation and study of Western art and has served the international art world for more than seventy-five years.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Website: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: 10am to 6pm Tuesdays through Saturdays, and from 1pm to 6pm Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, December 24, and December 25. Limited hours (1:00 to 6:00pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$10, general public; \$5, students & senior citizens.

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station

Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: now included in the price of admission is an INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop closes at 5:45pm, and is open otherwise the same days and hours as the Museum.

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Communications Officer

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