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The painting is a religious work in the style of the Cretan School, specifically by Doménikos Theotokópoulos, known as El Greco. It depicts two figures in a dark, dramatic setting. Saint Francis, on the right, is standing and wearing a grey habit with a hood. He has a beard and is looking down at a human skull he holds in both hands. The skull is positioned in front of his chest. A thick, braided rope is tied around his waist and hangs down. To the left, Brother Leo is kneeling, also in a grey habit, with his hands clasped in prayer and his head bowed. The background is dark and indistinct, with a hint of a wooden structure in the upper left corner. The lighting is focused on the figures, creating strong contrasts and highlighting the textures of their robes and the features of the skull.

Doménikos Theotokópoulos,  
called El Greco and Workshop  
*Saint Francis and Brother Leo in Meditation*



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DOMÉNIKOS THEOTOKÓPOULOS, called EL GRECO and workshop  
(Crete 1541-1614 Toledo)

## *SAINT FRANCIS AND BROTHER LEO IN MEDITATION*

*Early XVII century*

Oil on canvas.

78 × 57 cm; 30 3/4 x 22 1/2 in.

Inscribed '160(7)?' on the verso.

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### Provenance

Art market, Bilbao;  
Private Collection, Spain.

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### Literature

P. Bustinduy Fernández and F. Tabar Antia. "El Greco: Un Nuevo San Francisco con el Hermano León y un Retrato Subyacente." *Goya: Revista de Arte*, Lazaro Galdiano Museum, no. 288 (2002): [157-171]. Madrid.

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### Exhibitions

*San Francisco de Asís por El Greco en el País Vasco*. Museo Diocesano de Arte Sacro, Vitoria-Gasteiz, June - December 2005.

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The Franciscan iconography in the *oeuvre* of El Greco has been a prominent subject of scholarly inquiry, especially given his prolific depictions of Saint Francis of Assisi. The artist, along with his Toledo workshop, produced an array of approximately 200 pieces associated Franciscan imagery (see some renowned example Figs. 1-3).<sup>1</sup> These works include those executed by El Greco himself, his son Jorge Manuel, and other workshop assistants, as well as those created by his followers throughout the 17th century and even in later periods - according to the research on this vast corpus of paintings mainly undertaken by scholars José Camón Aznar and José Gudiol.

El Greco, born around 1541 in Crete into the Orthodox Christian tradition, became a devout Roman Catholic during his time in Italy. His commitment to this faith deepened following his settling in Toledo in 1577, where he dedicated his artistic talents to glorifying the Church. There he created some of his most remarkable visionary masterpieces, such as the celebrated *View of Toledo* (New York, The MET), and the monumental *Burial of Count Orgaz*, still preserved in Santo Tomé. His works, imbued with theological depth, served to visually interpret and propagate the doctrinal resolutions of the Council of Trent, making El Greco's contributions to Counter-Reformation religious iconography widely regarded as substantial and enduring. The profound humanity of Saint Francis - a wealthy merchant's son who renounced material possessions to establish a Catholic order devoted to poverty - resonated deeply during the Counter-Reformation. By the time El Greco settled in Toledo, the city was home to no fewer than seven Franciscan convents and three friaries, the most prominent of which was situated near the artist's residence. Many of the ordinary Toledans were members of the Third Order of Saint Francis, established so that lay persons could participate in the spiritual life of the Franciscans. All of this explains the success of El Greco's depictions of the Saint and indeed the artist's predilection for the subject. Francisco Pacheco, painter and influential art theorist, who visited El Greco at his home in 1611, considered him the most preeminent

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<sup>1</sup> J. Grabski. "The Iconography of St. Francis in the Work of El Greco and His Workshop: Typology, Variants, Derivatives." Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II. Wydawnictwo Naukowe EBooks, 2016.

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interpreter of Saint Francis of his era - a judgement that remains uncontested to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many representations of Saint Francis, the most frequently replicated composition is exemplified by works held in prominent collections such as the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid (Fig. 4)<sup>3</sup>, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa (Fig. 5)<sup>4</sup>, and the Monastery of Monforte de Lemos (Fig. 6).<sup>5</sup> These depict *Saint Francis and Brother Leo Meditating on Death*, one of the artist's greatest and most celebrated subjects. In this painting, Saint Francis is portrayed kneeling on a rocky outcrop within a cave, Mount *La Verna*, where, towards the end of his life around 1224, he retired for fasting and prayer. He holds a human skull in both hands and gazes at it with a contemplative expression. The Saint occupies the central position in the painting, his symmetry underscored by the vertical line of the rope cincture of his sackcloth habit and the cascading folds of the garment from his hooded head. The stark simplicity of the composition, combined with its restrained palette, amplifies the Saint's asceticism and humility. The centrally placed skull in the foreground serves not only as a focal point of the composition but also as an object of contemplation, inviting the viewer to engage in their own spiritual reflections. Intended to serve a devotional function to stimulate prayer and pious reflection, this composition possesses the striking intensity of a hallucinatory vision, wherein features characteristic of Italian Mannerist art - such as elongated figures, illogical spatial constructs, radiant supernatural light, and vivid, otherworldly colours - profoundly evoke the transcendental and spiritual domain. To the lower left of the composition, Brother Leo, his faithful companion, is shown leaning against the rock ledge. His hands are clasped in prayer, with his fingers interwoven, and his gaze is similarly fixed upon the skull. Like Saint Francis, Brother Leo is clad in a greyish-brown sackcloth habit. The sombre tones of the cave's rocky background harmonise with the earthy hues of their

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<sup>2</sup> See Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la Pintura*, Madrid 1866, vol. II, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> G. Manzini, T. Frati, *L'opera completa del Greco*, Milano 1969, p. 117, ill. 132c.

<sup>4</sup> J. Gudiol, *Iconography and Chronology in El Greco's Paintings of St. Francis*, "The Art Bulletin" XLIV, Sept. 1962, no. 3, p. 195-203; idem, *Domenikos Theotokopoulos. El Greco 1541-1614*, New York 1973, p. 199; G. Manzini, T. Frati, *L'opera...*, op. cit., p. 116, ill. 132a.

<sup>5</sup> G. Manzini, T. Frati, *L'opera...*, op. cit., p. 117, ill. 132j.

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garments. A vivid contrast is provided by the blue triangle of sky in the upper left corner, intersected diagonally by a shaft of divine light, which imbues the scene with a dynamic yet contemplative energy. Similarly to the Lemos painting, the present work, ascribable to the *oeuvre* of the Cretan master himself and his workshop, doesn't seem include the *cartiglio* in the lower-right corner that can instead be found both in the Toledo and Ottawa versions, together with many of the other renditions of this subject - however, traces of white paint have been recently discovered, which might have formed a rectangular simulated cartouche for the signature, located in the damaged lower-right corner. Moreover, far from the undulated smoothness of the Prado painting and the almost 'metallic' rendering of the Ottawa one - both particularly evident in St Francis' robe - our work is characterized by a rougher pictorial surface, possibly closer to the Lemos painting. However, the glimpse of clear blue sky between the clouds from which a shaft of light and mist emerges brings it closer to the Ottawa version.

A recent restoration campaign has led to the discovery of another painting beneath the final composition, evident through x-rays and partially visible to the naked eye (Fig. 7). It is a portrait bearing a strong resemblance to that of the presumed Manusso (c. 1529–1604), the painter's brother, previously held in the Contini-Bonacossi Collection in Florence and now at the Norton Simon Museum (Fig. 8). It also broadly corresponds to the face of one of the apostles on the right side of *The Pentecost* from the altarpiece of the Colegio de Doña María de Aragón, housed in the Prado Museum. Some historians have suggested this figure might be a self-portrait of the artist, possibly due to the inconclusive detail of the figure's gaze directed at the viewer.<sup>6</sup> Fernando Tabar Antia, in his 2002 article on the piece, asserts that the quality of the work under discussion is comparable to that of versions identified as autograph by various scholars. He acknowledges the inherent challenges of differentiating between works directly attributable to El Greco and those of exceptional quality produced within his workshop, whether they involved the master's direct intervention. However, Tabar Antia contends that the possibility of the piece being a later copy,

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<sup>6</sup> Fernández and Antia. "El Greco: Un Nuevo San Francisco con el Hermano León y un Retrato Subyacente." *Goya: Revista de Arte*, no. 288 (2002): [157-171]. Madrid, p. 159.

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unconnected to El Greco or his workshop, can be confidently ruled out. This conclusion is supported by visual analysis, the results of comparative chemical examinations of the painting and its preparatory layers, and the discovery of the underlying portrait.<sup>7</sup> For a detailed report of the scientific analysis of the work, please refer to the study conducted by Pilar Bustinduy Fernández and included in the same article.<sup>8</sup>

As anticipated, his composition achieved widespread popularity during El Greco's lifetime, as evidenced by its numerous replicas, workshop reproductions, and later copies. More than 60 examples of this specific type are known today, though it is likely that additional works remain in unknown locations or were lost during the tumultuous history of Spain.<sup>9</sup> The enduring appeal of this iconography is further attested by its early reproduction in engravings, the earliest extant example being a print by Diego de Astor, which El Greco commissioned, dated 1606.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 164

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 164 and ss.

<sup>9</sup> Among others in the following collections: Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid; coll. Bollag, Zurich; Colegio del Patriarca, Valencia; Colegio de Doncellas Nobles, Toledo; Barnes Foundation, Merion (Penn.); coll. Vales Izaguirre, Bilbao; coll. Drey, New York; Bargas, Toledo; coll. Rodríguez Landaeta, Caracas; National Gallery, Athens; sacristy of the cathedral of Toledo; coll. Hahn, Porto Ronco; Brera, Milan; Museo de Arte, Logroño; coll. Quer, Barcelona; Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid; coll. De Albayda, Madrid; coll. Peña, Madrid; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Anderson Gallery, New York; formerly Padres Escolapios coll., Monforte de Lemos (Lugo); A. J. A. Rickards coll., London; Casa del Greco, Toledo; Musée du Louvre, Paris; French and co., New York; F. Hess coll., Switzerland; Joaquín Paya coll., Madrid; Museo Provincial, Segovia; MacCohon coll., Morata de Tajuna coll., Madrid; Convento de Santa Clara, Villanueva de la Jara (Cuenca); Rafael Lafora García coll., Madrid; Salazar coll., Madrid; Maximo Pena coll., Madrid; Maria Pardo coll., Madrid; Alberto Puig Palau, Barcelona; Pier Luigi Nervi, Rome; Morris coll., Geneva.

<sup>10</sup> J. Gudiol, *Domenikos Theotokopoulos. El Greco 1541–1614*, New York 1973, p. 322, 326, ill. 346.



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Fig. 1. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Saint Francis receiving the Stigmata*, 1590-1595, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.



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Fig. 2. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Saint Francis receiving the Stigmata*, 1585-1590, oil on canvas, Walker Art Museum, Baltimore.

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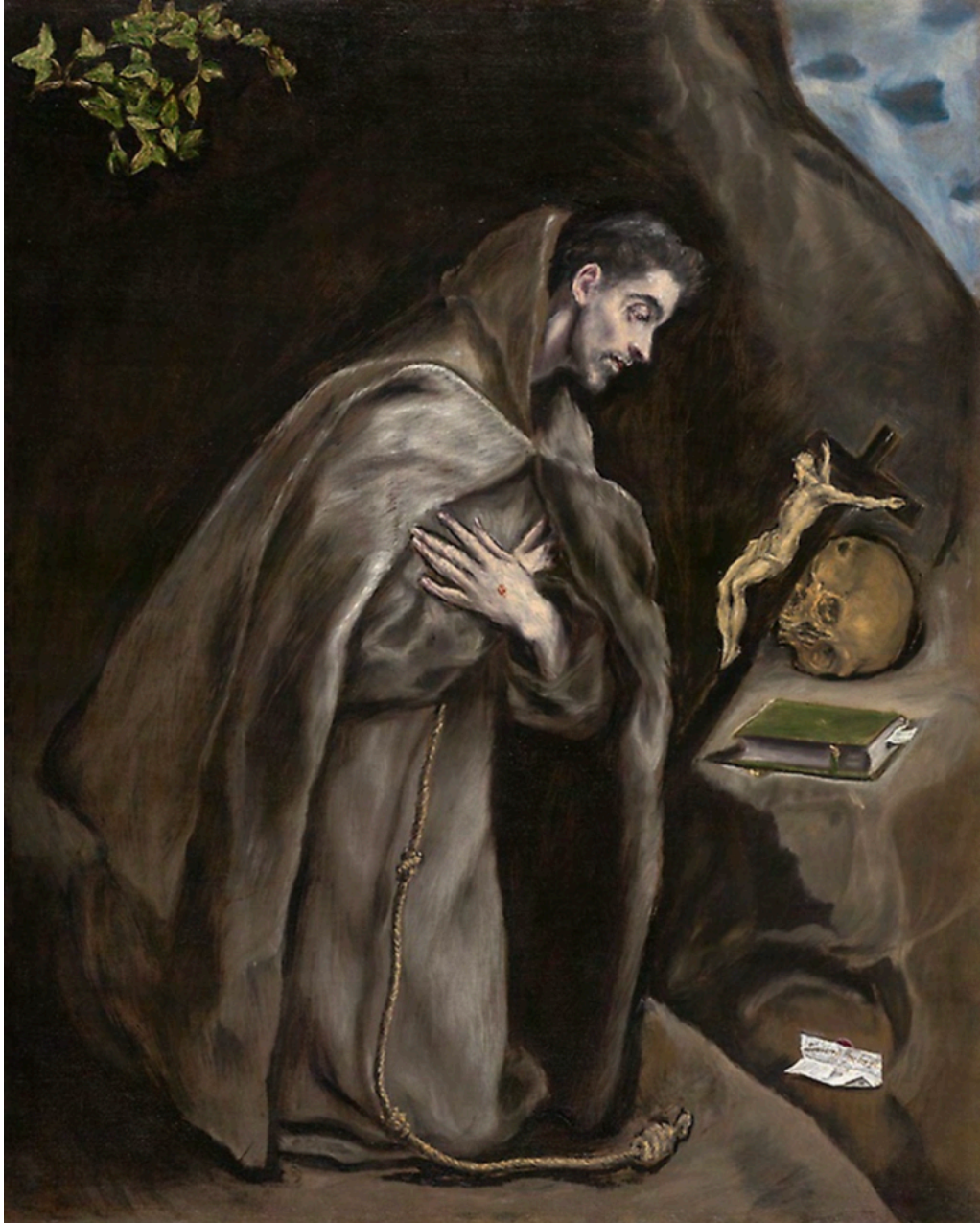


Fig. 3. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Saint Francis in Meditation*, c. 1595-1600, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.



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Fig. 4. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos) and workshop, *Saint Francis of Assisi and Brother Leo meditating on Death*, 1600 - 1614, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid.



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Fig. 5. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Saint Francis of Assisi and Brother Leo meditating on Death*, c. 1600 - 1605, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

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Fig. 6. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Saint Francis of Assisi and Brother Leo meditating on Death*, c. 1609, oil on canvas, Colegio del Cardenal in Monforte de Lemos, Lugo.



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Fig. 7. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos) and Workshop, *Portrait of Manusso, the painter's brother (?)*, X-Ray scan of the present painting.



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Fig. 8. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Portrait of Manusso Theotokopoulos*, 1603-1604, oil on canvas, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.

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