

# **Julius Meier-Graefe, El Greco and the rise of modern art**

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## Julius Meier-Graefe, El Greco and the rise of modern art

Why does artistic taste change? Why do widely appreciated artists suddenly go out of favour, while less well known others become fashionable? These complex changes could be studied fruitfully by analysing in depth one such process of rapid revaluation. The fast growing fame of El Greco during the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century is probably one of the best examples in art history of a rediscovery, and therefore constitutes a good case. Even more, because the El Greco revival was mainly the work of one man, the German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe.

Many scholars refer to the rediscovery of El Greco as an example of how radically taste can change. Such rediscoveries are generally seen as the result of a fortuitous discovery of a considerable amount of unknown masterpieces, of a conscious redirection of taste carried out by artists, collectors, dealers, critics, and art historians, or a combination of both. In some cases these changes came about quickly, while in others they were slower and more complex.<sup>1</sup> But what factors were decisive in the reappraisal of El Greco?

In the case of El Greco, it would be Meier-Graefe who, after a few decades of growing appreciation, brought about the final recognition of El Greco as a great master. In his highly influential *Spanische Reise* of 1910 - which in 1926 was also published in English as *The Spanish Journey* - he placed El Greco at the

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1. See for example Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art. Some aspects of taste, fashion and collecting in England and France*, London, 1976, 79, 84 and 100-102; Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte. Der Weg einer Wissenschaft*, rev.ed. Munich, 1990, 190-192. The rediscovery of El Greco has been studied already, although mostly in a superficial way. Indispensable are the introductory study of Álvarez Lopera and the exhaustive collection of nineteenth century source documents he published: José Álvarez Lopera, *De Ceán a Cossío: La fortuna crítica del Greco en el siglo XIX. El Greco: Textos, documentos y bibliografía*, Madrid, 1987. Further studies are: Jonathan Brown, Introduction. El Greco, the Man and the Myths, in: *El Greco of Toledo*, Boston, 1982: 15-35; and Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Domenicos Theotocopoulos 450 Years Later, in: *El Greco of Crete*, Iraklion, 1990, 57-112.

same level as widely acclaimed painters such as Michelangelo, Titian, Rubens and Rembrandt. Furthermore, according to Meier-Graefe, El Greco was an innovative colourist, who directly anticipated the work of painters like Renoir and Cézanne. The link between El Greco and contemporary artistic debates therefore was a close one in Meier-Graefe's book, as he presented the sixteenth century Toledan painter as an immediate precursor of French impressionism. Thus, to understand Meier-Graefe's ardent defence of El Greco's greatness, it is necessary to analyze the previous international El Greco reception and the role the discovery played in his own oeuvre.

### **The rediscovery of El Greco**

Domenikos Theotokopoulos, or El Greco, was a controversial figure during his own lifetime. Philip II rejected a painting he had ordered from El Greco for the newly built church of El Escorial. After his death in 1614 the Toledan painter of Greek origin slowly passed into oblivion. He appeared in Spanish artistic dictionaries of the eighteenth century as a minor painter who in his later works grew to be especially extravagant in style. Outside of Spain, he was practically unknown, as until about 1800 few in Europe were familiar with Spanish painting. Although, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, some first class collections of Spanish art came into existence abroad, a good sample of Spanish art only became available to a wider public in 1838, when the Spanish Gallery at the Louvre was inaugurated. Among its nearly five hundred works - which had been bought in Spain during the previous years at the expense of King Louis Philippe - were nine Greco's, of which the *Lady in a Fur Wrap* (fig. 1) was considered a masterpiece. At the same time artists, critics and writers started to revise the negative image of El Greco. Although authors like Gautier, Baudelaire and Champfleury still considered his paintings awkward, they acknowledged El Greco as an original and interesting artist. His idiosyncratic style was no longer condemned as deviating from the classical norm. Delacroix and Millet even acquired a painting of El Greco.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Alvarez Lopera (as note 1), 16-25; Cristina Marinas, La Galería Española del Rey Luis-Felipe, in: *Academia*, 57, 1983, 127-152; and E. Trenc Ballester, L'Espagne dans la peinture française au XIXe siècle, in: *Les peintres français et l'Espagne. De*

Although El Greco was somewhat better known after the Spanish Gallery was opened, he was still considered a minor painter. This view only started to change as Edouard Manet and some of his friends, like the critics Astruc and Duret and the painters Whistler and Carolus-Duran, became fascinated by Velázquez, and as a corollary also started to show interest in El Greco. For them, El Greco in some aspects foreshadowed the innovative use of colour and loose brushwork they so admired in Velázquez.<sup>3</sup> Soon this new appreciation of El Greco as a precursor of the realism of Velázquez was to be found in articles on the Spanish painter.

Thus in a volume dedicated to the Spanish School, which appeared in a series called *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles*, edited in 1869 by the progressive critic Charles Blanc, a relatively long essay was dedicated to El Greco. Only Velázquez, Murillo and Goya were treated more extensively. El Greco had clearly ascended to the second echelon, deserving about the same number of pages as respected artists like Morales, Juanes, Ribera, Zurbaran and Coello. The author, Paul Lefort, especially celebrated early works of El Greco like the *Disrobing of Christ* (fig. 2) and the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (fig. 3), both in Toledo. He disqualified later works as singular, excessive and pathetic. Nevertheless, he converted El Greco into one of the founders of the Spanish school, which according to Lefort and Blanc was mainly characterized by its 'realism' and had its best representative in Velázquez.<sup>4</sup>

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century Velázquez received an enormous amount of attention from painters and publicists. Painters like R.A.M. Stevenson and Aureliano de Beruete wrote extensive studies, and critics like Lefort, Charles Curtis, Mesonero Romanos, Jacinto Octavio Picón and Carl Justi did the same. Most of them celebrated Velázquez as the outstanding genius of the Spanish

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*Delacroix à Manet*, Castres, 1997, 13-37.

3.Alvarez Lopera (as note 1), 53-62; María de los Santos García Felguera, *Viajeros, eruditos y artistas. Los europeos ante la pintura española del Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, 1991, 134-155; and José Alvarez Lopera, Fascinados por Velázquez, in: *Descubrir el Arte*, 1: 4, June 1999, 72-82.

4.Charles Blanc, Introduction, and Paul Lefort, Dominico Theotocopuli, surnommé le Greco, in: Chales Blanc, W. Bürger, Paul Mantz, L. Viardot and Paul Lefort, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles VIII École espagnole*, Paris, 1869.

School of the seventeenth century and as an extremely influential forerunner of contemporary realism and impressionism. For Justi, Beruete and Picón, El Greco was one of the firsts to base his work on the 'innate' Spanish sense of reality, thus becoming one of the few sources of inspiration for the great Velázquez.<sup>5</sup>

This interpretation of El Greco was also defended by the first biographer of El Greco: Manuel Bartolomé Cossío. His monumental book on the Toledan painter appeared in 1908 and in it he described El Greco as the first who liberated himself from sixteenth-century Italian idealism, to find instead inspiration in the Spanish 'environment and spirit'. He thus became the first exponent of the characteristic Spanish naturalism. Cossío therefore particularly celebrated the early Toledan works of El Greco. El Greco's ultimate masterpiece was the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. He considered the later works and the *Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* (fig. 4) - which Philip II had rejected - as interesting experiments that anticipated the innovative use of colour and light of the impressionists. Nevertheless he qualified these paintings as unbalanced, exalted and mannered anomalies. According to Cossío, El Greco's only true disciple - despite the fact that they never met - was Velázquez. Luckily, Velázquez did not feel attracted to the violent dislocations in El Greco's later works. Taking his inspiration from the same national sources as his elder, Velázquez was the exponent of a more harmonious and moderate 'poetic realism'.<sup>6</sup>

Meier-Graefe did not know Cossío's book before he left Germany, although it appeared a few months before he started his Spanish journey. But he knew and disliked the works of Carl Justi. Justi was a professor of Art History at the University of Bonn. His two-volume monograph on Velázquez was the most thorough study on the Spanish master until then. In it he studied the art and life of Velázquez within the context of his time. To him, El Greco was one of the few painters who could be seen in some ways as a forerunner of the great Don Diego. El

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5. Carl Justi, *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert*, Bonn, 1888, I, 76-80; A. de Beruete, *Velazquez*, Paris, 1898, 66-70; and Jacinto Octavio Picón, *Vida y obras de Don Diego Velázquez*, Madrid, 1899, 162-169. See also: Fernando A. Marín Valdés, Aureliano de Beruete: crítica velazqueña y velazquismo fin de siglo, in: *Liño*, 7, 1987, 115-137.

6. Manuel B. Cossío, *El Greco*, Madrid, 1908, 106-112, 341-367 and 518-523.

Greco's later work, in which he moved away from the realistic norm, was condemned as a 'pathological debasement'. In two articles in the *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* from 1897, Justi even characterized him as a case of 'artistic degeneration'. Although the overall tone is not overwhelmingly negative, he dismissed the mature El Greco as someone with a perverse desire for originality. He now even called his style anarchistic: His paintings constituted a revolt against the truth of nature and the laws of gravity and decency. But significantly, he also labelled the older El Greco an 'impressionist'.<sup>7</sup>

That Justi disliked the latest developments in contemporary art became clear in 1903 when in the second revised edition of his *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert* he added two pages on El Greco. He now repeated his dismissal of El Greco's later works, defining them as products of a 'pathological disturbance', more a case for ophthalmologists or psychiatrists. He further regretted the growing recognition of El Greco as one of the prophets of modern art. In the past, the German professor argued, traditions and rules were still respected and painters like El Greco were isolated and quite harmless exceptions. He complained that in his own time artists had lost any restraint which could have disastrous consequences. And, contrary to the anarchic Greek, Velázquez emerged according to Justi as a reasonable realist, an 'honourable bourgeois and a pure man'.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Painter of the Soul**

The reappraisal of El Greco Justi hinted at was only just beginning. In Spain, young painters like Ignacio Zuloaga and Santiago Rusiñol became well-known devotees of El Greco. Between 1896 and 1898 Rusiñol even succeeded in collecting enough money to erect a statue of El Greco at the beach boulevard of the Catalan seaside resort Sitges, where he himself had a studio.<sup>9</sup> At about the same

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7. Justi (as note 5) I, 76-77; Carl Justi, Die Anfänge des Grecos, in: *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, 1897, in: Idem, *Miscellaneen aus drei Jahrhunderten spanischen Kunstlebens*, Berlin, 1908, II, 199-219 and 202-203.

8. Carl Justi, *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert*, Bonn, 2nd rev. ed., 1903, xxv and 51-52.

9. Francesc Fontbona, La recuperació d'El Greco per part dels modernistes catalans,

time writers like Pío Baroja, Azorín, Ganivet and later on also Miguel de Unamuno - collectively known as the generation of 1898 - wrote enthusiastic articles about El Greco. All of these young intellectuals were drawn to El Greco not because of his realism but because they considered him a spiritual painter, a painter of the soul. Feeling, movement, interior life, character and individuality were qualities they associated with his paintings. They presented El Greco as one of the best interpreters of the Spanish *Volksgeist*. In contrast with Beruete, Cossío and Justi they did not celebrate the profound sense of reality as the main characteristic of the Spanish people, but rather its spiritual and anti-materialistic nature.<sup>10</sup> Probably the best known example of this current of thought was the enormously influential French author Maurice Barrès, who in 1911 published a short book called *Greco ou le secret de Tolède*. Barrès presented El Greco's work as the key to understand the Spanish national character, which he defined as anti-materialistic and religious. Even more, according to the French writer, because Spain remained faithful to its own nature, it functioned as an example to other nations.<sup>11</sup>

These authors and painters also started to revise the relation between El Greco and Velázquez. For most of them El Greco stood above Velázquez. Nevertheless none of them had the influence Meier-Graefe would have with his *Spanische Reise*. Around the turn of the century Rusiñol had already popularized El Greco among young Catalan artists and Baroja and Azorín did the same in Madrid.

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in: José Milicua, ed., *El Greco. La seva revaloració pel Modernisme català*, Barcelona, 1996, 44-52. See for Zuloaga: Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, *La vida y el arte de Ignacio Zuloaga*, Madrid, 1990 and M. Milhou, *Ignacio Zuloaga, 1870-1945 et la France*, Bordeaux, 1981.

10. See for example P. Baroja, Cuadros del Greco I & II, in: *El Globo*, 26-6-1900 and 1-7-1900; José Martínez Ruiz (Azorín), El Museo. Una sala para el Greco, in: *La Correspondencia de España*, 18-12-1901; Azorín, *Diario de un enfermo* (1901) in: Idem, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1975, I, 374-403, especially 394; Azorín, La continuidad nacional, in: *ABC* (21-5-1910) in: Idem, *Pintar como querer*, Madrid, 1954, 39-44; and Miguel de Unamuno, El Greco, (1914) in: Idem, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1970, VII, 751-758.

11. Maurice Barrès, *Greco ou le secret de Tolède*, in: Idem, *Romans et voyages*, Paris, 1994, II, 511-564, 540-550. See for this nationalistic interpretation of El Greco also: Eric Storm, La nacionalización de El Greco, in: *Claves de la Razón Práctica*, 137, November 2003, 74-80.

Zuloaga was the only one who had some international influence, but as he did not publish his views, he could only transmit his enthusiasm to those who visited his Montmartre studio, showing them his collection of Greco's. Probably the only ones to rival Meier-Graefe's international influence were Cossío and Barrès. But whereas the former only wrote in Spanish, and maintained the accepted view of El Greco as a forerunner of the great Velázquez, the latter published his reflections a year after Meier-Graefe.

Rusiñol's opinion mostly coincided with Meier-Graefe. Contrary to his friend Zuloaga, who had directly influenced him when both shared an apartment in Paris in 1894, Rusiñol did not see El Greco as an essentially Spanish painter. Thus without changing the vitalistic interpretation, he did not understand him in a strictly nationalistic manner. Like Meier-Graefe Rusiñol presented El Greco - a Greek who had studied in Venice and Rome before coming to Spain - as a cosmopolitan painter, who in some ways anticipated contemporary art.<sup>12</sup> Rusiñol tried to introduce modern French art in his home country by organizing 'festas modernistas' in which he confronted the Catalan intellectual elite with the newest cultural developments from Paris. Particularly as a propagator of symbolism in all its forms Rusiñol played a major role. The 'festa modernista' of 1894 started with a procession in which the two Greco's he had previously bought in Paris were brought to his atelier in Sitges. El Greco thus became the symbolic forebear of the European modernity he wanted to introduce in Catalonia. Meier-Graefe, in his own way, would do the same for Germany.

### **Meier-Graefe's way to El Greco**

Meier-Graefe only discovered El Greco in 1908 after he had already succeeded

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12. As Rusiñol was a Catalan nationalist who used the not widely written Catalan language, he somehow also used El Greco in a nationalistic way, associating Catalan culture with artistic modernity. Santiago Rusiñol, *Discurs llegit a Sitges en la tercera "festa modernista"*, 1894, *El monument al Greco*, and *Impresiones de Arte*, 1897, all in: Idem, *Obras completas*, Barcelona, 1976, II, 607-609, 618-619 and 737-742; and Santiago Rusiñol, *La inauguración de la estatua del Greco*, in: *La Vanguardia*, 30-8-1898 in Alvarez Lopera (as note 1) 425-426. See for Rusiñol also: Josep C. Laplana, *Santiago Rusiñol, el pintor, l'home*, Montserrat, 1995.



in becoming a widely read art critic and had already issued his list of favourite painters. Meier-Graefe was born in 1867 as the son of a German industrialist. Although his father wanted him to become an engineer, he soon went his own way, establishing himself as a writer in Berlin. There he became involved in avant-garde literary and artistic circles and he made himself known as an active and straightforward publicist. In 1895 he was one of the founders of the magazine *Pan*, which sought to regenerate German artistic life, and was dedicated to all branches of art. This inclusion of various art forms also became clear in the careful design of its pages. Ultimately Meier-Graefe's defense of *Jugendstil* and his wish to include lithographs of contemporary foreign artists like Toulouse-Lautrec forced his dismissal from *Pan*. He then moved to Paris.<sup>13</sup>

In the French capital, Meier-Graefe became further involved in the Art Nouveau movement, which he understood as a kind of socialist undertaking. He argued in 1899 that after the French Revolution the pursuit of freedom and truth had had considerable success both in the arts as elsewhere. Now the time had come to realize the third ideal: equality. Art should return to the masses, he wrote. Therefore the dominant easel painting should be substituted for a new stress on decorative and monumental art.<sup>14</sup> Meier-Graefe thus became one of the leading propagators of the international Art Nouveau movement. For example, he convinced Samuel Bing to rename his art gallery 'L'Art Nouveau' and to let it be restyled by Henry van de Velde. In 1898 he founded the magazine *Dekorative Kunst*, followed a year later by a French edition. He also opened his own *Jugendstil* gallery calling it La Maison Moderne. In 1904 he was forced to close his gallery, which had not been a success. At this time he also began to grow disillusioned with the decorative style.<sup>15</sup>

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13. See for Meier-Graefe: Kenworth Moffet, *Meier-Graefe as an art critic*, Munich, 1973, 9-19.

14. Julius Meier-Graefe, Beiträge zu einer modernen Ästhetik, 1899-1900 in: Idem, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst*, 3rd ed. Munich, 1966, II, 736-758, 740-749.

15. Moffet (as note 13), 19-41; Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Princeton, 1994, 235-242 and Gabriel P. Weisberg, Lost and found: S. Bing's merchandising of Japonisme and Art Nouveau, available from [http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer\\_05/articles/weis.html](http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer_05/articles/weis.html).

In the introduction of his extremely influential *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst* -that appeared in the same year 1904 and was translated into English in 1908 as *Modern art; being a contribution to a new system of aesthetics* - he still defended the decorative movement as a return to the artistic unity of earlier times when, for example, the mosaics of Ravenna and Venice were in harmony with the buildings they covered. Decoration and architecture did not stand apart as would be the case after the rise of easel painting during the Renaissance. The structure of his book, ending with a chapter called 'the struggle for style', also betrayed his wish to defend Art Nouveau. Nevertheless, in this chapter he showed his growing disappointment with this style. He now saw Art Nouveau as a somewhat superficial movement confusing art with ornament. Instead of raising the general artistic level of craftsmanship and integrating all branches of art it produced highly individual luxury objects.<sup>16</sup> Ten years later, in the second edition of his book, he added that it had been an illusion to hope for a return to the artistic unity of earlier times. From the Renaissance onwards, the historical evolution led to increasing individualization, with its subsequent stylistic fragmentation. This trend, already four centuries old, could not be undone at once.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of his book lay in his critical description of nineteenth century art distinguishing clearly between those who mattered and those who did not. Compared with Richard Muther's *Geschichte der Malerei im 19. Jahrhundert* (1893-1894; The history of modern painting) Meier-Graefe substituted description for hierarchy. The central part of his study was dedicated to French art of the nineteenth century, whereas the then still very controversial impressionists were presented as the greatest painters of their century. The four pillars of modern painting consequently were Manet, Cézanne, Degas and Renoir. German painting only occupied a secondary place and in the pages dedicated to German artists he showed the same exclusive focus on the elite.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Julius Meier-Graefe, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst. Vergleichende Betrachtung der bildenden Künste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik*, Stuttgart, 1904, 32-45 and 677-684.

17. Meier-Graefe, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 1966, I, 70.

18. Moffet (as note 13), 41-52, Jensen (as note 15), 242-256 and Ron Manheim, Julius Meier-Graefe, 1867-1935, in: Heinrich Dilly, ed., *Altmeister moderner*

After returning to Berlin, Meier-Graefe continued on this path, trying to purge art of non-artistic goals, like instilling patriotic feelings, telling edifying stories, et cetera. Painters should convince with paint, not with political, literary or theatrical means. Thus, in 1905, he published *Der Fall Böcklin* (The case of Böcklin), paralleling Nietzsche's attack on Wagner, in which he criticized Germany's most popular artist as a bombastic and literary artist, and thus, a bad painter. His booklet was attacked from many sides. Nevertheless, it dealt a lasting blow to Böcklin's reputation. Meier-Graefe also tried to stimulate German art by giving positive examples. As a result, he wrote a short study on the young Menzel and published an extensive catalogue of Hans von Marées. Finally he played a very important role as one of the organizers of the *Jahrhundertausstellung*, the exhibition of nineteenth century German art which was held in Berlin in 1906. One of the discoveries of this major overview would be Caspar David Friedrich.<sup>19</sup>

Meier-Graefe thus tried to rewrite both the canon of nineteenth century international and German art. He would prove to be highly successful. Although not all of his often-provocative points of view became generally accepted, his general interpretation did. Academic painting and internationally recognized Salon artists, who hitherto had dominated the artistic scene all over Europe, slowly slid into oblivion. Although Meier-Graefe was not the only critic that reoriented international artistic standards, he surely was one of the most important ones. His reputation as a defender of modern art even earned him a place at the notorious Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich in 1937, where his portrait hung in the entrance hall.<sup>20</sup>

In his *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, he also established a genealogy of major artists who had contributed to the flowering of painterly values in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the first half of that century especially Delacroix, Daumier, Courbet and Millet had been important, whereas Titian, Rubens,

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*Kunstgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, 95-117.

19.Moffet (as note 13), 52-87; Jensen (as note 15), 257-263; and Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession. Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge, 1980, 170-182.

20.Jensen (as note 15), 235-263.

Rembrandt and Velázquez and some eighteenth century painters like Watteau and Goya were presented as direct forerunners of the impressionists. He also revised the artistic canon of previous ages, treating for example Michelangelo and Titian more extensively than Raphael, and preferring Velázquez and Goya to the until then more valued Murillo.<sup>21</sup> At this point in his career - after having revised the accepted view on international and German modern art - he decided to make a trip to Spain to see the masterpieces of Velázquez and one of the few major museums he had not visited, the Prado in Madrid. However, instead of enjoying Velázquez, Meier-Graefe discovered El Greco.

### **The Spanish Journey**

Meier-Graefe had seen some Greco's before visiting Spain. He could have seen a small Greco in a room with precursors at a great exhibition on the Development of Impressionism in Painting and Sculpture at the Vienna Secession, for which he had been consulted.<sup>22</sup> Meier-Graefe also saw one or two major Greco's at the gallery of Durand-Ruel, the dealer of the impressionists who was one of the first to show a commercial interest in the Spanish painter.<sup>23</sup> In 1907 he even dedicated a few pages on El Greco in his *Impressionisten. Guys, Manet, Van Gogh, Pissarro, Cézanne*, in which he compared Cézanne's painting technique with El Greco's. In this study he presented Cézanne as the purest painter of his generation, who only with contrasts in colour and tone gave shape to his inner visions. El Greco, of whom Meier-Graefe only discussed a limited number of works, was a lone genius who had depicted his subjective visions in a similar way. He was a kind of isolated precursor of Cézanne, like Velázquez was of Manet.<sup>24</sup> It therefore seems clear that

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21.Meier-Graefe (as note 16), 49-105. For Murillo see: María de los Santos García Felguera, *La fortuna de Murillo*, Sevilla, 1989.

22.The painting, a *Saint Francis*, was lent by Ignacio Zuloaga, and hung between works of Vermeer, Velázquez, Turner and Goya, among others. Wolfgang Hilger, ed., *Die Wiener Secession. Die Vereinigung bildender Künstler, 1897-1985*, Vienna, 1986.

23.Julius Meier-Graefe, *Spanische Reise*, 2nd ed. Berlin, 1923, 143-144 and 361.

24.Julius Meier-Graefe, *Impressionisten. Guys, Manet, Van Gogh, Pissarro*,

Meier-Graefe had developed a more than ordinary interest in the work of El Greco. Nevertheless it is not very probable that at this stage he already preferred the relatively unknown El Greco to broadly praised Velázquez.

During the spring and summer of 1908 Meier-Graefe made his visit to Spain. He mainly stayed in Madrid, making side-trips to Toledo, Andalusia, Tanager, Lisbon, Valencia, Barcelona and some other small Spanish towns. He travelled together with his wife and the painters Leo von König and Rudolf Tewes.<sup>25</sup> In Spain he was accompanied on some of his excursions by Cossío, Beruete and the marquis of Vega Inclán. The marquis at that time was reconstructing the house of El Greco in Toledo, which in 1910 was inaugurated as a small museum. Meier-Graefe also met the young philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who had studied at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin. During 1909 most of his travel impressions appeared in the *Neue Rundschau*, whereas the next year they were published under the title *Spanische Reise* by S. Fischer-Verlag, who also had paid for the trip.<sup>26</sup> The book was written in the form of a diary in which the almost daily entries alternated with travel letters which dealt mostly with artistic issues. As it was not published during his trip, it is difficult to know whether his notes were rewritten afterwards.<sup>27</sup>

Immediately after arriving in Madrid, Meier-Graefe and his friends went to the Prado. It proved to be a disappointment. He thought Velázquez to be one of the best painters in all of art history, but he discovered that his work consisted only of 'the painted imitation of reality' (*abgemalte Wirklichkeit*).<sup>28</sup> Velázquez was a

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*Cézanne*, München 1907, 189-196.

25. Julius Meier-Graefe, *Kunst ist nicht für Kunstgeschichte da. Briefe und Dokumente*, ed. by Catherine Krahmer, Göttingen, 2001, 372 and 431.

26. Meier-Graefe (as note 25), 418. Ortega, called systematically Gasset by Meier-Graefe, published two articles on his German interlocutor: José Ortega y Gasset, Meier-Graefe, 19-7-1908, and *Viaje de España*, June 1910, in Idem, *Obras completas*, Madrid, 1983, I, 96-99 and 527-532.

27. Nevertheless, his observations coincide with the remarks he made in letters which he wrote to friends at home. See particularly the letters to Mary Balling from May 1908 in Meier-Graefe (as note 25), 205-210.

28. Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 31. The translation is from the English edition: *The*

rude 'naturalist', an artisan who only produced scenes not paintings.<sup>29</sup> More than a month later, he explained in a letter that he had hoped to find an artist with a close relation to nature like Manet and Courbet, a perfectly balanced creator, not immoderate like Michelangelo nor superabundant like Rubens, but an 'impersonal genius'.<sup>30</sup> He now realized that this was impossible. A great personality who would only express himself in conventional acts did not exist. Instead of a forerunner of Manet and the impressionists, Velázquez was, according to Meier-Graefe, a grossly overvalued precursor of equally overvalued painters like 'Whistler and company'. With this taunt he surely referred to moderately innovative painters who felt inspired by Velázquez' highly atmospheric work like Whistler, Carolus-Duran, Bonnard, Sorolla and Stevenson. Beruete also belonged to this group, and the German critic consequently preferred his collection with some beautiful Greco's to his paintings.<sup>31</sup>

As he disqualified Velázquez by associating him with Whistler, he praised El Greco by naming him as a precursor of Renoir and Cézanne. After visiting Toledo he wrote that to the three well-known peaks - Michelangelo, Rubens and Rembrandt - had to be added a fourth: El Greco. Later, in front of Saint Maurice in El Escorial, he even admitted that El Greco stood above Rembrandt. Like other great painters, according to Meier-Graefe, El Greco did not copy reality but created a new subjective world. Paraphrasing Kant, Meier-Graefe maintained that an artist should not create 'das Ding an sich', but a new subjective reality, distil the essence of things, and give form to it in paint and canvas.<sup>32</sup> Whereas Velázquez was a copyist, El Greco was a creator. To the German critic Velázquez was not the one who surpassed El Greco, but on the contrary, a faint reflection of this largely unknown master.

Meier-Graefe praised El Greco as a brilliant initiator of the painterly

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*Spanish Journey*, Londen, 1926 p. 48.

29.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 78-79, 106, 146 and 245.

30.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 142-143.

31.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 25-26 and 37.

32.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 55, 79 and 135-136.

tradition he so appreciated in the impressionists. To him, Michelangelo was a sculptor who also painted. Tintoretto tried to combine Venice and Rome, colour and line. Nonetheless, compared to El Greco and Rembrandt Tintoretto was merely a drawer who also happened to be a splendid colourist. Only El Greco, like Rubens and Rembrandt after him, succeeded in merging *modelé*, contours, colour and light. The same brushstroke contributed to the composition and the creation of colour. He created a new world exclusively with paint. And, according to Meier-Graefe this tradition would be taken up again in the nineteenth century by Manet, Renoir and Cézanne.<sup>33</sup> El Greco anticipated modern inventions like 'coloured shadows, the dissolution of contours, the combination of cadences and contrasts'. Thus, for Meier-Graefe, El Greco was like Dante and Shakespeare the inventor of a new language.<sup>34</sup>

The German critic discovered El Greco in the Prado Museum. The huge altarpieces of the mature Greco - like the *Resurrection* (fig. 5) and the *Crucifixion* (fig. 6) - particularly fascinated him. He praised these works as very innovative painterly masterpieces. He finally became completely ecstatic before the *Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* in El Escorial. Significantly, the paintings Meier-Graefe preferred had been condemned or were considered minor works by nearly all his predecessors. Twenty-seven years before, for example, Federico Madrazo, director of the Prado at that time, complained to Justi, referring to the altarpieces, that he could not remove these 'meaningless caricatures'. Something he nevertheless did in the next few years sending some of El Greco's altarpieces to small provincial museums.<sup>35</sup> Justi himself saw these same paintings as the result of artistic degeneration and even Cossío was very critical, presenting them as interesting but not wholly convincing experiments.

Nonetheless, Meier-Graefe not only preferred other parts of El Greco's oeuvre, he also disagreed with his predecessors on other issues. Although Meier-Graefe is seen as one of the inventors of a formalistic approach to art, excluding

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33.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 256-257 and 295-96.

34.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 72-73 and 362, translation: *Spanish Journey*, p. 106.

35.Justi (as note 7), 203; Álvarez Lopera (as note 1) 133.

non-artistic arguments from criticism, he openly expressed his views on scientific, social and political issues. They even strongly affected the way he presented El Greco. In his book he particularly attacked the realistic interpretation of many positivist critics. He openly attacked Justi and other presumably scientific art historians. Whereas Justi pretended to be objective and methodical, his judgement, particularly his negative valuation of El Greco, was but a question of taste and of intuition.<sup>36</sup> Most university professors tried to force art into a system, converting art history into a kind of lifeless bookkeeping. The same terminology was used for all artists, thus effacing essential differences. This way they denied every relation between art and life. For Meier-Graefe, who was strongly influenced by a Nietzschean vitalism, art had to do with subjective values. An artist, according to Meier-Graefe, was a strong personality who created values to get to grips with a chaotic world. An artist should not be a balanced copier of reality, as Justi had asserted, but a real man, vibrating with life who translated his inner visions into painting.<sup>37</sup> And this was what he appreciated in El Greco.

Contrary to many of his contemporaries, Meier-Graefe did not focus on El Greco's nationality. Although in many aspects his views coincided with the vitalistic and spiritual interpretation of some young Spanish writers and painters, he did not agree that El Greco was a perfect interpreter of the Spanish soul. He admitted that El Greco was an exponent of his time, using baroque forms and depicting the Toledan society of which he was a member. Nonetheless, his strength lay in surpassing his time and local circumstances and in using contemporary forms to express his own personal viewpoint. He even provocatively stressed El Greco's Greek origins, associating him with classical art.<sup>38</sup> His main message was that El Greco was a highlight of human culture with a timeless value. Instead of depicting personal or local characteristics, the cosmopolitan El Greco portrayed humanity.<sup>39</sup>

In this way Meier-Graefe reacted against the highly nationalistic rhetoric

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36.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 64-65.

37.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 133-136 and 149-152.

38.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 152-154, 296-297 and 78.

39.Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 74 and 260-261.



that was strongly present in the German artistic debates of his own time. Impressionism was opposed as a foreign movement, and was not therefore in harmony with the German national character. Meier-Graefe's activities to promote modern French art were seen by some as treason. Nevertheless, one can discern a clear nationalist character to his activities. Instead of treating art without regard to its nationality, his main objective was to redirect artistic taste in his Fatherland. The propagation of contemporary French painting was meant to modernize German artistic life. His *Spanische Reise* had the same function; as in its pages he presented El Greco as one of the most important precursors of artistic modernity. El Greco's open-mindedness, his ecumenical absorption of influences from his own time, and his appropriation of tradition could function to regenerate German culture. Thus, according to Meier-Graefe, artistic innovation could come from great individuals from any country and any time.

### **The aftermath**

With his book, in which the discussion of El Greco composed over half of its length, Meier-Graefe initiated a real El Greco-revival. Already before his journey the interest for the painter had significantly increased. By 1902 the first modest exposition of his work was shown in the Prado Museum. In 1908, Cossío's monograph appeared and a short retrospective was organized at the avant-garde Salon d'Automne in Paris. Meier-Graefe, who had stopped in Paris on his way home, discussed this exhibit in negative terms as consisting mainly of minor works or even copies. And he would not be the only one to complain.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the exhibition did not have the effect it could have had. In 1909 another exposition of El Greco's works was organized at the Royal Academy of Art in Madrid, where the restored paintings that would form the collection of the future Casa del Greco in Toledo were shown. However, only after 1910 did an avalanche of publications

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40. Meier-Graefe (as note 23), 360-361. See also: Charles Morice, Art Moderne. La sixième exposition du Salon d'Automne, in: *Mercur de France* LXXVI, 273, 1-11-1908 155-166; and Raymond Boyer, Expositions et concours. L'art finlandais et les rétrospective au Salon d'Automne, in: *Bulletin de l'Art Ancien et Moderne*, 397, 17-10-1908, 261-262.

appear. Apart from the book of Barrès, a study of El Greco by the director of the museum of Pau, Paul Lafond, was published in France. In Germany two art historians, August Mayer and Hugo Kehrer, wrote biographies of the artist. Also, dozens of articles appeared, some by prominent authors like Tschudi and Dvorak. Meier-Graefe also contributed to it, by referring to El Greco in many of his own writings. He even started to translate Cossío's monumental study into German.<sup>41</sup>

Maybe more important than the written evidence, was the inclusion of El Greco's paintings at some major exhibitions. Thus in 1911 and 1912 the Hungarian amateur Marczell von Nemes showed his collection - after it could be seen in Budapest - in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and the Städtische Kunsthalle of Düsseldorf. In 1913 it was also widely visited in Paris where it was shown before being sold by auction at the Galerie Manzi. The collection contained European paintings from the fifteenth century onwards, specializing in Dutch and Flemish art of the seventeenth century, the Impressionists and Spanish art. Particularly the dozen major paintings of El Greco caused a sensation. Hugo von Tschudi, the controversial director of the Munich museum, also received on loan the *Laocoön* (fig. 7), one of El Greco's last works.<sup>42</sup> In 1912 at the epoch-making Sonderbund Exhibition in Cologne, El Greco would be the only old master. His *Saint John* hung in one of the rooms that were exclusively dedicated to Van Gogh while another Greco was surrounded by Picasso's. This way the connection between El Greco and modern art became firmly established.

Some extremely influential painters further strengthened this bond.

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41. Paul Lafond, *Domenikos Theotocopuli, dit Le Greco*, in: Maurice Barrès & Paul Lafond, *Le Greco*, Paris, 1911, 107-189; August L. Mayer, *El Greco. Eine Einführung in das Leben und Wirken des Domenico Theotocopuli genannt El Greco*, Munich, 1911; Hugo Kehrer, *Die Kunst des Greco*, Munich, 1914; Hugo von Tschudi, ed., *Katalog der aus der Sammlung des Kgl. Rates Marczell von Nemes - Budapest ausgestellten Gemälde*, Munich, 1911; Max Dvorák, *Über Greco und den Manierismus*, 1920 in: Idem, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte. Studien zur abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, Munich, 1929, 259-276. See for the translation which finally - because of the War - was not published: Meier-Graefe (as note 25), 366-367.

42. Barbara Paul, *Hugo von Tschudi und die moderne französische Kunst im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, Mainz, 1993; and Veronika Schroeder, *El Greco im frühen deutschen Expressionismus. Von der Kunstgeschichte als Stilgeschichte zur Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 96-106.

Picasso was already well familiar with El Greco's work. Picasso had grown up in Barcelona where he was in close contact with Rusiñol and his friends. These had conveyed their enthusiasm for El Greco to him. In many of his early drawings and paintings traces of El Greco were to be found. In Paris he got acquainted with Zuloaga in whose studio he saw El Greco's *Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse* (fig. 8) - a very late, and probably unfinished, painting - which would influence his own epoch-making *Les Femmes d'Alger*. But whereas Picasso received his information through Spanish channels, Kandinsky and Marc acquired theirs from Meier-Graefe. They even named Meier-Graefe - together with Tschudi - in the *Almanac* of *Der blaue Reiter* in which El Greco figured as one of the few old masters. Like Picasso, they clearly preferred the paintings El Greco did during the last years of his life.<sup>43</sup> Taking El Greco as a source of inspiration for their own visionary art, they broke with the traditional view of painting as a representation of an outer reality.

This precisely was a step Meier-Graefe refused to make. According to him a painting should not copy reality but create a new subjective reality consisting of paint and canvas. However, he did not want to give up all bonds with the outer-world. Art would otherwise become arbitrary. His disappointment with contemporary avant-garde art also affected his interpretation of El Greco. Whereas in his Art Nouveau period Meier-Graefe had striven for a reunification of all arts, to raise the general aesthetic level of society, around 1904 he started to revalue high art, and especially easel painting, focusing solely on the artistic high points. Not those who stay at the surface, imitating others or making mere ornaments deserve our attention, but those who create a new reality, those who inspired by past traditions give a new form to what slumbers in our inner selves. El Greco was such a genius, which he discovered in 1908. At this point he still was quite optimistic about the possibilities of human evolution. Although art had lost its immediate social function after the Middle Ages, it, Meier-Graefe thought, still progressed.

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43. Robert S. Lubar, Narrating the nation: Picasso and the myth of El Greco, in: J. Brown, ed., *Picasso and the Spanish tradition*, New Haven, 1996, 27-61; M. Teresa Ocaña, Picasso i El Greco in José Milicua, ed., *El Greco. La seva revaloració pel Modernisme català*, Barcelona, 1996, 52-62; and Wassily Kandinsky & Franz Marc, *Der blaue Reiter*, 2nd ed. Munich, 1965.

Great painters had learned the artistic language of their time, and, at the same time, conveyed their own personal message. A painting was a new reality, with its own life, a newly organized being. Although there was no common enterprise anymore, the painterly tradition could be carried on and possibly even improved by learning from each other's achievements. Because of his open, internationalistic and innovating attitude, a painter like El Greco could also be a model for society as a whole.

In November 1911, Meier-Graefe published an article on the baroque of El Greco. Inspired by the increasingly nationalistic intellectual climate in Germany on the one hand, and the appearance of Worringer's book *Formproblemen der Gotik* (Form in Gothic) on the other, he turned El Greco into a 'Nordic' painter. Meier-Graefe saw the tragic, transcendental and ascetic paintings of El Greco as typically 'gothic' and 'Nordic'. He converted El Greco into a spiritual painter who could function as a natural source of inspiration for German artists. This way - like Zuloaga, Azorín, Unamuno and Barrès did for Spain - he defined the northern, German spirit as immaterialist and transcendental.<sup>44</sup>

Although both Worringer's book as Meier-Graefe's interpretation of El Greco as a Nordic transcendental painter were taken up by Marc and Kandinsky, nationalism would not constitute a lasting solution to Meier-Graefe's quest for beauty and meaning. As a consequence of his dislike of recent artistic developments, he started to doubt the genius-driven artistic progress he had defended until then. This became clear in Meier-Graefe's response to Carl Vinnen's nationalistic *Protest deutscher Künstler*. In his 1912 work Vinnen protested the Bremen Museum's supposed discrimination against German art after the museum had bought a Van Gogh. Vinnen complained about the overvaluing of foreign art purchased at high prices by German collectors and museums at the expense of living German painters. Meier-Graefe, one of the main defenders of French art in Germany, was one of Vinnen's principle targets. Instead of reacting against this exaggerated nationalism, Meier-Graefe directed his complaints against the newest

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44. Julius Meier-Graefe, Das Barock Grecos, in: *Kunst und Künstler* IX, Nov. 1911, 78-97. The same article also appeared in French as: El Greco. Peintre baroque, in: *L'art décoratif*, 20-10-1912, 213-248.

developments in art.<sup>45</sup>

In a lecture called 'Wohin treiben wir?' (Whither Are We Drifting?) Meier-Graefe presented the great masters of the nineteenth century as tragic heroes. Alone, free and without a firm guidance in a world of unlimited possibilities, they had to struggle for beauty. Although these heroic artists felt free to break with contemporary schools or the art of the past, they first confronted artistic traditions, struggling to surpass them and find their own styles and sensibilities. According to Meier-Graefe, the artists of his own time, on the other hand, increasingly thought it unnecessary to respect tradition and they refused any firm hand to guide them. Art to them was not a tragic struggle for beauty and meaning, but a play for which no serious study was needed. Rules and traditions did not count anymore, Meier-Graefe lamented. Artists did not consider their life anymore as drama, striving for the impossible, but as a kind of sports. Labels for new artistic groups were invented before any work of art was produced and paintings were converted into slogans. In a neo-idealistic vein Meier-Graefe argued that the artist had a task in interpreting the world, and create a specific human cultural sphere. But instead of uplifting the world for humanity, the new artists, cutting the relation between their work and outer reality abandoned themselves to the world and, thus, stopped working for the progress of culture. The only solution he saw was educating a small minority that would know that great art both was a product of a flourishing culture, and should contribute to its advancement.<sup>46</sup>

Meier-Graefe now returned to his *Entwicklungsgeschichte der moderne Kunst*. He published a vastly revised second edition in 1914 that reflected his new ideas and his new fascination with El Greco. Throughout the book, Meier-Graefe stressed the value of tradition, the importance of a personal interpretation of reality and the tragic condition of great artists. This also applied to El Greco, who now occupied a place of honour in the early evolution of painterly values. Obviously Velázquez nearly disappeared. Meier-Graefe now presented El Greco as a lonely foreigner who felt his art was not understood by his contemporaries. This alienated

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45.Paret (as note 19), 182-199; Schroeder (as note 42), 78-85 and 93-96.

46.Julius Meier-Graefe, Wohin treiben wir? Eine Rede über die Kunst der Gegenwart, in: *Neue Rundschau*, XXIV, 1913, 479-501, 483 and 487, 496, 501.

position nonetheless made him a great creator. After absorbing the artistic traditions of Venice, Rome and Spain, he passionately painted his own inner visions, the 'reality of the spirit'. El Greco carried the painterly innovations of Venice to their final consequences. His from reality abstracted paintings were full of warmth, nature and life, unlike the bloodless and arbitrary art of the author's own time. El Greco's highly personal innovations slid into oblivion and were only taken up again by Manet with whom a last flowering of the arts had started. Meier-Graefe therefore concluded that with El Greco's death 'the hole in the hereafter was closed again'. He thus presented the Toledan painter as a mystical painter of inner realities who developed the nascent painterly tradition of the Venice in which he was educated to its final consequences anticipating in this way nineteenth century impressionism. At the same time, he was a lone hero, a clairvoyant who tried to express his own personal visions, but who was not understood by his contemporaries. He was even declared mad.<sup>47</sup>

Meier-Graefe speculated in the final pages of his book that this end probably was the fate of all serious artists in a time without common ideas and shared values. Their personal interpretation was not understood by a wider public. As a result, these artists were condemned to loneliness, struggling to convey meaning without being understood.<sup>48</sup> Meier-Graefe thought himself to be in a similar tragic position. However, this was not really the case, as his view on modern art became widely accepted, and as he succeeded in converting El Greco - in the wake of the impressionists - into a great artist.

## **Conclusion**

Which factors finally were decisive in the process of revaluation of El Greco? The answer can be short. By incorporating El Greco in the history of modern art, Meier-Graefe definitely included him in the artistic canon. Before his trip to Spain,

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47.Meier-Graefe (as note 17), 74-78.

48.Meier-Graefe (as note 17) 721-728. The third volume, in which these pages appeared, was only published in 1924. By this time, his pessimism was probably more intense but the overall view had not changed drastically.

El Greco was already rediscovered. Particularly in France and Spain some critics considered him a great artist and some painters and writers even valued him more highly than Velázquez. However, until the publishing of Meier-Graefe's *Spanish Journey*, this view would not be widely shared. The German critic promoted El Greco to the ranks of the greatest artists of all times. Professional art historians like Lafond, Mayer, Kehrer and Dvorak, and some major exhibitions like those of the collection Nemes and the Sonderbund Exhibition at Cologne consolidated El Greco's new status.

The rediscovery of El Greco therefore was not caused by the recovery of formerly unknown or lost pictures. Although most major paintings of El Greco were not very accessible, hanging mostly in churches and monasteries in and around Toledo, his growing fame was principally due to a change in taste and an increasingly nationalistic interpretation of history. Already during the second half of the nineteenth century he earned himself a reputation as a precursor of Velázquez and the newly defined Spanish School of the seventeenth century, who in his turn were seen as forbears of modern realism and naturalism. At the turn of the century, symbolists and vitalists like Zuloaga, Rusiñol, Baroja, Azorín and Barrès also appreciated his art as both an example of their own spiritual and neo-idealistic world view and as key to understand the Spanish soul. In some ways Meier-Graefe participated in this inward turn that should be understood as a reaction against positivism and naturalism, and some of his writings were also slightly contaminated with the nationalistic climate of the period. Nevertheless, his discovery of El Greco was mainly determined by his defence of modern French art as a flowering of painterly values.

The German critic was not the only one who made the link between El Greco and the impressionists. Even those like Justi who disliked the latest trends in art used the term 'impressionism' to characterize and dismiss El Greco's mature paintings. Consequently, painters and writers who looked for idealized beauty, classicism or for an edifying or patriotic message showed no interest in the Toledan painter. Nor did, surprisingly, catholic authors, even though El Greco clearly participated in the Counterreformation, painting almost exclusively religious subjects. On the contrary, nearly all who contributed to the rediscovery of El Greco

appreciated his work because of - to use a term of Meier-Graefe - its painterly qualities. While others also stressed El Greco's realism or spiritualism, Meier-Graefe exclusively focused his attention on this innovative use of paint. Contrary to other painters who were inspired by sculpture or drawing, El Greco created his images exclusively with paint. As a result, El Greco, according to Meier-Graefe, stood at the beginning of the painterly tradition that culminated in nineteenth century impressionism.

As Meier-Graefe was a widely read and well-informed critic, he would be very effective in his defence of the impressionists as the major artists of the nineteenth century. The same way he also succeeded in having El Greco accepted as one of the most important painters of the sixteenth century. From about 1912, he lost the close contact he had always had with the latest developments in art as he became increasingly sceptical about the avant-garde movements of his time. This also became clear in his interpretation of El Greco. He now stressed the importance of tradition and defined the task of art to be the interpretation of reality. Nevertheless, as emblematic avant-garde painters like Picasso, Kandinsky and Marc used the Toledan painter to transgress the boundaries of representational art, El Greco's newly gained fame would not be a transitory phenomenon.