

CLOSE TO HOME

El Greco's journey

Down the river, over the mountains and through the woods — the pioneer's journey from Portland to the Oregon Coast involved days of arduous travel. The trail unraveled in slow wet steps along a serpent's path through giant cedar and Douglas fir. Travel in the thick imposing woods stymied Lewis and Clark.

Today, the highway out of our own River City to the teeming metropolis of Portland can be driven in 90-minutes or so, and therein lays the potential for rich adventure. And so it happened this month. Our mission was to see El Greco, or more on task, to see his paintings at the Portland Art Museum's ongoing series "Masterworks | Portland."

Once inside the handsome museum with its cornucopia of art treasures, I queried a docent about the collection of El Grecos. "Upstairs and to the back of the medieval collection," was his answer. The response struck me as odd, for that space is defined as a rectangle hardly larger than a closet.

Up the stairs we rushed, full of expectation. At the end of the gallery of 15th- and 16th-century European paintings, another masterwork awaited. Here was the prize, an authentic late 16th-century El Greco. Immediately, I was disappointed. That single article translates joyously into just one El Greco — a stunning portrait, yes — but a single painting on its own. All alone! And that is the dilemma of a small museum. That is why we must continue our support.

For sure, the Portland Art Museum is not the great Prado of Spain, the renowned museum that houses the world's largest collection of the same Greek painter, Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco, who spent his best years painting in Spain.

Art historians define El Greco as a Mannerist. By that they mean, this painter and a few others, began to distort the human form to achieve greater expression. It was perhaps a natural response



The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Friends of the Cleveland Museum of Art in memory of J.H. Wade
El Greco [Domenikos Theotokopoulos] (Spanish, born Greece, 1541-1614), "The Holy Family with Saint Mary Magdalen," 1590-1595, oil on canvas.

to high Renaissance painters, Titian, Raphael and Michelangelo and their quest to achieve perfect proportion and per-

spective of the human form on canvas or board. The Mannerists then, extended six-foot perfections of human beings up-

ward to 10 feet. Human giants.

At least, these are elegant cartoons. At best, they are masterworks. In this painting, the virgin is stunning, floating in a lapis-blue turbulent sky in an existential time and space. Joseph is there, and Mary Magdalen, she, staring at the Christ child with a sorrowful gaze, as if alluding to Christ's ultimate suffering and death. Jesus himself squirms in an infant's body, but his telling eyes speak far beyond his early years. His small hand reaches forward, gently, elegantly. Already, he seems to foreshadow the gift of God.

The backdrop of the "Holy Family with Saint Mary Magdalen" is filled with ethereal light, a Holy light. Colors compete in a play of brilliant light and dark shadow, a technique foreshadowed by Leonardo and defined as *chiaroscuro*. That is Da Vinci, not the infamous Ninja Turtle. How challenging it must have been to follow that great Renaissance master.

The painting is universally called a masterpiece. Because of the artist's religiously induced vision and his mastery of the paint brush, El Greco will be forever associated with brilliance, if not genius. Abstraction of his subjects propel El Greco's paintings beyond time and place; propel them beyond a normal painter's reach into the rarified world of a few, like Van Gogh or Picasso. I choose to believe that El Greco is the first modernist.

This Spaniard, known as "the Greek," expands a painter's limits to the extreme. Remember, this is the end of the 16th century. Remember, the Inquisition and its consequences. El Greco took chances. He was not always safe.

This, then, begs a greater question: Would you travel 100 miles to see a single masterwork? Might you forfeit a Sunday sports game to see a painting of such stature? I humbly suggest this could be a good idea. The exhibit is on loan from the Cleveland Museum of Art until April. Opportunity missed is opportunity lost. Chances are, El Greco will not return.