

kunstmuseum basel

# Picasso El Greco

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**Picasso**  
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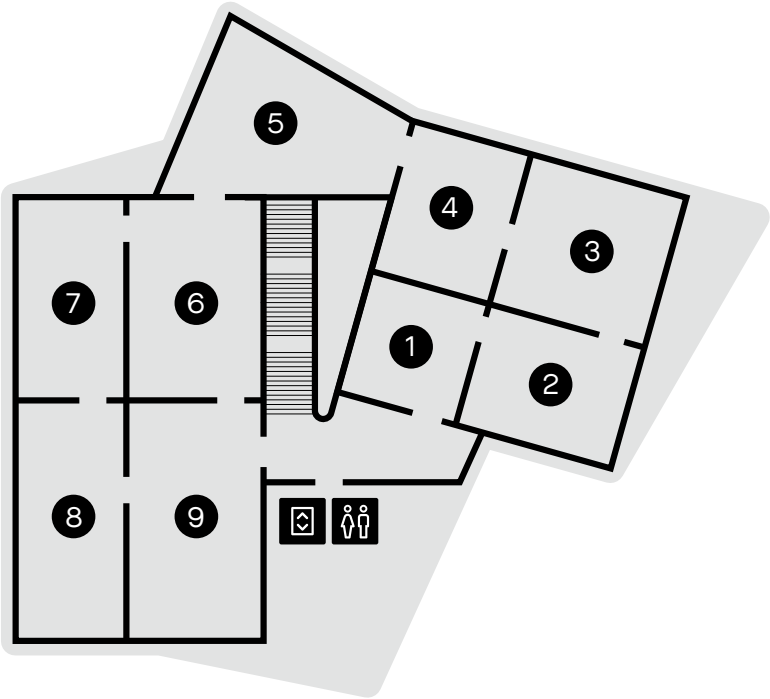
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***“In essence, what is  
a painter? A collector  
who wants to make  
a collection by doing  
paintings that  
he likes by others.”***

Pablo Picasso, 1934  
(As quoted by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler,  
“Huit Entretiens avec Picasso”,  
*Le Point. Revue artistique et littéraire*, 42,  
(October 1952), pp. 22–30.

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# 1 Elective Affinities: Picasso and El Greco

Pablo Picasso's (1881–1973) enthusiasm for El Greco (1541–1614) began at an early age. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Old Master from Crete was still a controversial artist in Spain—and elsewhere. Picasso visited the Museo del Prado whenever he was in Madrid. El Greco was among the painters he copied in his sketches. One drawing is even signed “Yo El Greco” (“I, El Greco”).

Picasso was particularly intrigued by El Greco's portraits. “What I really like in his work are the portraits, all those gentlemen with pointed beards,” he is reported to have said in the mid-1950s.

Picasso's dialogue with El Greco at the beginning of his career and in the subsequent Blue and Rose Periods (1901–06) is widely acknowledged. This exhibition broadens the perspective: The engagement with El Greco was not only more intense but also considerably more prolonged than is commonly assumed. A rich array of formal affinities with the Greek-Spanish Old Master can be traced across all of Picasso's creative phases.

***“Because Picasso and I copied El Greco in the Prado, people were scandalised and called us Modernistes. We sent out our copies to our professor in Barcelona [Picasso's father]. All was well so long as we worked on Velázquez, Goya and the Venetians – but the day we decided to do a copy of El Greco and sent it to him, his reaction was: ‘You're taking the wrong path.’ That was in 1897, when El Greco was considered a menace.”***

Picasso's friend Francisco Bernareggi, called “Pancho”, on their visits to the Prado  
(As quoted in Anne Robbins, “Picasso 1895–1906: ‘Each influence transitory, taking flight as soon as caught’”, in: *Picasso Challenging the Past*, ed. Elisabeth Cowling and Louise Rice, exh. cat. National Gallery, London, (London, 2009, p. 29.)

## 2/3 Blue and Rose Periods: *The Burial of Casagemas* and Subsequent Works

In 1899, the 18-year-old Picasso met the painter Carles Casagemas in Barcelona. The close friends associated with the Catalan “modernistes” and shared a studio in Paris. Casagemas committed suicide in 1901. The process of coming to terms with his friend’s death marks the beginning of Picasso’s Blue Period. It culminated in the painting *Evocation (The Burial of Casagemas)*.

The sharp distinction between heavenly and earthly spheres and the expressive gestures of the mourners are clearly inspired by El Greco’s paintings. However, in Casagemas’ heaven the Christian idea of salvation is replaced by brothel scenes.

El Greco’s influence extends into the Rose Period—for example in Picasso’s *Madame Canals*, a portrait of the wife of his friend, the painter Ricardo Canals. Here, it is juxtaposed with *Lady in a Fur Wrap*, a painting that was attributed to El Greco until the mid-twentieth century.

***“I had already seen a few of his paintings, which impressed me very much. That was when I decided to take a trip to Toledo, and it left a profound impression on me. It’s probably owing to his influence that my human figures from the blue period became elongated.”***

Pablo Picasso, Friday, June 16, 1944  
(As recalled by Brassai, in: *Conversations with Picasso*,  
trans. Jane Mary Todd (Chicago and London, 1999),  
p. 199; originally published as *Conversations avec  
Picasso* (Paris, 1964)).

## 3/4 Toward Cubism

After settling in Paris in 1904, Picasso expanded his artistic vocabulary to include forms from ancient Iberian art (700–500 BCE) and African art from the former French colonies. This influence is clearly recognizable in the masklike features of the prostitutes in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1907)*, his first large Cubist painting.

As a role model, El Greco was crucial for the emergence of Cubism. A comparison of El Greco's *Coronation of the Virgin* with Picasso's 1907 sketches for the *Femmes d'Alger* or his *Harvesters* from the same year also reveals some astonishing similarities.

The exalted gestures and the elongated proportions of the figures fall into this category. The same applies to the tendency to reduce the pictorial space and fracture the forms into separate planes of color.

***“Repeatedly I am asked to explain how my painting evolved. To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered art at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was.”***

Pablo Picasso, 1923

(From an interview with Marius de Zayas, as quoted in: Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), p. 264.)

## 6/8 El Greco and Cubism after 1910

Due to his astonishingly free and idiosyncratic style El Greco was perceived as a kindred spirit by a generation of artists looking for new forms of expression at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is very likely that the Toledan painter remained an important source of inspiration to Picasso around 1910 and in the decades that followed. Picasso's loose references to El Greco demonstrate a powerful urge to make sure that the Old Masters were not left to languish in the museums but were kept alive through ever more radical transformations.

The dialogue between El Greco's apostles and other religious images with Picasso's cubist works reveals this. There are not only similarities in pose but also some more fundamental visual parallels: the reduction of pictorial space, the monochrome backgrounds, and the fragmentation of forms into planes that push up against one another with hard, clear edges.

***“Furthermore, it is the realisation that counts. From this point of view, it is true that Cubism is Spanish in origin, and it was I who invented Cubism. We should look for Spanish influence in Cézanne... Observe El Greco's influence on him. A Venetian painter but he is a Cubist in construction.”***

Pablo Picasso. 1960

(As recalled by Romuald Dor de la Souchère, in: *Picasso in Antibes* (New York, 1960), p. 14.)



## 7/9 The Late Picasso: Wrestling with the Old Masters

Picasso perceived the Old Masters as contemporaries until the end of his life. In his own words, he even felt their presence as he worked. The historical costumes in many of his late paintings bear witness to this intense confrontation.

Many other icons of art history became important reference points for the later phases of Picasso's work. However, El Greco maintained his specific influence among Picasso's artistic role models. The inscription on the back of the 1967 painting *The Musketeer* "Domenico Theotocopulos van Rijn da Silva" is an explicit allusion to Picasso's three most revered masters, El Greco (D. Theotocopoulos), Rembrandt van Rijn, and Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez.

Whereas in his earlier years Picasso had used the Old Masters as a compass to help him find his bearing as an artist, his late works show the confidence of an artist who has himself become an "Old Master"—one who claimed his place in this line of a distinguished tradition with conviction.

***"I have a feeling that Delacroix, Giotto, Tintoretto, El Greco, and the rest, as well as all the modern painters, the good and the bad, the abstract and the non-abstract, are all standing behind me watching me at work."***

Pablo Picasso  
(As quoted by H el ene Parmelin, in: *Picasso Plain*  
(London, 1959), p. 77.)

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