

PAINTED GOLD.

El Greco and the Art between Crete and Venice

Venice, Doge's Palace - Doge's Apartments

30 April – 29 September 2025

Curated by Chiara Squarcina, Katerina Dellaporta, Andrea Bellieni



A new scientific study concerning the 'Venetian routes' of civilisation: the Veneto-Cretan school of painting, for more than four centuries half way between the Byzantine East and the Latin West.

A world of images and their original creators is ready to be discovered: among them Dominikos Theotokopoulos, who later became known as El Greco.

A golden thread links the historical and artistic events, the diplomatic balances and the devotion in the Mediterranean area along the route between Venice and Crete, or Candia as it was known from the thirteenth century, when it became the pearl of the Serenissima's *Stato da Mar*.

Painted gold, which makes icons shine with spiritual light, is the protagonist of the exhibition at the **Doge's Palace**, curated by the Scientific Director of the Fondazione Musei Civici **Chiara Squarcina**, the manager of the Museo Correr **Andrea Bellieni** and the General Director of the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens **Katerina Dellaporta**; it provides the backdrop to a long history of intense pictorial relations between the two islands.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Candia became the most important artistic centre for the ancient Byzantine tradition, which saw the involvement of over a hundred workshops of '*madoneri*', especially iconographers producing popular devotional images. At the same time, Venice – like a new Byzantium – welcomed a growing influx of artworks and artists from the Aegean islands. Iconographers, or painters of icons, travelled or immigrated between Crete, the Ionian Islands, and the Venetian capital. This led to a unique synthesis between the native Byzantine courtly tradition – already an essential element of Venetian artistic heritage – and the Western figurative language, which evolved from late Gothic to the Renaissance, becoming more human-centred, naturalistic, and dynamic.

A fortunate relationship developed and remained unbroken between the golden age of the Venetian Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the early nineteenth century, marked by moments of always original symbiosis. This exhibition offers a rare and valuable opportunity in Italy for the reinterpretation and in-depth study of an extremely important yet still under-explored cultural phenomenon.

The **seven sections of the exhibition chronologically illustrate this unique pictorial journey**: from its **origins in the fifteenth century**, with the first masters who progressively looked to the Gothic West – among them Angelos, Akotantos and Andreas Ritzos – and on to the **mature fifteenth century** and significant similarities

Palazzo Ducale
Museo Correr
Torre dell'Orologio
Ca' Rezzonico Museo del Settecento Veneziano
Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo
Casa di Carlo Goldoni
Ca' Pesaro Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna
Palazzo Fortuny
Museo di Storia Naturale
Museo del Vetro
Museo del Merletto

Fondazione
Musei Civici di Venezia
Piazza San Marco, 52
30124 Venezia
T +39 041 2405211
F +39 041 5200935
—
REA 348432
Registro Persone Giuridiche n. 401
CF / PI 03842230272
—
www.visitmuve.it
—

with the models of the great Venetian Renaissance – especially those of the Bellini and Vivarini – in painters such as Ioannis Permeniatīs.

The evolution continued in the **sixteenth century with successful hybridisations of the Byzantine tradition and Western influences**, for the most part mediated by printed images. This period saw the rise of prolific and renowned masters such as Georgios Klontzas and Michael Damaskinos, the latter notable for his extended period of activity in Venice between the 1570s and 1580s.

At the heart of this fascinating narrative of history and painting stands the most famous and extraordinary figure of the ‘school’: **Dominikos Theotokopoulos**, or **El Greco** (1541–1614). Born in Crete, he began his training within the post-Byzantine tradition before making his way to Venice around 1567 – an essential step for artists of the time. There, he encountered the remarkable works of the mature Titian, Bassano, and Tintoretto, a formative experience before his travels to Rome and later Spain, where he rose to prominence as the brilliant **El Greco**. Highlighting these pivotal moments, the exhibition features *The Flight into Egypt* (circa 1570), an exceptional loan from the Prado Museum in Madrid, juxtaposed with works from his mature and Spanish period, including *St. Peter* (1600–1607) from the National Gallery – Alexandros Soutsos Museum in Athens.



Inevitably, we must recall the **period of the Morean Wars**, during which the city of Candia – now Heraklion – was besieged by the Ottomans and fiercely defended by the Venetians. Despite their efforts, it fell in 1669 following a negotiated surrender by Captain General Francesco Morosini. As a result, iconographers and their workshops were forced to relocate to other Venetian-controlled islands, such as Corfu and Zakynthos. There, artists like Theodoros Poulakis, Elias Moskos, Lambardos, and Prete Victor resumed their work, sending their creations to Venice. Some, including **Emmanuel Tzanes**, chose to settle in the city itself.

True to the inclusive spirit of the Serenissima, a thriving Greek community took root in Venice – one that remains vibrant and fully integrated within the city’s economic and civic life to this day. It has preserved its distinct cultural and religious identity, centred around its *Scuola* and the adjacent Church of San Giorgio dei Greci. Through these enduring ties, this Hellenic heritage remains a **vital and recognisable part of Venice’s identity**. This profound connection is the focus of the **seventh and final section of the exhibition**.

The exhibition concludes with an in-depth exploration of the icon, examining its material, technical, and artistic aspects. This section offers visitors a valuable insight into the craftsmanship behind these works and has been developed in collaboration with the Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare – CHNet Cultural Heritage Network.

Painted Gold. El Greco and the Veneto-Cretan School of Painting underscores the commitment to international cooperation between the Fondazione MUVE, the Republic of Greece and other important museums and collections – including private ones – in Greece, Italy and Europe. The contribution of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Greece has been essential, together with institutes such as the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, a major lender of works, the National Gallery of Athens and the Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies in Venice.

A special contribution has come from the City of Heraklion and the Archdiocese of Crete.



Press information

Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia

Chiara Vedovetto

with Alessandra Abbate

press@fmcvenezia.it

www.visitmuve.it/it/ufficio-stampa

With the support of

Studio ESSECI, Sergio Campagnolo

roberta@studioesseci.net

simone@studioesseci.net