

# Mind Your Mannerists— Understanding the Art of El Greco

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## Overview

**Topic:** El Greco, Mannerist painting. This lesson will focus upon the painter El Greco, the Mannerist style in which he painted, and will discuss how to look critically at art. This lesson allows students to view the works of El Greco, to recognize elements of El Greco's work and of Mannerist painting. Students will learn four ways of looking critically at art and will apply this to works of El Greco.

## Time Allotment

Two 50-minute class periods

## Media Components:

*Art History II* #5, Spain: El Greco, Velazquez, Goya, Gaudi

VCR/TV with remote control

SmartBoard

Computer/TV cart for displaying art images and presenting PowerPoint program with information from the book, "Looking at Pictures"

Web Browser used for information collection and analysis:

- Artcyclopedia, The Fine Art Search Engine. This site includes links to El Greco works on the web; it can also be used for other artists  
[www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/greco\\_el.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/greco_el.html)
- Painting by Thomas Hart Benton, influenced by El Greco, at the National Gallery of Art  
[www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?55107+0+0](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?55107+0+0)

## Learning Objectives

The student will be able to:

- point out characteristics of Mannerist painting in works by El Greco

- relate the four ways of looking at art to a painting by El Greco
  - identify common elements of El Greco paintings
  - compare and contrast a work by Thomas Hart Benton and a work by El Greco
- (This lesson addresses Va. SOL Foreign Language MFLII.11, MFLIII.6; Visual Arts AI.13, AI.17, AI.19, AII.18, AIV.14)

## Materials

- *Looking at Pictures* by Susan Woodford (Publisher: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1983, ISBN 0-521-28647-6  
[www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0521286476/qid=1003086560/sr=1-2/ref=sr\\_1\\_14\\_2/103-9339713-8579050](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0521286476/qid=1003086560/sr=1-2/ref=sr_1_14_2/103-9339713-8579050))
- Images of paintings by El Greco
  - Vista de Toledo* (View of Toledo)  
[www.metmuseum.org/collections/view1zoom.asp?dep=11&full=0&mark=1&item=29%2E100%2E6](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/view1zoom.asp?dep=11&full=0&mark=1&item=29%2E100%2E6)
  - San Martín y el Pordiosero* (Saint Martin and the Beggar)  
[www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?1167+0+0](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?1167+0+0)
  - El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (The Burial of the Count of Orgaz)  
[www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/g/greco\\_el/158190/index.html](http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/g/greco_el/158190/index.html)



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- *Trail Riders* painting by Thomas Hart Benton, American painter influenced by El Greco  
[www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?55107+0+0](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?55107+0+0)  
Copies of masterpieces by famous painters for opening activity. Suggestions:  
Kahlo  
[www.albrightknox.org/ArtStart/Kahlo.htm](http://www.albrightknox.org/ArtStart/Kahlo.htm)  
Self-Portrait with Monkey 1938  
Cassatt  
[www.artic.edu/aic/artaccess/AA\\_Impressionist/pages/IMP\\_6\\_1g.shtml](http://www.artic.edu/aic/artaccess/AA_Impressionist/pages/IMP_6_1g.shtml), The Child's Bath, 1893  
Monet  
[nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?46240+0+0](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?46240+0+0)  
The Houses of Parliament, Sunset, 1903  
Manet  
[www.nga.gov/feature/manet/intro.htm](http://www.nga.gov/feature/manet/intro.htm)  
The Railway, 1872-1873  
Van Gogh  
[www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/oz947.html](http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/oz947.html) Irises, 1889  
Velázquez  
[museoprado.mcu.es/prado/html/i45a.html](http://museoprado.mcu.es/prado/html/i45a.html)  
Las Meninas (The Handmaids), 17th Century  
El Greco  
[museoprado.mcu.es/prado/html/i44a.html](http://museoprado.mcu.es/prado/html/i44a.html)  
The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest, 16th Century

### Teacher Preparations

- Bookmark websites of art images for students to find their own El Greco painting to examine. Suggestions:  
[www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/greco\\_el.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/greco_el.html)  
This artcyclopedia page has links to Online El Greco Galleries. Check the links to make certain they're current before assigning links to students.
- Cue videotape to beginning of *Art History II* #5
- Prepare brief PowerPoint presentation, or other comparable introduction, as described in the Introductory Activity.

### Introductory Activity

1. Tell students they have a summer job working at a local museum. Luckily, the museum is going to

host an exhibit of famous masterpieces, and the students are in charge of unpacking the masterpieces from the shipping crate, and putting them up for display. Unfortunately, the nameplates were attached to the masterpieces with cheap glue, and they've all fallen off in shipping. Have the students put the correct nameplate with the correct masterpiece. Using the smart board, students will put the paintings and names in the correct order.

2. When the students are finished, you can make any necessary corrections with the students.
3. Introduce students to the four ways to look at art taken from the book, *Looking at Pictures* by Susan Woodford. This could be a brief PowerPoint presentation, or you could use an overhead projector.
  - What is the purpose served by the art? Is it to tell a story and/or to convey a moral lesson? Is it simply to paint a picture of a famous person? Is it a study in technique?
  - What can the painting tell us about the culture in which it was produced?
  - How realistic is the picture? Is realism even what the artist is after? Does the artist want to draw attention to something else? Is his/her aim to convey feelings?
  - Think about the painting in terms of design—the forms and colors used to produce patterns within the picture.
4. Tell students that they'll apply these principles to some works by a famous artist after a video about his work

### Focus for Media Interaction

1. Tell the students that they will be viewing a video called *Art History II* #5 that focuses on the work of El Greco, a famous painter. Tell the students that by the time the segment is over, they should be able to tell you how El Greco was influenced by his travels and ongoing events in Spain of the 1500s.

**Pause vs. Stop**

When using a video interactively with students, teachers need to decide when to use **PAUSE** and when to use **STOP**. **PAUSE** the video when the anticipated discussion or activity will take less than two minutes. **STOP** for longer periods. Pausing for too long at one time can cause video heads on the VCR to become clogged which may require cleaning to correct.

**Learning Activities**

**1. FOCUS:** Tell students they will be seeing a famous painting by El Greco, the artist that they'll learn about today. Ask: What is the name of the deceased person shown in the painting by El Greco shown here? What are the artistic characteristics of the figures at the top of the painting? What are the artistic characteristics of the figures at the bottom of the painting? How do the two differ? What is the importance of the difference? **START** at the beginning of *Art History II* #5, Spain, El Greco, Velazquez, Goya, Gaudi. **PAUSE** at “. . . while others gesture.” **FOLLOW-UP:** (The Count of Orgaz) Inform the students that this painting is considered to be El Greco's masterpiece. It's located in the Church of Santo Tomé in Toledo, Spain. The figures at the top of the painting represent heavenly beings, the figures at the bottom are earthly.

**2. FOCUS:** Ask. Which famous artist did he study under in Venice? Also, what do the terms *contraposto* and *chiaroscuro* mean? Tell students to be ready to point to the parts of the painting that demonstrate both techniques. **RESUME. PAUSE** at “. . . dark to light, light to dark.” **FOLLOW-UP:** El Greco studied under Titian. *Contraposto* is the twisting of the torso, *chiaroscuro* is extremes of light and dark within the painting. Have one student define the terms another student points to the areas of the painting that illustrate that technique.

**3. FOCUS:** Ask. What important event was taking place in Spain when El Greco came to Toledo? How does this event correspond to current events? **RESUME. PAUSE** at “. . . is rooted in her mixture

of cultures and religions.” **FOLLOW-UP:** Ask students what they know about the Inquisition, talk about the reasons behind it, trying to unite Spain behind a common cause, etc. Current events could include a discussion of the September 11th tragedy, the resulting problems for Americans of Middle Eastern descent, the Taliban and their efforts to rid Afghanistan of Western influences.

**4. FOCUS:** Say to the students, “I will ask you to look for two things in the next section. What were El Greco's preferred subject matter and style? (You might want to ask the students if they can answer the first question based on what they've seen so far, and then tell them that we'll see if you're right.) **PLAY. PAUSE** at “. . . sophisticated, frustrated, neurotic.” **FOLLOW-UP:** Religious themes (saints, officials of the Roman Catholic Church), Mannerism

**Culminating Activities**

**1.** Tell students that you are going to look at some of the works discussed in the video together, Have students look again at *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, followed by *Saint Martin and the Beggar*, and *View of Toledo* on the Smartboard . Discuss each painting in terms of the four ways of looking at art:

- purpose of the work (Possible answer: to tell religious stories)
- culture in which it was created (Possible answer: dress of the soldiers is Spanish in pictures of earlier scenes)
- realism (Possible answer: Mannerism is not very realistic, it works to convey religious feeling)
- design (Possible answer: clouds outline significant figures in painting, bodies are at angles [*contraposto*], faces are ovals, limbs elongated to show spirituality of subjects, colors point eye to significant figures)

**2.** Have students identify the Mannerist elements of each of the paintings. (Possible answers including: Elongated limbs, religious elements, *contraposto*)

**3.** Examine a painting by the American painter Thomas Hart Benton. Ask students to compare and

contrast the Benton painting with the El Greco painting. (El Greco influenced Benton.) (Similarities of landscape, chiaroscuro, colors)

### Assessment

Students in pairs will choose a painting by El Greco that has not been looked at by the class as a group. (They can look at the bookmarked sites to choose a picture, and they can't duplicate the work of another group.) They must identify elements of the painting in terms of the Mannerist style and El Greco's style. Students must also discuss the painting in terms of the four ways of looking at art. Students will present their findings in a brief oral report to the class.

### Community Connections

Students could take a field trip to the National Gallery of Art to look at and further analyze the paintings by El Greco in the museum. How does the display and juxtaposition of El Greco's works with other artists influence the analysis of his art?

### Cross-Curricular Extensions

**History:** Students could research the Spanish Inquisition in order to further understand the period in which El Greco painted.

**Geography:** Students could view a map of Europe in the 1500s to chart the travels of El Greco, and to see the extensive holdings of Spain at that time.

**Art:** Students could look at the work of other Mannerist painters and could also fill in the outline of the painting, Nobleman with a Hand on his Chest, in the style of El Greco.

[www.cyberspain.com/colorme/iexplorer/pinta1.htm](http://www.cyberspain.com/colorme/iexplorer/pinta1.htm)

**Current Events:** Research Christian/Muslim/Jewish conflicts today and compare/contrast with the Crusades, Expulsion from Spain, and/or the Inquisition.

**Literature:** Read Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes to find out about the inquisition through literature.

### About the Author

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Julie Knudson now works as a Technology Integration Specialist at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. She taught Spanish at Rockbridge County High School in Lexington, and in Northern Virginia and Huntsville, Alabama for a total of 12 years. She holds a degree in English from the University of Utah and a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. She enjoys spending time with her daughter, Katie, reading and gardening.

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# LESSON SLIDE SHOW

## How to Look at Art

Taken from the book,  
“*Looking at Pictures*” by  
Susan Woodford

## History

- What can the painting tell us about the culture in which it was produced?

## Four Ways of Looking at Art

- Purpose
- History
- Realism/Emotionalism
- Design

## Realism/Emotionalism

- How realistic is the picture? Is realism even what the artist is after? Does the artist want to draw attention to something else? Is his/her aim to convey feelings?

## Purpose

- What is the purpose served by the art? Is it to tell a story and/or to convey a moral lesson? Is it to paint a picture of a famous person? Is the purpose to showcase

## Design

- Think about the painting in terms of design—the forms and the colors used to produce patterns within the picture.