

The Dr. John and Helen Collis Lecture 2023: Wandering off the Byzantine Path: El Greco's "Modernism"
Sunday, September 24, 2023, 2:00 p.m.
By Holly Witchey

This 2023 Collis Lecturer was Charles Barber, the Donald Drew Egbert Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, a specialist on Byzantine Art, whose research and publications range from late Antiquity to the early modern period. As usual, a full audience eagerly awaited the speaker and at just after 2:00 pm, Director William Griswold mounted the stairs to the podium in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA).

Dr. Griswold welcomed the audience and reminded them that the Dr. John and Helen Collis Lecture Series remains a model for Cleveland and museums across the country. Griswold expressed his gratitude to the late Dr. John Collis, his wife Helen Collis, a CMA trustee, and the entire Collis family, for their visionary support of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Griswold also thanked the Hellenic Preservation Society of Northeastern Ohio for their additional support of the lecture series.

He professed himself delighted to welcome Charlie Barber, the Donald Drew Egbert Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University, as the day's guest lecturer, and welcomed CMA's Gerhard Lutz, the Robert P. Bergman Curator of Medieval Art, to the podium to introduce the speaker.

Dr. Lutz said that it would take far too much time to review Barber's entire career so that he, Lutz, would share but a few of the broad brushstrokes. Barber received his PHD from The Courtauld Institute of Art in London in 1989, writing a thesis on the topic of the image of the Virgin in medieval art. Barber began his teaching career as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, before moving on to the University of Notre Dame in 1996 where he rose to the rank of full professor. In 2019 he was named the Donald Drew Egbert Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton.

Lutz cited Barber's scholarly *bona fides* including 10 journal essays, 40 chapters in books, 45 invited lectures, and that he served as a member of numerous of editorial boards. In terms of publications Barber has two major contributions to Byzantine art history: *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (2002) and *Contesting the Logic of Painting: Art and Understanding in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (2007). Dr. Barber also has two books to look forward to related to today's talk: *Eccentric Renaissance* (expected 2024) and *El Greco's Wisdom* (expected 2025).

A remarkably elegant, humble, and soft-spoken Dr. Barber took the stage thanking the Collis family for their support of the lecture series, and hoping to do justice to the spirit behind the series. He also thanked the many people at Cleveland who had helped to make his stay so rich and rewarding.

Barber began his remarks talking about El Greco's *The Holy Family with Mary Magdalene* in the permanent collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the artist's relationship to his Byzantine roots, and El Greco's own idea how his art was modern in the time it was painted. Barber explained that he hoped to offer a fresh perspective on El Greco's art and to remind ourselves that throughout his life El Greco always referred to himself as Doménikos Theotokópoulos (Greek: Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος) from Crete, and that he was known by contemporaries by some variant as Domenico Greco, the Greek Dominic.

We know that he received his early training on Crete in the tradition of Byzantine icon painting in the 1540s and we know he died in Spain in 1614. The words extravagant, eccentric, exceptional are some of the words that have been used to describe both the man and his work. He was, by all accounts elegant, learned, strange. He was an architect, sculptor, and painter—though best known for his paintings today

because his work was rediscovered in the early years of the 20th century, when the world embraced modernism, and found in El Greco's work, a kindred spirit. His works became immensely popular in America. Barber pointed this out to the audience, and then he immediately asked the audience to forget the future and ask ourselves, how did El Greco think about his compositions in his own time.

What made El Greco's strange compositions valued when El Greco painted them? Barber showed several El Greco paintings of close-knit Holy families with Mary at the center holding the Christ child, sometimes Joseph is present, sometimes there are other actors and suggested that one of the reasons El Greco's art was popular was his ability to weave the past, present, and future within these complex paintings (because the viewer knows what has gone before, and what will happen in the future).

Barbar then embarked on a tremendously interesting discussion about books from El Greco's private library including a 1568 edition of *Vasari's Lives of the Artists*, and 1556 edition of *Vitruvius' Ten Books on Architecture*, both now in the National Library in Madrid, and filled with El Greco's own notations in the margins that serve as clues to El Greco's own philosophy of art.

Barbar pointed out is El Greco's criticism of Vasari's favorable remarks about Giotto's choice of the Latin style of painting over Greek (Manera Greca/Greek Manner/Italo-Byzantine Style) as the source of contemporary style. El Greco writes in the margin of his copy of Vasari, *"If he [Vasari] knew how the Greek manner that he mentions really is, then he would judge it differently, for I am of the opinion that when one compares the two, the one which Giotto uses [the Latin manner] is simple in comparison to the inventive difficulties that one [the Greek manner] teaches."*

One of Barbar's theories is that El Greco's art appropriates or reinvents or reattributes Vasari's terms of ingenuity and elevation and applies them instead to the Greek Manner in which he [El Greco] paints. El Greco believes that Vasari is wrong to assign the best of then modern painting to the Latin manner, that the roots of all that is great in art comes from the Greek. It is at this point in Barbar's lecture where the audience needed to be reminded of the title, "Wandering off the Byzantine Path" because Barbar's subtle arguments for El Greco's "path" were beautifully crafted and it was a pleasure, albeit work, to keep up with Barbar's seemingly effortless leaps from topic to topic.

Barbar first reminded the audience that El Greco often signed his paintings, after leaving Venetian Crete, as Domenico Theotokopolus from Crete, to remind others of his Creta origins and possibly because of his rejection of Vasari's rejection of the Manera Greca.

Barbar then gave the audience a whirl-wind tour of the work of various art historians who have tried to find one-to-one comparisons with El Greco's later works and early Byzantine iconographic styles, or link his works spiritually with texts rooted in Byzantine Neoplatonism (he had one such book in his library), but in the final analysis, Barber said these visual comparisons are suggestive rather than necessary, because El Greco is a Greek Painter living in a century when Italian painting is at the top. He asks the question: Doesn't it make more sense to see El Greco as a Greek artist bringing Greek painting radically up-to-date?

Barbar suggested that one way to do this is to look more deeply into El Greco's written comments about art, the values he placed upon what the ancient Greeks did and said, the comparisons El Greco made about the discoveries of the ancient Greeks in terms of art and architecture, and the discoveries in

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painting and sculpture made during his own time. Barbar suggested that El Greco search for a pathway for his art that was Greek. El Greco, even though he was born in Venetian Crete, and wrote his later notes in Castilian, identified as a Greek and that "Greekness" was bound to his identity as an artist. Barbar also says that this Greek identity had its origin in the work of the ancients Apelles of Kos and his biographer Pliny the Elder and their foundational notions of a vocabulary for art, and color, and points of view—an art that is not predicated on Byzantine training, but begins in the eyes of the artist. The art El Greco made in his own time can therefore best be understood as the *Arte Moderna Greca*—forged in a Greek manner in word and deed.

SAVE THE DATE

Sunday, September 29, 2024

Gartner Auditorium

The Dr. John and Helen Collis Lecture

The Art of Antiquity: Objects and Their Biographies from the Athenian Agora

John K. Papadopoulos, Distinguished Professor of Classics at UCLA and Director of the Excavations of the Athenian Agora at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens