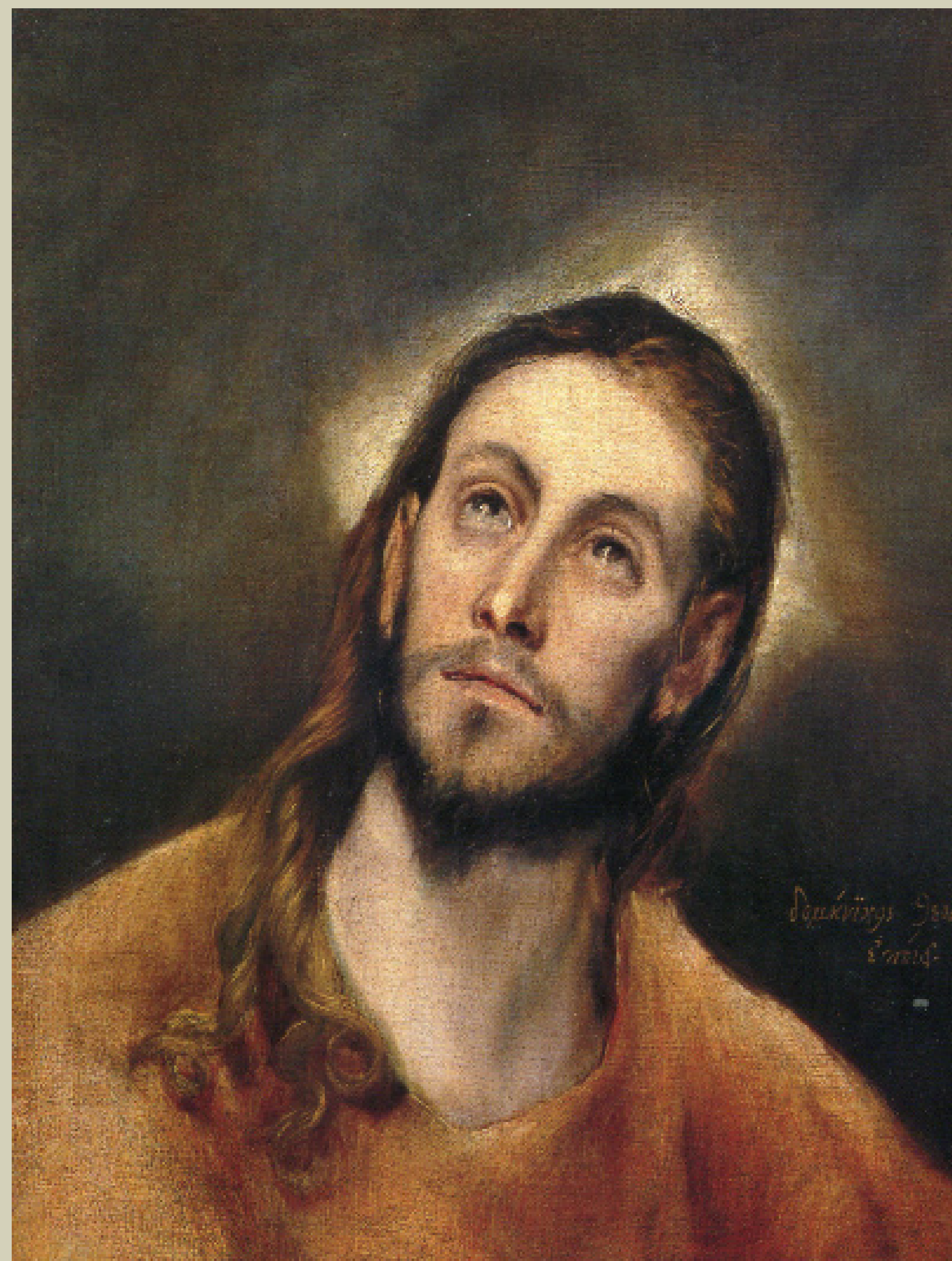


TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

In addition to the McNay's painting, two other versions of El Greco's *Head of Christ* exist at the National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic, and the San Telmo Museum in San Sebastián, Spain.

A work of notable quality, Prague's painting, *Christ in Prayer*, is similar but not identical to the McNay's *Head of Christ*.



The black background is rich and luminous.

Christ in Prayer is more uniform in style and the paint application more consistent than that in *Head of Christ*, further proof that the painting was solely the work of El Greco.

The colors of *Christ in Prayer* are much warmer than those used in the McNay's *Head of Christ*.

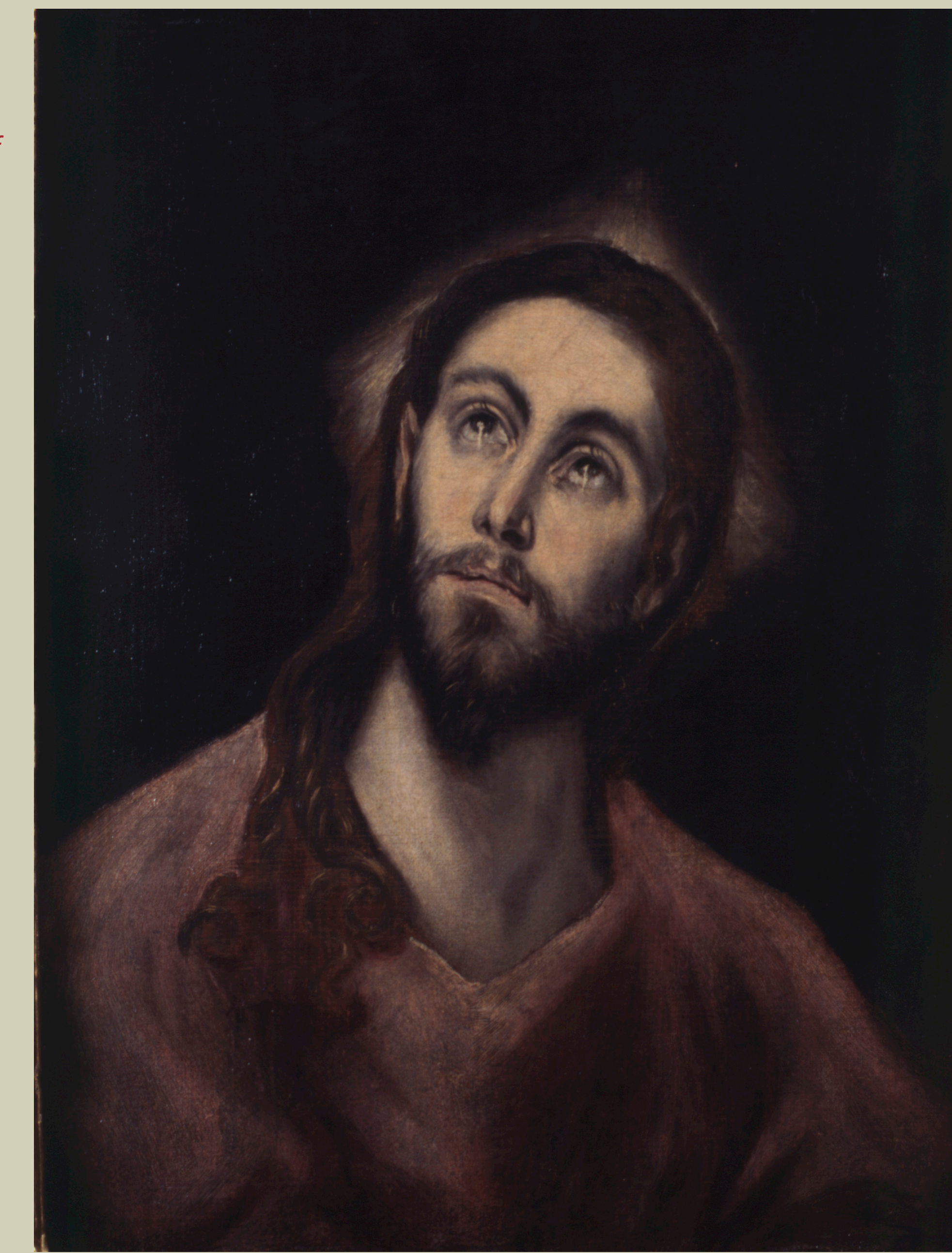
El Greco's signature, "Doménikos Theotokópoulos, Cretan," supports the status of Prague's painting as a finished work by the artist.

El Greco (Doménikos Theotokópoulos), *Christ in Prayer*, ca. 1595-97. Oil on canvas, National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic.

Despite these differences, Ruiz Gómez feels that the McNay's painting is a more emotive work, with great expressive quality.

El Salvador (The Savior) from San Telmo is similar to the Prague version, but is considered a work created solely by El Greco's workshop or by a follower of the artist.

Very little is known about the history of ownership, or provenance, of these three paintings. El Greco mentions a "head of Christ" in an inventory of his assets read before his death in 1614, which could refer either to the Prague work or the McNay's painting.



San Telmo's *Head of Christ* is considerably darker than either example from Prague or the McNay.

During his lifetime, El Greco would initial paintings done by his workshop that he was pleased with. *El Salvador* is uninitialed.

Workshop of El Greco, *El Salvador (The Savior)*, ca. 1592-96. Oil on canvas, San Telmo Museum, San Sebastián, Spain.

A *Head of Christ* first appeared on the art market in 1862 during the sale of the art collection of the Count of Quinto. Marion Koogler McNay purchased the McNay's El Greco from the Dalzell Hatfield Gallery in Los Angeles, in 1937.

CHRIST'S FACE IN *EL ESPOLIO*

Scholars have proposed several theories about why El Greco painted the McNay's *Head of Christ*. One expert suggests that the work was intended to hang with an image of *Our Lady of Sorrows (Mater Dolorosa)*, a common pairing in 16th-century Catholic Spain. Others think that an individual in Toledo, Spain, admired other El Greco works and commissioned the painting as a personal devotional piece. Still others hypothesize that the work is a simplified version of the central figure's face in El Greco's earlier masterpiece *The Disrobing of Christ*, which was commissioned in 1577 for the Toledo cathedral and completed in 1579.



El Greco (DoménikosTheotokópoulos), *El Espolio (The Disrobing of Christ)*, 1577–79. Oil on canvas, Toledo Cathedral, Spain.

An uncommon Christian scene, *The Disrobing of Christ* depicts Christ having his clothing removed before his crucifixion. While a disrobing at the crucifixion site is only described in the apocryphal writings of Nicodemus, all four Gospel writers (New Testament) —Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—include such a scene after Pilate's trial of Jesus:

Then the soldiers of the governor, taking Jesus into the hall, gathered together unto him the whole band. And stripping him, they put a scarlet cloak about him.

Matthew 27:27–29

Known in Spanish as *El Espolio*, the scene became an important part of medieval Passion imagery. Toledo cathedral commissioned the work for the sacristy, the room in which priests change their vestments to celebrate Mass. This setting was not only highly appropriate for such a scene, but also a prime location for El Greco's work.

In both the McNay's *Head of Christ* and Jesus's face in *The Disrobing of Christ*, the figure looks up to the viewer's left with immense, moist eyes. The McNay's painting echoes the delicate features of Christ's face, his powerful neck, and the dark red tunic in *The Disrobing of Christ*. In his early years in Toledo, El Greco developed an artistic vocabulary that he would further refine throughout his career. Although no concrete evidence exists linking the McNay's *Head of Christ* and Toledo cathedral's *The Disrobing of Christ*, the similarities are striking.



The McNay's *Head of Christ* before conservation.



The McNay's *Head of Christ* after conservation.