



# ARCHIVED PRESS RELEASE

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## THE FRICK COLLECTION

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1 EAST 70TH STREET • NEW YORK • NEW YORK 10021 • TELEPHONE (212) 288-0700 • FAX (212) 628-4417

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### FRICK PARTICIPATES IN EL GRECO YEAR WITH *MEN IN ARMOR: EL GRECO AND PULZONE FACE TO FACE*

August 5 through October 26, 2014



El Greco (1541–1614), *Vincenzo Anastagi*, c. 1575, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

El Greco's *Vincenzo Anastagi*, acquired a century ago by Henry Clay Frick, is one of The Frick Collection's most celebrated paintings and one of only two full-length portraits by the master. It was executed during the artist's six-year stay in Rome, before he moved to Spain, where he spent the rest of his career. Much of the force of this work emanates from the resplendent half-armor worn by Anastagi. Rich highlights applied with broad brushstrokes accentuate the steel, its metallic sheen contrasting with the velvety texture of Anastagi's green breeches and the dark crimson curtain. To mark the 400th anniversary of El Greco's death, the Frick will pair *Vincenzo Anastagi* with the rarely seen *Jacopo Boncompagni* by the artist's Roman contemporary Scipione Pulzone. With its gleaming, highly detailed polish, Pulzone's



Scipione Pulzone (c. 1540/42–98), *Jacopo Boncompagni*, 1574, oil on canvas, private collection; courtesy of Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd.; photo: Michael Bodycomb

portrait of Boncompagni, on loan from a private collection, epitomizes the elegant style that dominated high-society portraiture in Rome during the last quarter of the sixteenth century. El Greco's painterly portrayal of Anastagi stands in stark contrast, underscoring the artist's innovative departures from convention. The exhibition, held in the Frick's East Gallery, is organized by Jeongho Park, Anne L. Poulet Curatorial Fellow. It is generously funded by gifts from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Sidney R. Knafel and Londa Weisman in memory of Vera and Walter A. Eberstadt. **The Frick will continue its celebration of El Greco this autumn and winter with a collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum of Art that is discussed on page five.**

## **MASTER OF PORTRAITURE: EL GRECO IN ROME**

El Greco was born Domenikos Theotokopoulos in 1541 on the Greek island of Crete, which had been under Venetian rule since 1212. One of the few surviving records from his early years indicates that he was already an established painter of icons by 1566. He relocated to Venice in 1567, probably dissatisfied with his career as a Byzantine icon painter. There he absorbed Venetian Renaissance painting and began his transformation into an Italianate painter. As an aspiring artist, it was necessary for El Greco to master portrait painting. During the sixteenth century, portraiture grew in popularity in Europe, and portraitists enjoyed increasing recognition and esteem. A well-painted likeness was an effective way to win the favor of a prospective patron and become a court painter. Once associated with a court, an artist would enjoy not only economic stability but also the elevated status of a courtier.

In 1570 El Greco moved to Rome, where a recommendation written for him by the miniaturist Giulio Clovio led to his acceptance into the household of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. Clovio introduced El Greco as a pupil of Titian and wrote specifically of a marvelous “self-portrait that astonished the painters in Rome.” Unfortunately, this painting has not survived. Clovio’s claim about El Greco’s mastery of portraiture is confirmed by the artist’s portrait of him (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples), completed about 1571. In this work, El Greco demonstrates his remarkable ability to depict psychologically penetrating likenesses with exacting naturalism. Although not officially hired by the cardinal, El Greco spent the next year and a half focusing on portraits for the circle of learned men who gathered at the Farnese Palace. In 1572, for reasons that are unknown to us, El Greco was expelled from the Farnese household. His execution of the portrait of Vincenzo Anastagi was no doubt part of his effort to draw the attention of powerful men and to secure much-needed patronage after his expulsion.

## **A PROMISING SUBJECT FOR SELF-PROMOTION: VINCENZO ANASTAGI**

Anastagi was born into a noble family in Perugia around 1531 and became a Knight of Malta in 1563. He was most famous for his contribution to the victory against the Ottomans during the Siege of Malta in 1565. He was also known as an expert in fortifications, and his biography is included in a book published in 1578–79 about famous people from Perugia.

As a middle-ranking nobleman, Anastagi would not have been a promising patron. He was not particularly interested in paintings and was therefore unlikely to commission further works. He was, however, connected to a very eminent personage: Jacopo Boncompagni, the natural son of Pope Gregory XIII. Born in Bologna in 1548, Jacopo was legitimized almost immediately by his father. He moved to Rome in March 1572, when his father was elected pope, and in that year assumed the offices of governor of Rome’s Castel Sant’Angelo and head of the papal army. In 1575 Boncompagni named Anastagi sergeant major of the Castel Sant’Angelo; it was probably on this occasion that Anastagi commissioned his portrait. The close connection between the two men may well have motivated El Greco. It could be expected that the portrait would be shown to Boncompagni and possibly even to Pope Gregory XIII. Since

Boncompagni was known to be a great patron of the arts, El Greco's portrait of Anastagi was an ideal means of self-promotion.

For his portrayal of Anastagi, El Greco would have looked to examples of military portraits, the most recent, successful likeness of this type being Pulzone's portrait of Boncompagni. Pulzone was at this time the most sought-after portrait painter in Rome, having portrayed dignitaries of the highest rank, including Pope Pius V, Pope Gregory XIII, and Cardinal Alessandro Farnese. The artist also enjoyed personal relationships with powerful patrons; his first son, Giacomo, was Boncompagni's godchild.

### **CONSIDERING PULZONE'S *JACOPO BONCOMPAGNI***

El Greco undoubtedly would have been aware of Pulzone's splendid likeness. The three-quarter-length portrait communicates Boncompagni's high status with the detailed depiction of his opulent armor, meticulously groomed beard, and elegant hands. According to the inscription on the piece of paper in the sitter's right hand, the portrait was executed in 1574, only about one year before El Greco painted *Vincenzo Anastagi*. In his left hand, Boncompagni holds a wooden letter case, which suggests that the painting was probably commissioned when Jacopo was sent on a diplomatic mission to Ferrara to greet Henri de Valois, the future French king, Henry III.

In the portrait, Pulzone achieves lifelike qualities through painstakingly rendered details. Traces of brushwork are suppressed in order to gain a highly finished surface that adds to the portrait's sense of refinement. Boncompagni's dazzling armor displays techniques of embossing, damascening, bluing, and gilding. Pulzone's depiction of the breeches—woven with gold and silver threads—shows an equal degree of precision. The light bouncing off the breastplate lends tactile effect to the polished surface of the metal. Pulzone's masterful depiction of the play of light in the smallest details, such as on the fringe of the curtain, enhances the illusionistic effect.

### **THE PORTRAYAL IN ARMOR TO PROMOTE ONE'S IMAGE**

As a newcomer to Roman noble society, Boncompagni would have felt the need to actively propagate his image, and a portrayal in armor would serve this purpose. Armor had gradually become obsolete in the sixteenth century, after firearms replaced swords and lances as the principal weapons of warfare; paradoxically, the loss of its utilitarian function served only to enhance its prestige, and it was seen as a symbol of masculinity, military valor, wealth, social status, and antique lineage. Pulzone's portrayal of Boncompagni in such ostentatious armor reflects the sitter's important positions as governor of Castel Sant'Angelo and head of the papal army. The figure of Saint Michael on the breastplate refers not only to Castel Sant'Angelo but also to Boncompagni's role as the protector of the Church. Militant spirit is accentuated in the prominent display of the figure of Mars on the helmet and the armored glove placed on the table. Lining the golden bands that twine the breastplate and shoulder and arm defenses are various trophies that represent military feats. More specific than the spoils are the depictions of captive Turks along the center band of the breastplate and the base of the helmet, which commemorate the recent victory over the Ottomans at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In addition to the martial motifs, there are symbols of wealth and prosperity—such as cornucopias and grotesque figures carrying jars of fruit—meant to convey Boncompagni's eminent status.

When El Greco portrayed Anastagi, both the painter and the sitter would have been keenly aware of the prestige associated with armor, but the trappings El Greco could use in his depiction were limited by the sitter's rank of sergeant major. Unlike Boncompagni, who wears highly decorative parade armor, which was reserved for ceremonial occasions, Anastagi is portrayed in field armor, which was used in battle. Regardless of the degree of opulence, however, armor itself was perceived as a status symbol. In the sixteenth century, even merchants would have themselves portrayed in armor. In this sense, Anastagi's desire to be depicted in armor and with a rapier reflects not only his wish to make known his profession but also to aggrandize himself. El Greco's use of the full-length format further emphasizes the sitter's ambition. Anastagi was from a noble family, but his status did not approach that of the kings, generals, and grandees for whom full-length military portraits were customarily reserved.

## **EL GRECO FAVORS INNOVATION AND ARTISTRY OVER TRANSCRIPTION OF REALITY**

For El Greco, representing Anastagi in armor would have presented an excellent opportunity to display his artistry. Contrary to previous studies that assume this work is a literal depiction of reality, research undertaken in preparation for this exhibition indicates that the painter went beyond a faithful description of the symbolic objects. Most striking is El Greco's drastic abbreviation of the details of Anastagi's armor, prioritizing instead a blaze of light reflected on the metal surface. During the Renaissance, the painted representation of reflective armor was considered to be a powerful means of demonstrating a painter's virtuosity and was often offered as proof of painting's superiority over all other artistic genres. El Greco certainly would have been aware that the artistic skill necessary to imitate the glittering armor would draw much praise.

El Greco's innovations were not limited to the representation of armor. The painter appears to have taken careful measures to render the unusual form of the curtain, which emphasizes the most important elements in the portrait, the sitter's face and armor. As can be seen in the pentimento, El Greco moved the contour of the right edge of the drape upward in order to align it closer to the sitter's left forearm. Also, the X-radiograph taken during the painting's treatment in 1958–59 indicates that El Greco shortened the curtain to achieve a tighter focus on the sitter's upper body, which allows the viewer to appreciate the painter's ability to depict the different textures of various materials.

Showcasing his artistic invention, the painter achieves a sense of verisimilitude quite distinct from that of Pulzone's meticulously executed portrait. It is as though El Greco's intent was to emphasize Anastagi's military career and personal traits over his status. The sunburnt face and strands of gray hair, rendered with short, powerful brushstrokes, bear witness to his career on the battlefield—these are not the idealized features of an elegant courtier. White hose accentuate the athletic, muscular calves befitting an infantry officer. Anastagi's sense of self-possession is enhanced by the placement of his arms, which frame his torso. In the sixteenth century, this pose was associated with aggressive masculine virtues. The pentimento to the sitter's left reveals that El Greco made an inventive change in the depiction of the sword. By shifting its orientation without altering the position of the hand, the painter directs the viewer's attention to the gilded hilt and to the scabbard, so that the weapon seems almost an extension of the sergeant's powerful forearm.

El Greco's likely intention was to honor Anastagi while simultaneously displaying his own artistic invention. The painter has been described as a proud man who felt a keen sense of rivalry with other artists of his time. Although there is no evidence documenting El Greco's opinion of Pulzone, a compelling case can be made for the catalytic effect that the most successful portraitist in Rome had on the Cretan artist. A link emerges between the magnificent verisimilitude of Pulzone's *Jacopo Boncompagni* (as well as the acclaim it brought him) and El Greco's ambition to surpass Pulzone in terms of fame and artistry, which prompted the creation of the highly original *Vincenzo Anastagi*.

## PUBLICATION

*Men in Armor: El Greco and Pulzone Face to Face* is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue that features an essay by Jeongho Park, the exhibition's guest curator. The book (softcover, 64 pages, 35 illustrations; \$14.95, Member price: \$13.46) will be available in the Museum Shop or can be ordered through the Frick's Web site ([www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)) or by phone at 212.547.6848.

## FRICK EXTENDS ITS FOCUS ON EL GRECO INTO FALL AND WINTER



El Greco, *Purification of the Temple*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, 16 1/2 x 20 5/8 inches, The Frick Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

The Frick will extend its focus on El Greco through the fall and winter with an installation organized in conjunction with *El Greco in New York*, opening in November at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Frick will unite its three remarkable El Greco paintings—*Purification of the Temple* and portraits of Vincenzo Anastagi and *St. Jerome*—for the first time showing them together on one wall of the East Gallery. *El Greco at the Frick*, runs from November 4, 2014, through February 1, 2015.

## EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND EVENT: *MEN IN ARMOR*

### Free Public Lectures

*Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis, and reservations are not accepted. Selected lectures are webcast live and archived for future viewing on our Web site. Please visit [frick.org/live](http://frick.org/live) for details.*

**Date** Wednesday, September 17, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Jeongho Park, Anne L. Poulet Curatorial Fellow, The Frick Collection  
**Title** *Vincenzo Anastagi, El Greco, and Henry Clay Frick*

El Greco's *Vincenzo Anastagi* has not received much attention from scholars despite its importance as one of only three surviving portraits from the painter's formative Italian period. The curator of the special exhibition *Men in Armor: El Greco and Pulzone Face to Face* will discuss the work in the context of El Greco's career and explore the significance of the portrait's acquisition to Henry Clay Frick.

**Date** Wednesday, October 22, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Andrew Casper, Assistant Professor of Art History, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio  
**Title** *El Greco's Italian Period and Artistic Hybridity*

Although El Greco's 1567–76 sojourn in Venice and Rome has been the focus of recent scholarly attention, it has not yet been adequately reconciled with the entirety of his artistic career. Referencing recent studies of cultural hybridity in the early modern world, this lecture will explore El Greco's rapid assimilation of Renaissance Italian painting as well as the evolution of his idiosyncratic style.

## Free “Summer Night” Event

**Men in Armor: Friday, August 15, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.**

Enjoy a night of programs and activities when we open our doors to the public after-hours to celebrate our special exhibition. The evening will include gallery talks, open sketching, music, and performances. *Admission to **Summer Night** is free, and visitors are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis. Reservations are not accepted. Children under ten are not admitted. Music and dance performances are supported by Ayesha Bulchandani-Mathrani.*

## BASIC INFORMATION

**General Information Phone:** 212. 288.0700

**Web site:** [www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)

**E-mail:** [info@frick.org](mailto:info@frick.org)

**Where:** 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

**Hours: open six days a week:** 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year’s Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln’s Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

**Admission:** \$20; senior citizens \$15; students \$10; “pay what you wish” on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

<b>PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.</b>
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**Subway:** #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

**Tour Information:** included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

**Museum Shop:** the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

**Group Visits:** Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

**Public Programs:** A calendar of events is available in the museum’s Entrance Hall and on the Web site.

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For further press information, please contact the Media Relations & Marketing Department

Media Relations Phone: 212.547.0710

E-mail address: [mediarelations@frick.org](mailto:mediarelations@frick.org)