Much has been written about the artistic output of Domenicos Theotocopoulos during his time in Spain, but few scholars have examined his works in Venice and even fewer have looked at the years he spent in Rome. This may be in part attributed to the lack of firm documentary evidence regarding his activities there and to the small corpus of works that survive from his Italian period, many of which are furthermore controversial. The present study focuses on Domenicos’ Roman years and questions the traditional notion that he was a spiritual painter who served the principles of the Counter Reformation. To support such a view I have looked critically at the Counter Reformation, which I consider more as an amalgam of diverse and competitive institutions and less as an austere movement that strangled the freedom of artistic expression. I contend, moreover, that Domenicos’ acquaintance with Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s librarian, Fulvio Orsini, was seminal for the artist, not only because it brought him into closer contact with Rome’s most refined circles, but principally because it helped Domenicos to assume the persona of ‘pictor doctus’, the learned artist, following the example of another of Fulvio’s friends, Pirro Ligorio. The elitist art that resulted from Domenicos’ collaboration with Orsini, represented, for example, in his paintings of Boy Lighting a Candle and the Healing of the Blind, was partly responsible for the Greek painter’s failure to engage the interest of Cardinal Farnese, in whose palace he stayed for two years, 1570-1572. But Domenicos was determined to establish a career in Rome, as his registration in the painters’ guild, the Accademia di San Luca, in September of 1572, confirms. Although he ultimately failed in this respect, the time he spent in the city was decisive for his understanding of both ancient and modern art, and played a fundamental role in his later artistic development in Spain.

Abstract

Much has been written about the artistic output of Domenicos Theotocopoulos during his time in Spain, but few scholars have examined his works in Venice and even fewer have looked at the years he spent in Rome. This may be in part attributed to the lack of firm documentary evidence regarding his activities there and to the small corpus of works that survive from his Italian period, many of which are furthermore controversial. The present study focuses on Domenicos’ Roman years and questions the traditional notion that he was a spiritual painter who served the principles of the Counter Reformation. To support such a view I have looked critically at the Counter Reformation, which I consider more as an amalgam of diverse and competitive institutions and less as an austere movement that strangled the freedom of artistic expression. I contend, moreover, that Domenicos’ acquaintance with Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s librarian, Fulvio Orsini, was seminal for the artist, not only because it brought him into closer contact with Rome’s most refined circles, but principally because it helped Domenicos to assume the persona of ‘pictor doctus’, the learned artist, following the example of another of Fulvio’s friends, Pirro Ligorio. The elitist art that resulted from Domenicos’ collaboration with Orsini, represented, for example, in his paintings of Boy Lighting a Candle and the Healing of the Blind, was partly responsible for the Greek painter’s failure to engage the interest of Cardinal Farnese, in whose palace he stayed for two years, 1570-1572. But Domenicos was determined to establish a career in Rome, as his registration in the painters’ guild, the Accademia di San Luca, in September of 1572, confirms. Although he ultimately failed in this respect, the time he spent in the city was decisive for his understanding of both ancient and modern art, and played a fundamental role in his later artistic development in Spain.

Much has been written about the artistic output of Domenicos Theotocopoulos during his time in Spain, but few scholars have examined his works in Venice and even fewer have looked at the years he spent in Rome. This may be in part attributed to the lack of firm documentary evidence regarding his activities there and to the small corpus of works that survive from his Italian period, many of which are furthermore controversial. The present study focuses on Domenicos’ Roman years and questions the traditional notion that he was a spiritual painter who served the principles of the Counter Reformation. To support such a view I have looked critically at the Counter Reformation, which I consider more as an amalgam of diverse and competitive institutions and less as an austere movement that strangled the freedom of artistic expression. I contend, moreover, that Domenicos’ acquaintance with Cardinal Alessandro Farnese’s librarian, Fulvio Orsini, was seminal for the artist, not only because it brought him into closer contact with Rome’s most refined circles, but principally because it helped Domenicos to assume the persona of ‘pictor doctus’, the learned artist, following the example of another of Fulvio’s friends, Pirro Ligorio. The elitist art that resulted from Domenicos’ collaboration with Orsini, represented, for example, in his paintings of Boy Lighting a Candle and the Healing of the Blind, was partly responsible for the Greek painter’s failure to engage the interest of Cardinal Farnese, in whose palace he stayed for two years, 1570-1572. But Domenicos was determined to establish a career in Rome, as his registration in the painters’ guild, the Accademia di San Luca, in September of 1572, confirms. Although he ultimately failed in this respect, the time he spent in the city was decisive for his understanding of both ancient and modern art, and played a fundamental role in his later artistic development in Spain.