

# CHRISTIE'S

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## AN EARLY MASTERPIECE BY EL GRECO LEADS A GROUP OF THREE EXCEPTIONAL OLD MASTER PAINTINGS RESTITUTED TO THE HEIRS TO THE COLLECTION OF **JULIUS & CAMILLA PRIESTER**

London, 7 December 2021



Doménikos Theotokópoulos, called El Greco (Crete 1541–1614 Toledo)  
*Portrait of a Gentleman*  
Estimate: £800,000-1,200,000

**London** – An early masterpiece by El Greco leads a group of three exceptional Old Master paintings restituted to the heirs to the Julius & Camilla Priester Collection which will be offered for sale in Christie's Old Masters Evening Sale on 7 December, as highlights of *Classic Week* in London. One of the earliest surviving portraits by the artist and one of the last to remain in private hands, El Greco's *Portrait of a Gentleman*, 1570, is charged with an uncompromising intensity that would define the artist's revolutionary idiom, securing his reputation as one of the great visionaries of western art (estimate: £800,000-1,200,000). It will be offered alongside an extremely rare, *trompe l'oeil* church interior by Emmanuel de Witte (estimate: £500,000-800,000) and a powerful portrait by the Master of Frankfurt (estimate: £40,000-60,000). These works highlight the quality and significance of the collection assembled by Julius (1870–1954) and Camilla Priester (1885-1962), passionate Viennese art collectors who had the entirety of their collection seized by the Nazi authorities between 1938 and 1944. Julius Priester – a respected industrialist, who was involved in *Petroleumgesellschaft Galizin GmbH* and had commercial interests in oil and the energy sector – made extensive efforts to trace and recover their missing collection after the

war. This search was continued after his death by his widow, and subsequently by the couple's heirs.

The El Greco, which was part of the seminal 2019/2020 *Greco* exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, will go on view for the first time ahead of the sale at Christie's New York on 29 October until 11 November, before being exhibited in Hong Kong from 25 to 29 November; the de Witte will be on view at Christie's Amsterdam from 1 to 3 of November. The three works will be reunited for the pre-sale London exhibition which will run from 3 to 7 December.

**Henry Pettifer, Head of the Old Masters Department, Christie's London, commented:** "We are honoured to be acting on behalf of the heirs to the Julius and Camilla Priester Collection in the sale of these three fantastic paintings in the upcoming Old Masters sale in December. It will be especially exciting to bring to the market this mesmerising early portrait by El Greco – one of the most transcendent artists in the Old Masters category."

### EL GRECO

Dated 1570, the year the artist arrived in Rome, El Greco's astonishing portrait follows an established Venetian pattern, owing much to the late works in that genre by his master Titian and Jacopo Bassano. Set against a neutral backdrop, the dramatically lit face and hands are in deliberate contrast to the sober black costume, with the sitter's features framed by his closely-cropped dark hair and beard. The influence of El Greco's Venetian contemporaries, particularly Tintoretto, is further evident in the restrained tonality, open brushwork and application of dry paint, which are masterfully employed in the beautifully preserved modelling of the man's head, and in details such as the rendering of the book. Despite the presence of both a date (January, or June, 1570) and coat-of-arms the identity of the sitter has eluded scholars of the artist's work.

El Greco's portraits, which have captivated his fellow artists since his early years in Italy, greatly influenced portraiture throughout the twentieth century, notably informing the work of other pioneering figures including Egon Schiele, Amedeo Modigliani and Alberto Giacometti. This portrait by El Greco represents a key work in our understanding of development in this genre.

### DE WITTE & THE MASTER OF FRANKFURT

Emanuel de Witte's large and boldly executed church interior, *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, with a trompe l'oeil curtain*, 1655, stands out as one of the most inventive *trompe l'oeil* architectural paintings in the artist's *oeuvre*, and the only known example in this ambitious horizontal format to remain in private hands (estimate: £500,000-800,000, *illustrated right*). De Witte painted only five church interiors using the *trompe l'oeil* device. The other four are all in museums. The present view of the Oude Kerk from the west end of the nave was clearly popular with de Witte's clientele, as the artist executed several paintings from approximately the same vantage point between 1655 and *circa* 1660, all on a similar scale, including: a picture at the Amsterdam Museum, and a dramatically lit work of *circa* 1660 at the National Gallery



of Art, Washington D.C. This picture is one of the artist's finest works from this period, exploring the shifting dialogue between illusion and reality, which was especially prevalent in Delft architectural painting from around 1651.

Whether representing the practice of covering church images with protective curtains or used solely as a compositional aid, the illusionistic curtain in this picture eschews the distinction between the real and fictive by both attempting to share the viewer's space and acting as a barrier between the painting of the church interior and the beholder. Keeping a respectful distance between the two, the curtain intimates that de Witte's church is an image to be venerated, both for its religious significance and for its dramatic artistic representation.



*Portrait of a man, traditionally identified as the Emperor Ferdinand I, half-length, in a fur-lined overmantle, belongs to a small group of intricately executed male portraits by the Netherlandish Master of Frankfurt (active Antwerp, late 15<sup>th</sup> /early 16<sup>th</sup> century) produced during the early decades of the sixteenth century (estimate: £40,000-60,000, illustrated left). While the sitter's identity has been lost, the artist's links with the court circles of Emperor Maximilian I and his son Philip the Handsome, combined with the sitter's fashionable contemporary attire, point to him being a member of the Imperial court in the Netherlands.*

#### THE RETURN OF THREE OLD MASTERS TO THEIR RIGHTFUL OWNERS

The London-based Commission for Looted Art in Europe, which represents the heirs, identified *Portrait of a Gentleman* by El Greco which had been acquired by a London art dealer in 2010. The painting was still in its original frame, which can be clearly seen in photographs of the dining room in Julius and Camilla Priester's Viennese apartment before 1938 (see below). Following a claim made by the Commission, the painting was restituted to the heirs to the Priester Collection in 2015. The history of the painting, revealed by the Commission's research, showed that, after seizure in Vienna, the El Greco was sold in 1952 by Dr Herzig of Galerie Sanct Lucas in Vienna to the art dealer Frederick Mont (formerly Friedrich Mondschein of Vienna) in New York. In 1954 it was published in the journal *Arte Veneta* as 'newly discovered' and in 1959-1960 it was exhibited in the National Museum Stockholm, on both occasions with the painting recorded as owned by the New York dealer Knoedler & Co. In 1990 it was shown in the El Greco exhibition in Crete marking the 450th anniversary of the artist's birth. By then it had been owned for two decades by an Italian collection where it remained for two more decades until soon before the painting was discovered by the Commission. In all the publications in which the El Greco appeared from 1954 onwards, the Priester provenance had been removed and the painting came to be associated solely with the Viennese collection of Ritter von Schoeller.

The eye-catching *trompe-l'oeil* church interior, by Emanuel de Witte was included in the search list of the Priester collection published by the Austrian Federal Police on 21 May 1954 and circulated via Interpol. The painting was identified by the Commission for Looted Art in Europe in an Austrian collection and restituted to the heirs to the Priester Collection in 2019.

The *Portrait of a man* by The Master of Frankfurt was also published in the May 1954 search list of the Priester collection compiled and circulated by the Austrian Federal Police. It was included in a sale at

Christie's London on 7 July 2006 and identified as a work from the Julius Priester Collection by the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, who contacted Christie's with their claim. The claim was resolved amicably and the painting returned to the heirs to the Priester Collection. Christie's is very pleased to have assisted in the resolution of this claim.

### JULIUS AND CAMILLA PRIESTER



Julius and Camilla Priester's elegant apartment in the heart of Vienna displayed over 80 fine Italian and Dutch Old Master and nineteenth century paintings in every room, evoking the refinement and confidence of pre-war Vienna, and the Priesters' own clear sense of taste and style (*illustrated left, pre 1938, showing the El Greco*).

From the early 1920s, Julius Priester devoted himself to building up an art collection, advised by Moritz Lindemann, an Old Master dealer with

a gallery on Vienna's Karlsplatz. The paintings were displayed both in Priester's office and in the third-floor apartment where he and his wife Camilla lived on Ebendorferstrasse in Vienna's historic centre. Julius Priester was particularly interested in Dutch and Italian artists including Peter Paul Rubens, Frans Hals, Tintoretto, David Teniers, Pinturricchio and Anthony van Dyck, and had a distinct eye for portraits. Photographs of the Priester apartment taken before 1938 show the paintings displayed within and complemented by an oak-furnished setting evoking a Renaissance-style interior. The collection also included outstanding works by nineteenth century artists such as Josef Danhauser, Carl Moll and Rudolf von Alt.

The Priesters' life was dramatically changed by the 'Anschluss' or annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany on 12 March 1938. Forced to flee their home and their country, they lost all of their property and assets in Vienna, including all their paintings, as well as silverware, tapestries and antique Persian carpets. On 31 March 1938, Julius and Camilla Priester fled to Paris and then on to Mexico City, where they arrived in late August 1940. They never returned to Austria. Julius died in Mexico in 1955, Camilla in 1962. From abroad, Julius Priester arranged for the contents of the Ebendorferstrasse apartment to be packed and stored with the interior decorator and shipping agent Max Föhr; he was to have sent them on to Paris. But, as the Nazi grip on Jewish property tightened, these plans proved in vain. In August 1938 and 11 May 1939 the contents of the apartment were appraised by art experts under the supervision of the Gestapo and the *Zentralstelle für Denkmalschutz* (Central Office of Heritage Protection). This resulted in the seizure of five paintings in November 1938, followed by a further nine in May 1939, which entered museum collections including that of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The rest of the collection and furnishings were transferred to Max Föhr for storage but, although an export licence was applied for, no shipment was permitted. In February 1944, the art collection and furnishings were confiscated by the Gestapo and removed in six trucks.

After the war, Julius Priester made extensive efforts to trace and recover the missing collection. In May 1947, his lawyer, Dr Erich Goglia, registered a claim with the Austrian authorities, attaching a list of paintings based on an inventory drawn up for insurance purposes on 4 May 1937 by Dr Robert Eigenberger, director of the Picture Gallery of Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts. From Mexico, Julius Priester was in frequent contact with his Vienna-based lawyers and his private secretary Henriette Geiringer. Their extensive correspondence on tracing the collection bears testimony both to their concerted efforts but also to the obstacles encountered. They contacted the authorities in Austria – including the Federal Heritage Office and the Austrian Federal Police, and internationally, through Interpol and their own efforts, the German, Swiss and French police and US legal authorities. The Priester losses were also reported in the press, notably in connection with court proceedings, such as a 1953 court case against Julius Strecker, a former appraiser for the Gestapo, in whose possession their Rubens painting *Man with a fur coat* was located. In 1954 the Austrian Federal Police circulated internationally an illustrated search list of 17 of the missing Priester paintings. This list includes the de Witte and the Master of Frankfurt, but not the El Greco as the police were then on its trail. While a number of works, notably those confiscated in 1938 and 1939, could be traced in the years after the war, the bulk of the collection remained missing. After Julius Priester's death, his widow continued to search for the missing art, a search which has since been carried on by the couple's heirs.

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