

**Featured Essay:****“Grotesque Irreverence: The Transformation of ‘Ecce Homo’”*****Sophie Handler***

The global online community erupted on August 21, 2012 following reports by the Spanish newspaper *Heraldo* of the failed attempt made by Cecilia Giménez, an elderly local amateur artist, to restore Elías García Martínez’s fresco *Ecce Homo* (*Behold the Man*) (Figure 1).<sup>i</sup> A gift from Martínez, the artwork was painted directly onto the wall of the Santuario de Misericordia church in the Spanish town of Borja in around 1930, and until 2012 had existed in relative obscurity. The work is unimposing in size, measuring just twenty inches in height and sixteen inches in width, and was originally painted by Martínez in a style strikingly similar to that of the high-Baroque works of Italian artist Guido Reni (1575-1642). Whilst general opinion amongst the press treated the fresco as “a work of little artistic importance,” because “Martínez is not a great artist and his painting *Ecce Homo* is not a ‘masterpiece,’” the fresco nevertheless held some sentimental value within the local community; residents’ attachment to it stemmed from an interest in historical preservation and general artistic authenticity as much as the inherent sanctity associated with the artwork.<sup>ii</sup> The original image, which depicted Jesus crowned with thorns and gazing skyward in a traditional Catholic pose, had suffered significant moisture damage over the decades. Sources vary as to whether Giménez acted with or without permission from the priest, but local city councilor of arts and culture, Juan Maria Ojeda, was quick to defend the octogenarian parishioner, dismissing theories of malicious vandalism, and instead insisting that she acted with “good intentions,” despite having no formal artistic training.<sup>iii</sup>

Giménez’s efforts had such disastrous results that the uproar soon turned into hilarity, with journalists likening the restoration to both Rowan Atkinson’s Mr. Bean defacing *Whistler’s Mother* (1871) (Figure 2), and a “crayon sketch of a very hairy monkey in an ill-fitting tunic,” – the latter perhaps contributing to the subsequent dubbing of the restored version “*Ecce Mono* (*Behold the Monkey*).”<sup>iv</sup> Giménez’s handiwork quickly became an internet phenomenon. In a matter of hours, online forums and social media outlets such as Reddit, 4chan, Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter had created various discussion threads, groups and accounts that generated thousands of comments, reposts and followers as the artwork was transformed into various “memetic” images and disseminated globally. These memes ranged from simple, animal-based edits (Figure 3), to elaborate efforts to paste the now monstrous face onto famous works of art, such as Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* of 1893 (Figure 4) and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, c. 1506 (Figure 5).<sup>v</sup>

Whilst it is easy to see that the global community found Giménez’s work to be an abundant source of humor, what is not immediately clear is the reason why exactly this particular image generated such widespread interest and ridicule. In an age of increasing tension between religion and agnosticism/atheism in

modern society, or between those who believe in God and those who do not, religious irreverence has become for some a comedy of its own. This is exemplified by the soaring popularity of memes such as *LOL Jesus*, which refers to a subgenre of images most often based on iconic depictions of Jesus accompanied by tongue-in-cheek captions that portray the figure as somewhat irreverent and obnoxious.<sup>vi</sup> Significantly, however, the *Ecce Homo* phenomenon was accidental (at least in the first instance), as opposed to carefully constructed jokes designed to garner widespread appreciation and amusement, or perhaps to provoke or even gently offend.

It is often the case that unintentional humor proves the most effective of all, especially, as in this instance, when the subject matter is of such veneration and the creator's motives so sincere. This is amplified by the incredulity expressed by commentators in the press: in a 2016 article, Jonathan Jones, the art editor of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, exclaimed, "[h]ow did it happen? What was the well-meaning vandal thinking?" Giménez's *Ecce Homo* seems almost too disastrous to have been a mere accident, and this only increases its comedic effect.<sup>vii</sup> Moreover, the initial mistake becomes all the more humorous when it is intentionally and often quite skillfully combined with the various popular culture references that then form memes. In many ways, this incident became something of an advertisement for the grotesque genre, for the reaction it spawned was appropriately threefold: according to scholar and critic Geoffrey Harpham, "for an object to be grotesque, it must arouse three responses. Laughter and astonishment are two: Either disgust or horror is the third."<sup>viii</sup> Considering the plethoric responses to the restoration, varying from hilarity amongst internet users to astonishment and disdain within the pious local community, the new *Ecce Homo* became an unlikely purveyor of grotesquerie.

The grotesque is often discussed as a distortion of established aesthetic conventions and their representation of reality as we understand it; the result of such challenges to aesthetic norms is the creation of a disturbing new form of truth. In this way, *Ecce Homo* becomes a paradigm of grotesque humor. The grotesque aspects of the painting can be understood more darkly (and thus perhaps, for some, more amusingly still), for this disassembling of convention is a result of what Robert C. Evans, an authority on the philosophy of the grotesque, would term a "sudden, disastrous, and apparently random change."<sup>ix</sup> Indeed, its grotesqueness has been amplified by its alterations having arisen from, as Evans summarizes, "a serious accident or some other abrupt loss," unforeseen by community and society and so extreme that it can never be undone or rectified.<sup>x</sup> The reaction engendered by the grotesque, whether it be horror, abhorrence, diversion or laughter, possesses a power and effect proportionate to its severity; in the case of *Ecce Homo*, its potency and the longevity thereof is, in a large part, a consequence of the irredeemableness and incorrigibility of its metamorphosis.

The furor surrounding the fresco generated interest in more than just its comedic value. The subsequent fame of the artwork has rewarded Borja with an influx of more than 40,000 tourists, raising more than 50,000 euros for charity and inspiring a range of memorabilia and gifts, and as of March 2016, the town opened its own arts center dedicated to celebrating the fresco in both its original

nineteenth-century form, and in its current state as what *Hyperallergic* writer Claire Voon has termed a “hazily daubed, gaping primate.”<sup>x</sup> However, Giménez’s restoration has also been applauded for its importance and influence in the art world. Much like its apparent significance within the genre of the grotesque, the restored artwork was hailed as a daring example of Expressionism, praised by global online art hub *Blouin Artinfo* for unleashing “a freakish new power all its own.”<sup>xii</sup> Indeed, far from simply generating attention for an otherwise unfamiliar and arguably mediocre artwork, Giménez’s restoration provides what *Forbes* magazine’s Jonathon Keats calls “rare raw access to human faith at work,” representing “one woman’s vision of her savior, uncompromised by schooling.”<sup>xiii</sup>

For some, the new artwork symbolizes the power of the creative and the ecclesiastical expression of someone who has remained unfettered by artistic regulation; Giménez has perhaps acted ‘in blind faith.’ The humor of this botched restoration is just one facet of its appeal and significance, for the attention garnered by its enduring hilarity can lead to important insight into an individual’s connection to a figure with whom they feel an affinity. In this way, Giménez’s attempted restoration is, in the simplest of terms, representative of a human response to passion, in this case spiritual passion, which is an experience, message and notion that should be as powerful to those without religious faith, as it is to those who believe.

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Elena Pérez Beriain, “La ‘restauracion’ de una pintura mural en una iglesia de Borja acaba en ‘chapuza,’” *Heraldo*, December 12, 2012, accessed January 24, 2016.

[http://www.heraldo.es/noticias/cultura/2012/08/21/la\\_restauracion\\_una\\_pintura\\_mural\\_una\\_iglesia\\_borja\\_acaba\\_chapuza\\_200865\\_308.html](http://www.heraldo.es/noticias/cultura/2012/08/21/la_restauracion_una_pintura_mural_una_iglesia_borja_acaba_chapuza_200865_308.html).

<sup>ii</sup> John Hall, “Elderly woman destroys 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish fresco by Elias García Martínez in botched restoration,” *The Independent*, August 22, 2012, accessed January 24, 2016.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/elderly-woman-destroys-19th-century-spanish-fresco-by-elias-garcia-martinez-in-botched-restoration-8073267.html>; Jonathan Jones, “Great art needs a few restoration disasters,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2012, accessed January 24, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/23/great-art-restoration-disasters>.

<sup>iii</sup> “Spanish fresco restoration botched by amateur,” *BBCnews.com*, accessed January 24, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19349921>.

<sup>iv</sup> Jones, “Great art needs a few restoration disasters;” “Spanish fresco restoration botched by amateur;” “Ecce Mono,” *Financial Times*, August 24, 2012, accessed January 24, 2016.

<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/269a80c4-edec-11e1-8d72-00144feab49a.html>.

<sup>v</sup> “Botched Ecce Homo Painting,” *KnowYourMeme.com*, accessed January 24, 2016.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/botched-ecce-homo-painting>.

<sup>vi</sup> “LOL Jesus,” *KnowYourMeme.com*, accessed January 24, 2016.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/lol-jesus>.

<sup>vii</sup> Jones, “Great art needs a few restoration disasters.”

<sup>viii</sup> Geoffrey Harpham, “The Grotesque: First Principle,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 4 (1976): 463.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert C. Evans, “Aspects of the Grotesque in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*,” in *The Grotesque*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2009), 143.

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<sup>x</sup> Evans, "Aspects of the Grotesque," 143.

<sup>xi</sup> "Disfigured Spanish fresco is hit for artist, town," *Yahoo! News*, accessed January 26, 2016. <http://news.yahoo.com/disfigured-spanish-fresco-hit-artist-town-151848237.html>; Aitor Bengoa, "El eccehomo de Borja ya tiene quien lo explique," *El País*, March 16, 2016, accessed March 22 2016. [http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/03/16/actualidad/1458155898\\_147342.html](http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2016/03/16/actualidad/1458155898_147342.html); Claire Voon, "With Its Own Arts Center, Beast Jesus Rises Again," *Hyperallergic*, March 18, 2016, accessed March 22, 2016. <http://hyperallergic.com/284684/with-its-own-arts-center-beast-jesus-rises-again>.

<sup>xii</sup> Alexander Forbes, "Spanish Octogenarian's Disastrous Unauthorized Art Restoration Yields Surprisingly Avant-Garde Results," *Blouin Artinfo*, August 23, 2012, accessed January 26, 2016. <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/821028/spanish-octogenarians-disastrous-unauthorized-art-restoration>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jonathon Keats, "Why Every Church Should Be Blessed With A Muralist As Uncouth As Cecilia Giménez," *Forbes*, September 27, 2012, accessed January 26, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2012/09/27/why-every-church-should-be-blessed-with-a-muralist-as-uncouth-as-cecilia-gimenez/#16dd85457c44>.



Figure 1. Elías García Martínez, *Ecce Homo*, ca. 1930, fresco, 20 in x 16 in. Santuario de Misericordia Church, Borja, Diocese of Tarazona (Photo via Gawker.com). The leftmost photograph, taken in 2010, shows some initial flaking of the paintwork. The central photograph was taken in July 2012, just a month prior to the attempted restoration, and shows the extent of damage and deterioration. The rightmost photograph documents the artwork following Giménez's efforts to repair it.

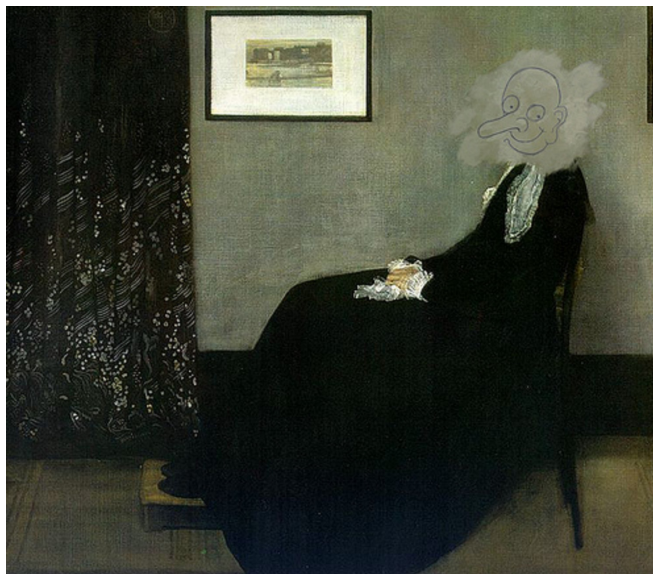


Figure 2. Mr Bean's restoration of James McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 (Whistler's Mother)*, from the movie *Bean*, 1997 (Polygram Filmed Entertainment, photo via mrbeanwikia.com).



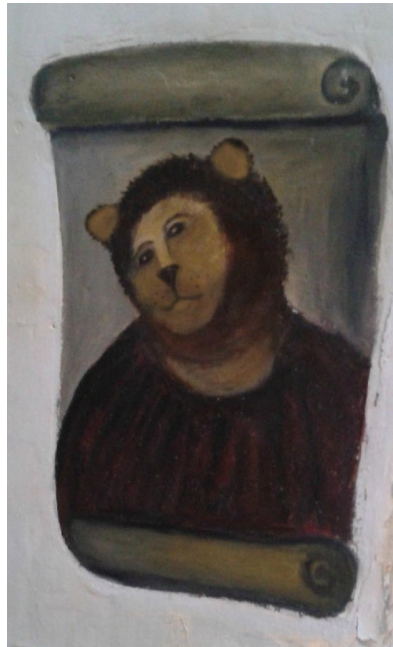


Figure 4. Author unknown, Internet meme transforming the restored *Ecce Homo* into a lion-like creature, 2012, (Photo via knowyourmeme.com).



Figure 4. Author unknown, Internet meme combining the restored *Ecce Homo* and Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, 2012, (Photo via knowyourmeme.com).



Figure 5. Author unknown, Internet meme combining the restored *Ecce Homo* and Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, 2012, (Photo via knowyourmeme.com).