

Cultural Institutions in Greece from the First Museums and the Care for Antiquities to Artistic Festivals and Contemporary Art Biennials

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Abstract

The history of cultural institutions in Greece has its origins in the time the country started his struggle to become independent (1821 onwards) and to form a contemporary Western state. The first concern of the then Governments of Greece was to preserve the cultural heritage and to establish institutions to support the corresponding efforts. Thus, in addition to initiatives to create a university, a science academy and a technical university, a National Museum was founded to house the plethora of antiquities scattered throughout the land of Attica, and the archaeological service was established, which was to carry out the great task, among others, of restoring the monuments of the Acropolis. In the 20th century, the Greek State also became interested in contemporary art, establishing the National Gallery (1900) and promoting processes to set up art collections, to organise exhibitions in special venues (art galleries), and to promote Modern Greek art abroad (Venice Biennale and others). Following World War II, private initiative played a dominant role in the art trade and the promotion of art through specialised publications and artistic associations. At the same time, new contemporary art museums were established, both public and private, by purchasing important and very expensive modern art collections, such as the Costakis Collection in 2000, and international exhibitions, also known as Biennials, were organised in Athens and in Thessaloniki, aiming at gaining international experience in all fields. From time to time, the largest cities in Greece have hosted important artistic festivals on the occasion of events such as the European Capital of Culture and the Cultural Olympiad.

Keywords: National Archaeological Museum, Archaeological Service, National Gallery, Art Biennale, Modern and Contemporary Art Museums, European Capital of Culture, Cultural Olympiad.

Introduction: International Cultural Organisations and Greece

A place's cultural heritage is the intertemporal intellectual and technological creation of the people of such place, which can have many aspects (historical, aesthetic, social, etc.) and many objectives (education, entertainment, pleasure, etc.). Cultural heritage is a supreme good and it should therefore be treated with adequate respect and be duly safeguarded both by individuals and by the organised State. The concept of "heritage" encompasses all material and non-material evidence of human culture, which has been acknowledged for its value and for the historical memories it passes from one generation to the next, and this is why it is worthy of the greatest possible protection, preservation, and promotion (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010). This is why people have agreed on creating various "institutions", both public and private, to serve the needs arising from time to time from the duty to preserve cultural heritage. Evidently, museum, galleries, and all sorts of collecting organisations are primarily the venues serving the society's needs with regard to such purpose. Nevertheless, the necessity arose, at the international level, to establish highly prestigious scientific and political institutions that would be capable of performing supervisory duties over countries and cultural establishments all over the world.

The international community, nations, and governments have responded to requests from scientists and the informed civil society regarding the need to protect human culture, which due to wars, national disasters, financial difficulties, theft, and all sorts of unlawful actions, ran the risk of being destroyed or lost, thus resulting in loss of "collective memory". UNESCO (United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture) is the first and most important international institution established to this end by the United Nations (1945). By law adopted in 1991, Greece established the National Commission for UNESCO, which has since then been particularly active in preserving and protecting the country's cultural wealth.

Very belatedly, Greece also established, in 1983, the Hellenic National Committee of ICOM (International Council of Museums), a highly important cultural institution founded in Paris, in 1946, with the aim of supporting the work of museums all over the world. A few years earlier, in 1972, the Greek chapter of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites, founded in Warsaw in 1965) had also been established in Greece, aiming at protecting and preserving the Greek natural and cultural heritage. It is true that, albeit with some delay, Greece has responded in a positive manner to every international call regarding institutional policy in the area of culture in order to face the considerable problems surfacing from time to time and preserve its centuries-old cultural heritage. It is now a fact that cultural institutions, irrespective of whether they are public or private or independent non-profit organisations, significantly contribute to the production of culture and are considered to be the pillars in matters of protecting, preserving, and promoting cultural heritage. Besides, this latter aspect is expressly provided for in Article 24 of the Greek Constitution, according to which “protection of the natural and cultural environment constitutes a duty of the State”.

The establishment of the Archaeological Service and the first museums

Immediately after the Greek Revolution and the creation of the Modern Greek State by virtue of the Treaty of London in 1827, a great effort was launched to salvage antiquities from clandestine excavation and to prevent the unlawful sale and purchase of movable monuments of the Greek culture. The first efforts towards this end were undertaken by the then Governor of Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias (1828-1831), and immediately afterwards by King Otto (1833-1862) (Kokkou, 1977). The great problem that the country was facing since the times of the Ottoman rule was not only how to protect archaeological treasures from being looted and unlawfully taken out of their original environment, but also and foremost how to safeguard, promote, and showcase its antiquities, an urgent task that had to be dealt with. This is why Kapodistrias adopted measures from the outset regarding the fate of such antiquities, by founding in Aegina, the first capital of the newly established Greek State, the first National Archaeological Museum, managed by Andreas Moustoxidis, a scholar from Corfu (Kokkou, 2009: 50). The measures adopted by the country's first Governor included “taking stock of all antiquities in the countryside or forming part of private collections”, determining the procedures for purchase by the State of ancient objects and for expropriation from land with antiquities, prohibiting excavations without the State's permission, and providing for strict sanctions for the smuggling of antiquities. The museum was housed in rooms and other spaces in the Orphanage, the first public institution established by Kapodistrias. The first official exhibition of ancient works of art at the Aegina Museum took place on 31 December 1830 (Kokkou, 2009: 50 ff.). Unfortunately, Kapodistrias' multi-faceted reforming work was interrupted by his assassination in Nafplion in 1831.

The most important and substantial efforts to take care of antiquities and, in general, of Greece's cultural heritage, were noted during the reign of Otto, the Bavarian prince designated King of Greece by the then Great Powers (United Kingdom, France, Russia). Indeed, the “Archaeological Service” was established in the beginning of 1833, as part of the Ministry of Education, its main task being to safeguard, discover, and preserve monuments. German architect Anton Weissenburg was appointed General Ephor and he was to be assisted by his collaborators Ludwig Ross (German classical archaeologist, who excelled in his position), Kyriakos Pittakis, archaeologist, and Ioannis Kokkonis, economist. Athanassios Iatridis, the famous painter, also served in the first Archaeological Service, having worked before at the Aegina Museum (Kokkou, 2009: 70).

The first task that the newly established Archaeological Service undertook was to restore the monuments of the Acropolis, until then operating as the city's fortress. With the assistance of Ludwig Ross and architects Stamatios Kleanthis, Eduard Schaubert, and (later on) Christian Hansen, works began at the Acropolis of Athens to restore its monuments. To this end, the Government had ensured the warm support of the famous neoclassicist architect Leo von Klenze, who was in Athens at the time as an envoy of Ludwig, King of Bavaria, and father of Otto. Klenze advocated “freeing the Sacred Rock” from the buildings that had been added on it during the medieval and later years (Kokkou, *ibid.*). This is how the immense task of conserving and restoring all monuments of the Acropolis began, a task that is still on-going to this day. Another important cultural institution of that time was the “Archaeological Society”, established in 1837, comprising members of international renown, whose objective was to assist in archaeological research. Its first elected chairman was the scholar Iakovakis Rizos Neroulos. The time was now ripe for founding museums to house the many antiquities scattered all over the land of Attica. First of all, the findings from the most famous archaeological rock, the Acropolis in Athens, had to find a home. In 1862, the Greek Government decided to construct a museum on the South-Eastern side of the Sacred Rock, a rather small building designed by architect Panagis Kalkos.

The museum was inaugurated in 1865, it operated for approximately 145 years, it underwent many modifications through time, and it was abandoned in 2009, when the New Acropolis Museum was founded on Dionysios Areopagitis Street (at the location of the former Makrygiannis military camp, opposite the Acropolis). The new museum was designed by French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi.

However, in those early days, there was a more intense debate about, and interest in, the necessity to establish a “National Archaeological Museum”, a debate that had started immediately after the transfer of the new capital from Aegina to Athens in 1834. It is worth noting that this necessity is mentioned in the first archaeological law of 1834, almost at the same time as the establishment of the Archaeological Service (Kokkou, 2009: 202). Great efforts were made to fulfil this national necessity, i.e. to build a large museum in Athens, worthy of its history. Architectural competitions were organised and many, more or less, well-known architects were involved in its design, including the famous and experienced Leo von Klenze and the creator (together with his brother, Hans Christian Hansen) of the “Athenian Neoclassical Trilogy” and the Zappeion Hall, Danish architect, Theophil Hansen. In the end, the project was entrusted to the less known of them all, German architect and painter Ludwig Lange, who was in Athens at that time accompanying the painter Carl Rottmann, who was the official court painter with many successful artistic mandates under his belt.

The positive aspects of this mandate included his expertise in museum design and, in particular, his being familiar with contemporary Greece and his knowledge of the monuments in Athens and in other areas, which he had had the opportunity to see when accompanying Rottmann in his tour throughout Greece in 1834, as well as his teaching experience at the newly founded “School of the Arts” during a period of four years (Kokkou, 2009: 223). Lange was tasked with designing the National Archaeological Museum in 1860, and the relevant decree was signed in 1865, in spite of the political upheaval that ensued after Otto’s deposition in 1862. Panagis Kalkos was designated the building’s architect and had an active role in the completion of the museum. Following some issues regarding the selection of the place, the National Archaeological Museum was finally built at its current location, on Patision Street, and the foundation stone was laid in 1866. The museum underwent modifications through time and it was extended and finally completed in 1889 with the inspired assistance of German architect Ernst Ziller, who also designed many public and private buildings in Athens and in other cities. During the 19th century archaeological museums were also built outside Athens, for example in Sparta (1874-1876), Ancient Olympia (1883-1886), and Ermoupolis, Syros, (1888) (Κόκκου, *ibid.*). The founding of the National Archaeological Museum was indeed one of the greatest historical moments experienced by Greece with regard to safeguarding its culture and reinforcing its national identity. Even the choice of the neoclassical style for the first museums and public buildings erected was an important parameter of the national pride of the Greek people.

From the 19th to the 20th century. Caring about contemporary art. The School of Arts and the National Gallery. The first exhibitions

Almost concurrently with the efforts of the new King and its government to found an archaeological museum and an archaeological service to safeguard the ancient Greek cultural heritage, a royal decree was promulgated, on 31 December 1836, to establish in Athens a technical and artistic “School” (the precursor of the National Technical University and the School of Fine Arts). The aim was to gain practical knowledge in the construction of projects through the subject of architecture and research of historic sources and to promote contemporary art through the teaching of artistic subjects. The first teachers at the “School of Arts”, as it was commonly called, were Greek and foreign painters and sculptors, architects, archaeologists and town planners, philosophers, historians, and engineers (Lydakis, 1976:78 ff.). Through the years, the original School was upgraded in terms of its curricula, it acquired new fields of specialisation, and it was significantly extended to cover a considerable surface area on Patision Street (next to the National Archaeological Museum) in a neoclassical building complex, designed by architect Lysandros Kaftantzoglou (1862-1878). On 3 May 1837, a royal decree established the University of Athens, the most important institution in the country’s history, where many fields of knowledge were studied and taught, with the aim of becoming the pillar of the development and true regeneration of Greece.

It was one of the oldest universities in South-Eastern Europe, housed since 1841 in one of the most beautiful neoclassical buildings in Europe, worthy of its historical mandate and significance, designed by architect Hans Christian Hansen (1803-1883). The foundation of the University was laid in 1839. As indicated above, the “University” is part of the so-called “Athenian Neoclassical Trilogy”. The two other buildings forming the Trilogy are the “Academy” (1859) and the “Library” (1887), designed by Christian’s brother, Theophil Hansen (1813-1891).

In the area of culture, an important role was to be played in the future by institutions whose purpose was to gather artists together, to promote their work through exhibitions, and to publish art magazines. Already in the 19th century, in 1897, the “Society of the Votaries of the Arts” was created, which published since 1901 the magazine “Pinakothiki”, its first manager and editor being painter Dimitris Kalogeropoulos. The magazine suspended its publication in 1926. There followed a series of other magazines featuring, as a rule, a variety of themes, i.e. historic, literary, and artistic, but they have all been rather short-lived, such as: “O Kallitechnis” (1910-1911), managed by painter Gerasimos Vokos (Yoka, 2000), and “Fraggelio” (1926-1929), edited by author and painter Nikos Velmos. Sculptor Michalis Tompros then published the modern magazine “O Eikostos Aionas” (1933-1934). The magazine “To Trito Mati” (1935-1937), published by architect Dimitris Pikionis and architect and painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika, was also oriented towards modern art, as was “I Techni” (1938), published by Errikos Frantziskakis (Lydakakis, 1976: 102-103). In 1885, the “Christian Archaeological Society” was founded, whose task was to highlight the importance of Byzantine art.

Another significant institutional intervention by the Greek State with regard to modern art was the establishment in 1900 of the “National Gallery”, whose first manager was the painter and teacher at the School of the Arts, Georgios Iakovidis. The Gallery, later (in 1954) renamed, as a result of a donation, “National Gallery – Alexandros Soutzos Museum”, has been the centre of the collection of works of Modern Greek art from the post-Byzantine years to this day and it represents the main reference regarding the development of the new Greek art (painting, sculpture and engraving). Given the absence of a modern art museum in Greece, the National Gallery also covered, to the extent possible, the need to display and promote modern art from both Greece and abroad. Whereas the Greek State was striving to financially recover from many years of war for its independence, the School of Arts, under the management of Lysandros Kaftantzoglou (1844-1862), lived through glory days. Many of the talented artists continued their studies abroad as part of scholarships, while at the same time the conditions were met for organising exhibitions of young artists, graduates of the School of Arts. The “Konstostavlos Competitions” were among the most famous art competitions (from 1856 onwards).

However, the most important exhibition at the time was the “Olympia” Panhellenic exhibition (1859-1888), which survived during many years and which aimed at “encouraging domestic production” and was linked to the attempt to revive the Ancient Olympic Games. It was mainly financed by Evaggelos Zappas (Baroutas, 1990: 32-33). In 1885, the Literary Society “Parnassos” organised the first large exhibition of contemporary Greek artists. At the same time, artistic associations were founded in the Greek capital, which undertook to promote the work of their members through exhibitions, now also organised in private venues, in new galleries, rapidly multiplying (Moschonas, 1990). During the interwar period, two major events took place in Greece in the field of visual arts. The first was the Panhellenic exhibition, with the participation of virtually every artist in the country. It was held on an annual basis under the responsibility of the State. It was organised for the first time in 1938 and, following some interruptions, it was held anew in 1987, for the last time. This was an important event which, in spite of its mass character, provided new artists with a platform from where to promote their work. The second major event during this period was the Government’s decision to participate in the Venice Biennale, by sending Greek artists to the famous exhibition and putting up its own stand in the Venice Giardini. The first effective participation in the Venice Biennale was in 1934 with artist Konstantinos Parthenis and since then Greece’s presence has been permanent and constant (Matthiopoulos, 1997). It was one of the first serious attempts by the art authorities and decision-makers to internationalise Greek art, although there had also been some other hesitant attempts from time to time. Besides, the movement of European modernism had originated in the West, in particular Paris, where many of the young artists had studied, Munich also holding a special attraction since long ago.

Post-World War II institutions: New modern and contemporary art museums. The purchase of the Costakis Collection

It is a fact that Greece is one of the countries with the largest number of museums proportionate to its size. Almost all capital cities of prefectures in the country have an archaeological museum, while several of them also have a Byzantine, history, or folklore museum. The absence of modern and contemporary art museums, with the exception of the efforts of certain individuals or institutions, is more than evident. It has taken several decades for the central administration to realise that modern art museums had to be created. Only in 1997 did the Ministry of Culture decide to create two modern art museums, one in Athens, named “National Museum of Contemporary Art”, and the other in Thessaloniki, named “State Museum of Contemporary Art”. However, the issue of their housing, in particular in Athens, has not as yet been definitively resolved.

Nevertheless, the oldest contemporary art museum is the “Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art”, whose seat is in Thessaloniki. It was established in 1979 by private individuals and it is housed in a private building in the centre of the city. In 1984, the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art acquired the collection of the famous collector, Alexandros Iolas, which included works of widely known avant-garde European and American artists, thus conferring unquestionable international value to the museum.

However, the most important intervention of the Greek State in cultural institutions has been the purchase of the Costakis Collection which includes famous works of the Russian avant-garde. The collection was purchased in 2000 on behalf of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki from the heirs of collector Georgios Costakis at the price of 35 million US Dollars. This purchase is unquestionably one of the rare State institutional interventions in culture not only in Greece, but also in Western countries.

Artistic festivals, international institutions and art biennials in contemporary Greece. Kassel Documenta 2017 in Athens

After World War II, Greece became entangled in a civil war (1946-1949), which resulted in delaying its economic, social, political, and cultural adjustment. In spite of all the political reversals that ensued, culminating in the military dictatorship (1967-1974) and the ideological conflicts of the Greek intelligentsia, culture has been under the influence of Western art and the exhibitions that took place in public or private venues in the large Greek cities had something from the “glamour” of Paris, which was the undisputed centre of activity of Greek artists abroad. The art magazine that dominated after World War II was “Zygos” (1955-1966, 1973-1983), managed (by turns) by brothers Errikos and Frantzis Frantziskakis. Another avant-garde magazine during that period was “Nees Morfes” published by Professor Aggelos Prokopiou, whereas “Epitheorisi Technis” (1954-1967), a magazine published by art historian Georgios Simos-Petris, has had an important influence, particularly in left-wing circles.

As indicated above, new modern art museums were founded in the country’s two largest cities, Athens and Thessaloniki, and this has multiplied the visual arts activities in these cities. At the same time, municipalities were implementing their own cultural policy by founding galleries with local interest and organising art festivals, such as the “Dimitria” in Thessaloniki, one of the longest-living institutions in post-World War II Greece. “Dimitria” is an annual art and culture festival, established in 1966 upon the initiative and under the responsibility of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, which covers a large array of cultural events. In the fall of 2016, its activities culminated with a large exhibition of famous artist Yoko Ono. The exhibition took place at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art and made a great impression on the public that attended it in droves.

Artistic activity has been more intense in Athens due to the many museums and art galleries existing in the city. The most massive event is the international contemporary art fair which has been held since 1993 under the name “Art-Athina”. However, both Athens and Thessaloniki have been organising art biennials since 2007, showcasing works of contemporary Greek and foreign artists.

In 1985, Athens was the first European city to be selected as European Cultural Capital. This was an idea and an initiative launched by the then Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Merkouri, and it has since become one of the most important European Cultural institutions. In 1997, it was Thessaloniki’s turn to become European Cultural Capital, followed in 2006 by Patras. On the occasion of those institutions, important cultural projects have been carried out, in particular in Athens and in Thessaloniki.

Lastly, upon the occasion of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, the international institution of the Cultural Olympiad was implemented, which lasted from 2001 to 2004, a period during which large-scale cultural projects were undertaken with regard to both material and non-material culture.

It has been a pleasant surprise for art aficionados all over the world to learn about the decision of the organisers of Kassel Documenta 2017 to include Athens in the artistic programme, on an equal footing with the German city in terms of artist participations. Important visual art interventions are already scheduled in the Greek capital by artists from around the globe. The reason behind this invitation extended to Athens is evident, given that the city is experiencing a great economic and refugee crisis and this image could not go unnoticed. In the midst of those new and long-lasting conditions, art comes in to fill a void and convey in its own language the world’s concerns about what is happening in the most historic city of Europe.

Conclusion

Cultural institutions in Greece have evolved in a non-uniform manner. A large part thereof is represented by archaeological museums and locations with Ancient Greek content. Interest in contemporary institutional forms of culture is rarer and it appears, in any event, in the post-World War II period. In this regard, private initiative has been a reinvigorating shot, intervening through galleries or institutions and other collective efforts, such as non-profit organisations, mostly oriented toward avant-garde choices. In any event, this whole activity demonstrates the State's lack of strategy in cultural matters and the absence of any serious cultural policy, which would have won a large part of the public, that, according to surveys, remains to a large extent uninvolved in contemporary artistic developments. Historically, the purchase of the Costakis Collection, at a very high price, paid up in its entirety by the Greek State, has been a pleasant surprise. Undoubtedly, this remains a unique example of this magnitude and it represents the most important institutional intervention in culture at the European level. For Greece, this purchase has triggered the launching of extensive artistic festivals, such as the biennial attracting a large number of avant-garde Greek and foreign artists.

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