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Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution

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Areti Adamopoulou

Τέχνη και ψυχροπολεμική διπλωματία: Διεθνείς εικαστικές εκθέσεις στην Αθήνα (1950–1967)

[Art and Cold War diplomacy: International art exhibitions in Athens, 1950–1967]

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The period after the Second World War is attracting the greater interest of historians, both in the context of political and cultural history as well as the emerging public history and memory studies in Greece. This growing interest in recent history, which seems to have intensified in recent years, perhaps reflects the effort to understand the world today and the reasons that led to the recurring and intense economic, political and social crises.

However, while the debate on the Cold War period and its global effects has long been a subject in the international literature,[1] in Greece the research effort has only begun to bear fruit. The mature result of two such efforts are the recent books by Areti Adamopoulou and Zinovia Lialioutis.[2] Starting from different perspectives, the history of art in one case and the cultural and diplomatic history in the other, the two authors offer a first, comprehensive picture of Greece's position on the world map of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. They guide us through the internal conflicts and conditions in a country with a Western orientation that was trying to rebuild itself while dealing with a recent traumatic past. These two notable publishing efforts address not only the specialist audience of historians, public historians, art historians, political scientists and scholars of public memory, but anyone interested in studying this historical period in a transnational (which is perhaps the most important contribution of the books) historical approach.

More specifically, Adamopoulou deals with the art exhibitions in postwar Athens up to the beginning of the 1967 dictatorship, a period characterised by intense efforts to restore legality and order and smooth international relations, but also by a "stunted" democracy.[3] Furthermore, she deals with the intervening role of foreign institutions and governments and the upgraded role of the visual arts. She discusses the artistic situation in Greece and the role of culture in the formation of postwar national identity. The "New History of Art", as she refers to it, changed "the objects of interest for many art historians"

while “exhibitions are a field on which the idea of the Cold War cultural competition was built in practice” (16). And she is right in stating that “exhibitions are complex events because they act on more levels than art works alone … Today the history of exhibitions is an established and interdisciplinary field of study.”[4] It is this complexity that is presented through the five exhibitions in respective chapters of the book, which approach the visual phenomena and the history of art in direct relation to political and diplomatic history.

In her introduction, Adamopoulou sets the goals of her book and her research questions, that is, to highlight the relationship between art and the formation of Greek national identity and the use of art exhibitions for the creation of a common cultural space in Western Europe, to which Greece belonged or sought to belong. Regarding the chronological frame of her study, she correctly places it, at least for Greece, in early 1950, with 1952 representing an internal milestone and the country’s accession to NATO. It was a time when international interest in Greece’s internal affairs was increasing, when foreign cultural institutions came to Greece to present and promote their cultural superiority.[5] Yet it is strange that the first exhibition that Adamopoulou deals with occurred at the end of the decade, in 1958. As such, she ignores what was perhaps the most important exhibition of the decade, that of Henry Moore in the Zappeion in 1951. Organised by a foreign body, the British Council, the exhibition worked as an archetype for the visual arts in Greece.[6]

In her introductory chapter Adamopoulou presents the ways in which the visual arts were used to form both national identities and a unified European cultural identity. She aptly notes that “culture was considered the ‘glue’ that would unite the exhausted and disoriented peoples of Europe” (25–26). This framework set the standards and the limits of art production internationally and gradually in Greece. In this political, cultural and diplomatic arena, art exhibitions would play a crucial role. Adamopoulou gives a thorough outline of the art exhibitions of the period, which clearly further supports her arguments regarding the intervening role of foreign actors and, at the same time, Western modernisation, as she calls it, a course that she connects with Greece’s tourist development.

In the following chapters, Adamopoulou analyses the five exhibitions she chose to focus on: “Family of Man” (1958), “The Stavros Niarchos Collection” (1958), “Caravaggio and His Followers” (1962), “Byzantine Art: A European Art” (1964), all of which were held in the Zappeion Gallery, and the “Panathenaea of World Sculpture” (1965), on Filopappou Hill. One immediately understands the emphasis placed on exhibitions organised or planned abroad, sponsored or financed by foreign organisations. An exception was the “Panathenaea”, an exhibition organised exclusively to be presented in Athens, while the Byzantium exhibition was obviously of Greek interest and many objects came from Greek collections. The common element, however, of these exhibitions and obviously one of the reasons that prompted the author to choose them, lies in their international character, that is, their integration into Western European culture.

The “Family of Man”, a photographic exhibition, was one of the “flagships” of US cultural policy and its arrival in Athens demonstrated, according to Adamopoulou, the importance that American diplomacy attached to shaping a positive image in Greece. The significance of the exhibition in the international field makes even more substantial Adamopoulou’s conclusions that Greek public and art critics showed less interest in this exhibition than in those of the Marshall Plan, despite the fact that anti-Americanism had noticeably receded in the country. This is why “a seemingly apolitical presentation, the ‘Family’ was not tested for anti-American intentions, but rather treated as a presentation in the context of the Westernisation of the Greek public” (131–32).

In this context, the coming to Greece of Stavros Niarchos’ famous collection of modern art enhanced the country’s Western character. The exhibition had already aroused international interest before coming to Athens and it had already been shown in America, Canada and Britain. The Athens version, which was supported by the collector himself, was an important cultural and social event and generated the intense interest of art critics. For that reason, Adamopoulou sees the exhibition as a further step in the integration of Greece into modern European culture, although she could put more emphasis on the role played by the British Council, which was heavily involved in organising the exhibition.

The exhibition “Caravaggio and His Followers” was part of the cultural diplomacy between Greece and Italy. It was also a joint cooperation; after Athens, the exhibition moved to Naples. It was a clear attempt to normalise bilateral relations after the traumatic events of the war, in line with US wishes. Adamopoulou rightly points out that it was an excellent opportunity to strengthen both countries’ common European origins within the new European institutions. The political nature of the exhibition was confirmed at the inauguration, attended by the leaders of the two countries, which aroused strong interest in the press and especially among art critics. The methodological choice of studying the reception of such exhibitions is once again crucial to Adamopoulou’s analysis, which underlines the opportunity that the Greek public had to become acquainted with the culture of Western Europe, which was, as she demonstrates, an important arrow in the quiver of diplomacy and in the effort to restore the country’s international prestige. Unfortunately, unlike France, Greece was slow to realise the importance of cultural exchanges, the mechanisms of influencing public opinion and the management of public history.

The integration of Greek culture into European culture finally seems to have been achieved with the exhibition “Byzantine Art: European Art”. According to Adamopoulou, “the exhibition deconstructed many stereotypes about Byzantine art and connected the medieval Greek past to common European culture”.[7] The exhibition, held under the auspices of the Council of Europe and with the support of the Greek government, was conceived and organised by Manolis Hatzidakis and supported by numerous Greek Byzantinologists. Adamopoulou provides a detailed presentation with rich iconographic material, convincingly placing the exhibition in the national context of a continuous search for Greekness in art, and in the European context, where such exhibitions operate to

confirm the common heritage of the continent. Also in this case, Adamopoulou sees the reception by the press and art critics as important in her attempt to interpret both the goals of the exhibition and its impact.

The next and last exhibition, the "Panathenaea of World Sculpture", is the subject of the most extensive chapter, probably as a result of the author's intensive commitment to this exhibition.[8] The idea was born from the initiative of the art critic Tonis Spiteris, who, having lived in Paris and experienced in international exhibitions and relations, wanted to promote Greek artistic production but, at the same time, place it in a European context. The exhibition, which received great international publicity, was part of the Athens Festival and put the Greek capital at the centre of artistic events around the world. Adamopoulou maintains that the works shown in Greece responded to the European canon and referred mainly to the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. This was probably the main reason why Spiteris, according to the writer, was extremely reluctant to include Greek sculptors, choosing those who followed Western modern art and excluding artists who were ideologically distant from the West, such as Memos Makris. In the art criticism texts that illustrated the opening of the exhibition and which she diligently selected and analysed, Adamopoulou observes another systematic attempt to integrate Greek art into European culture and through that process to reconnect it with Ancient Greece. At the same time, the visual arts were emerging as a privileged field of intense ideological rivalries that followed the divisions of the Cold War but confirmed, according to the author, the full development of an art scene in Greece.

In her concluding thoughts, Adamopoulou underlines the dominant position that European art occupies in Greek reality through such exhibitions, but also their role in the consolidation by Greek society of the country's new position in the Western capitalist camp of the Cold War. Adamopoulou, by analysing the content and form of those exhibitions, but also their subsequent reception, convincingly answers the questions she poses from the outset: how was Greece connected to Western culture after 1945? What kind of exhibitions were presented and how were they received by the Athenian public? How have art exhibitions served ideological and political interests in Western European states and Greece in particular?

We still have more to learn about that period in order to understand and study the cultural intersections and complexities that arise outside national narratives and within an international context. Adamopoulou's book covers significant gaps, raises new questions and provides impetus for a broader reflection on the post-Second World War, post-Civil War and Cold War period in Greece.

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[1] See, indicatively, Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999); Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *ArtForum* 11, no. 9 (May

1973): 43–54; and Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *ArtForum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39–41.

[2] Zinovia Lialiouti, *Ο “Άλλος” Ψυχρός Πόλεμος: Η αμερικανική πολιτιστική διπλωματία στην Ελλάδα, 1953–1973* [The “other” Cold War: American cultural diplomacy in Greece, 1953–1973] (Irakleio: Crete University Press, 2019).

[3] See Ilias Nikolakopoulos, *Η καχεκτική δημοκρατία: Κόμματα και εκλογές, 1946–1967* [The stunted democracy: Parties and elections, 1946–1967] (Athens: Patakis, 2001).

[4] In Eva Fotiadi, “What Could Art History Contribute to Modern Greek Studies in the 21st Century: A Discussion with Areti Adamopoulou,” Torch: Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, 29 January 2021, https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/article/what-could-art-history-contribute-to-modern-greek-studies-in-the-21st-century.-part-i.-a-dis.

[5] See Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos, “Οι εικαστικές τέχνες στην Ελλάδα τα χρόνια 1945–1953” [Fine art in Greece, 1945–1953], in *Ιστορία της Ελλάδας του 20ού αιώνα* [History of Greece in the 20th century], vol. 4/2, ed. Christos Hadziiossif (Athens: Vivliorama, 2009), 216–21.

[6] The exhibition is, however, briefly analysed in the next chapter. See also Herbert Read, introduction to *Henry Moore: An Exhibition of Sculpture and Drawings Organised by the British Council* (Athens: Zappeion Gallery, 1951).

[7] In Fotiadi, “What Could Art History.”

[8] See Areti Adamopoulou, “Τα Παναθήναια Γλυπτικής του 1965” [Panathenaea of Sculpture, 1965], *Δωδώνη* 33 (2004): 249–300.