

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 18, No 1 (2021)

Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XVIII (2021)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

“The artist has to make a long journey through the demands of painting.” A reading of the exhibition “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece”, Athens (June 2019 to August 2020).

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To cite this article:

Foukaneli, G. (2022). “The artist has to make a long journey through the demands of painting:” A reading of the exhibition “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece”, Athens (June 2019 to August 2020). *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 18(1), 286–291. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/31396>

“THE ARTIST HAS TO MAKE A LONG JOURNEY THROUGH
THE DEMANDS OF PAINTING:”

A reading of the exhibition “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece”, Athens (June 2019 to August 2020).

The exhibition “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece”, organised by the Athens Municipal Gallery, highlighted individual formulations of Greek artists of the twentieth century that represent real exceptions “regarding the prevalent academic climate in Greek art and the dominant modernist tendencies of the 30s Generation”, according to exhibition curator Denys Zacharopoulos.¹ Artists, who in their majority did not hold institutional positions and developed independent artistic idioms, with influences from the French Modernism and Expressionism, were represented by paintings, engravings, drawings and sculptures, created mainly from the beginning until the third quarter of the twentieth century.² The exhibition also treated, in a comprehensive way, the issue concerning the perception of Expressionism in Greece,³ by displaying

works of art by Giorgos Bouzianis and Giorgos Oikonomidis, expressionists par excellence, and by painters from their immediate circle, as well as by artists who – after using expressionistic writing – proceeded to more personal or abstract ways of expression.

This important artistic event was hosted in the New Municipal Gallery in Metaxourgeio, Athens, a neoclassical building designed by the Danish architect Christian Hansen, which until 1875 served as the headquarters of a silk factory, which lent its name to the whole district of Metaxourgeio. Over the last decade the building has hosted several artistic and educational events, as well as temporary exhibitions, displaying parts of the rich collection of the Athens Municipal Gallery, which numbers more than 3,000 artworks, many of which are considered important moments in the evolution of Greek art in the twentieth century.

The first of the three rooms of the exhibition displayed artworks from the beginning of the twentieth century whose creators had deviated from the academic Athens–Munich axis, working mainly in the artistic climate of French

¹ Denys Zacharopoulos, “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece” (exhibition leaflet), 2019.

² The exhibition comprised a total of 104 artworks by 41 artists.

³ On this topic, see indicatively Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos, “La Réception de l’expressionisme en Grèce dans les trois premières décennies du XXe siècle,” in *Expressionisme(s) et avant-gardes*, ed.

Isabelle Krzykowski and Cécille Millot (Paris: L’Improviste, 2007), 149–62.

Modernism. Some of these works echo the artists' conversation with expressionistic writing while others are snapshots of their route towards the adoption of the expressionistic idiom.⁴ The "French Landscape" by Dimitris Galanis (1879–1966), at the start of the exhibition, exudes the cosmopolitan aura of the multifaceted artist. The painting itself justifies the term "exceptions", as it balances, like all of Galanis' art, the geometry of Cezanne with the lessons of Fauvism and Cubism, Impressionism.⁵ Equally significant was the representation of Periklis Byzantios (1893–1972) in the same room. The artist who abandoned his studies in Munich to continue in Paris, finally forming a purely personal idiom, was represented by the poetic "The Model and his Idol", by the

"Pines" – with multiseptic influences of Konstantinos Parthenis and Cezanne – as well as by a series of drawings.⁶ "The Way Back" and "The Landscape" of Periklis Lytras (1888–1940), the youngest and prematurely departed member of the famous painter family, indicated the debt of Lytras' poetic painting to Impressionism and to the art of his brother Nikolaos. Three paintings, the lyrical "Procession of the Resurrection", the "Impressions from Athens Park", with its heavy contours and the warm colours, and, finally, "The Last Rehearsal", a work in the spirit of Intimism from the series of paintings "Pierrots", introduced a prominent "exception" in Greek art: their creator, Theophrastos Triantafyllidis (1888–1933), who stoically endured the misfortunes of his personal life in adverse historical circumstances, was one of the most ignored artists of Greek Modernism in his time and still remains rather unknown to the public.

The conversation of many Greek artists with Expressionism concluded, among others, in a partial adoption of expressionistic writing as a means for the expression of the artists' inner world. The symbolic idiom of Michalis Oikonomou (1883–1993) is evident in "Houses with Water"; the "fluffy" texture, due to the vest used as a painting surface, intensifies the expressionistic character of the work.⁷ The lyric painting

⁴ This review consulted the following reference books: Nelli Kyriazi, *Η Πινακοθήκη του Δήμου Αθηναίων: Ελληνική Ζωγραφική – Χαρακτική – Γλυπτική* (Athens: Adam, 1994); Chrysanthos Christou, *Νεοελληνική Χαρακτική* (Athens: Athinon, 1994); Ilias G. Mykoniatis, *Νεοελληνική Γλυπτική* (Athens: Athinon, 1996). Dora Komini-Dialeti and Eugenios D. Matthiopoulos, eds., *Λεξικό Ελλήνων Καλλιτεχνών: Ζωγράφοι – Γλύπτες – Χαρακτές, 16ος–20ός αι.*, 4 vols. (Athens: Melissa, 1997–2000); Chrysanthos Christou, *Η Ζωγραφική του 20ού αιώνα* (Athens: Athinon, 2006); Christou, *Η ελληνική ζωγραφική στον εικοστό αιώνα*, 3 vols. (Athens: Association for the Dissemination of Useful Books, 2000–2007). The same works could be also suggested for further reading.

⁵ Emmanouil Mavrommatis, *Η χαρακτική και η ζωγραφική του Δημήτρη Γαλάνη, 1879–1966* (Athens: Diogenis, 1983), 51–145.

⁶ Chrysanthos Christou, "Από το ρεαλισμό και το γαλλικό εμπρεσιονισμό σε μια προσωπική ζωγραφική του ουσιαστικού και της εσωτερικής αλήθειας," *Περικλής Βυζάντιος: Η ζωή ενός ζωγράφου* (Athens: National Gallery, 1984), 11–12.

⁷ Afroditi Kouria, *Μιχάλης Οικονόμου*

of the painter and engraver Koula Bekiari (1905–1992) has been characterised as “expressionistic impressionism”.⁸ Tokens of this idiom are evident in the paintings “Berta”, “Bonatsa”, as well as “Girl’s Head”, with the penetrating eyes, due to the overlapping layers of colours in their contours.⁹ In the same framework, Mikis Matsakis (1900–1978) in his “Karditsa Market” combined an expressionistic writing with influences from Impressionism and social realism.¹⁰ Finally, in “The First Pose” and “The Landscape” of Angelos Theodoropoulos (1883–1965), the female figure and the trees, respectively, are exalted as symbols in the climate of a postimpressionistic painting, with expressionistic pursuits.

Snapshots of the course of artists towards the gradual adoption of the expressionistic idiom are works such as “In the Land of the Cyclops” by Vallias Sermetzidis (1911–1983),

whose expressionistic requests would be implemented in his later paintings in the context of social realism. In the same way, the illuminated and nostalgic watercolours of Iphigenia Lagana (1915–2004) – “Table in the Countryside”, “Nafpio”, “From Attica” and “Landscape” – echo early influences from plein-air impressionistic painting and Cezanne’s art, as well; later she would express herself in purely psychographic expressionistic compositions. Moreover, the portraits of Aglaia Papa (1904–1984), “Synthesis–Woman at an Easel”, “Little Zoe”, “Girl at the Window”, with their gentle impressionistic light, bear the traces of her apprenticeship to Parthenis, while landscapes such as the “Corfiot Olives” constitute the prelude to her commitment to Expressionism.

The second room of the exhibition paid tribute to Bouzianis (1885–1959) and Oikonomidis (1891–1958), as the par excellence representatives of Expressionism in Greece. Both had encountered Expressionism during their studies in Germany and concluded with suggesting a “Mediterranean or Greek Expressionism” through personal elaboration.¹¹ The watercolour “Channel of Dieppe” is a typical landscape of Bouzianis’ art,¹² while the female figures in the panels “Two Women” and “A Woman at the Mirror”, are rendered from the painter’s penetrating and subtractive writing “as figures alluding in their

(Athens: Adam, 2001), 111 and 254–55, catalogue no. 72, where the painting is entitled “Ακροθαλασσιά” (“Seashore”).

⁸ Stelios Lydakis, *Κούλα Μπεκιάρη: Ζωγραφική Χαρακτική* (Athens: Melissa, 1976), 31–32.

⁹ Tasos Koutsouris, “Η ζωγραφική της Κούλας Μπεκιάρη,” in *Μπεκιάρη: Κούλα Μπεκιάρη: Ζωγραφική – Χαρακτική. Άννα Μπεκιάρη: Γλυπτική – Ζωγραφική*, ed. Tasos Koutsouris and Dimitris Pavlopoulos (Athens: Adam–Pergamos, 2007), 17–64, 145, where the “Girl’s Head” is entitled “Παναγιού” (Panagiou).

¹⁰ Spyros Moschonas, “Αδρά φυσιογνωμία μεσημβρινού τύπου με ‘μανταλιτέ’ Ευρωπαίου,” in *Μίκης Ματσάκης 1900–1978* (Athens: National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, 2017), 11–42.

¹¹ Christou, *Η ελληνική ζωγραφική*, 1:37–38.

¹² In Dimitris Deligiannis, *Μπουζιάνης* (Athens: Adam, 2006), 296, catalogue no. 321, the painting is referred to as “Factory near the Channel, Diep”.

grandeur the passions of our century”, as their creator himself noted.¹³ Two wood engravings by Oikonomidis, “Livadia” and “The New Karlobasi”, represent the multitalented engraver and painter who was unrecognised in his time.

The same room also hosted works of artists who mainly used expressionistic writing. The prosopography “A Girl” and the landscape “Skopelos” by Maria Anagnostopoulou (1890–1971) recall the scandal caused by her expressionistic paintings at the 1926 exhibition of the Greek Artists Association artistic group.¹⁴ The evocative dark colours and the confined space in “The Harbour” reflect the existential art and the agonising mind of Mimis Vitsoris (1902–1945). “The Melancholic Outbreak”, the “Girl”, as well as the archetypal composition of the “Mother with Child”, were indicative of Selest Polychroniadou’s (1904–1985) work in the echo of German Expressionism, while the ceramic vases and tiles were tokens of her multifaceted creativity in the framework of the decorative arts (Rooms A and C).

In the third room of the exhibition, the works of Bouzianis’ pupils and friends imply an initial imaginary web: the psychographic “Portrait” of Dimitris Davis (1905–1973), the innerness and the evocative use of colour in “The Quinces” and “The Seated Figure” by Nikos Chronopoulos (1910–1977), as

well as the dynamic palette and the abstract forms in “Pylos Square” by Koula Marangopoulou (1910–1997), repay the debt of their creators to their teacher’s work. Orestis Kanellis (1910–1979) also acknowledged Bouzianis as his teacher; in his paintings “Myrto”, “Little Girl” and “Fog in Vermio”, various other influences are evident, mainly from Giorgos Gounaropoulos.

A group of works by later artists, which formed a second imaginary web in the third room, reflected additional aspects of the perception of Expressionism: in the engravings “Fanfare” and “The Accordionist” by the internationally renowned artist Lambros Orfanos (1916–1995), the expressionistic tone and naïf style were recruited in order to illustrate the gloomy, grotesque world of circus performers and people on the margins; in the paintings “Quarry”, “Workers”, “Aman in Vyonas” by Alexandros Korogiannakis (1906–1966), Expressionism became the means of expression of social realism; Errikos Frantziskakis’ (1908–1958) landscapes, such as the “Landscape” and the “Pines and Forest”, revealed aspects of his symbolic art; Giannis Mitarakis’ (1898–1963) works “Santorini”, “Meltemi”, “Women of Megara at the Well” and “Miss T.K.” constitute a version of personal expressionistic art, with a parallel adoption of the fauvist colour, echoing Soutine’s art, if our reading is correct.

Finally, “The Nude” by Giannis Gaitis (1923–1984), “Janet” by Giannis Maltezos (1915–1987) and “The Hat with the Cactus” by Eleni Zongolopoulou (1909–1991) are tokens of the varied elaboration of the expressionistic idiom of their creators, towards the formation

¹³ Nelli Kyriazi, ed., *Ελληνική Ζωγραφική: Ελληνική Ζωγραφική από τις Συλλογές της Πινακοθήκης του Δήμου Αθηναίων* (Patras: Municipal Gallery of Patras, 2000), 18.

¹⁴ Zacharopoulos, “Exceptions.”

of personal abstract idioms, which were completed in later phases.

Six sculptures all over the three rooms of the exhibition highlighted aspects of Expressionism in modern Greek sculpture that are also relevant to those developed in painting. In the first room, “The Refugees” by Loukas Doukas (1890–1925) vibrates with expressive passion, intensified by its expressionistic distortion, while the “Nude” by Titsa (Areti) Chrysochoidi (1906–1990) captures the expression of the inner world of the form. An attempt at psychography, despite the typical characteristics, is evident in the “Bust of an Old Man” by Thanassis Apartis (1899–1992). The “Bust of Yiannoulis Halepas” by Antonis Sochos (1888–1975), in the third room, apart from being a token of the artist’s turn towards modernism, was a quasi-presence in the exhibition of the Tinian artist, the eminently idiosyncratic creator in the history of modern Greek sculpture. Finally, the brass “Adolescent” by Christos Kapralos (1909–1993), with the realism and dynamism that characterise his early sculptures, as well as the spiritualised portrait of “The Painter Frantziskakis”, a work of George Zongolopoulos (1903–2004),¹⁵ represented two prominent creators of Greek sculpture in its evolvement towards Modernism.

Special mention should be made of four letters (in copy) concerning the circumstances under which paintings by Bouzianis and Vitsoris were obtained by the Municipal Gallery. The exhibition of

these archival testimonies reflected in a thrifty way the otherwise well-known historical and social framework of the twentieth century, but also the more specific conditions of the living and creating of the artists, focusing not by chance on the trials of Bouzianis’ life. It is important to recall that after his return from Nazi Germany, Bouzianis was not assigned the post he was promised at the High School of Fine Arts, which resulted in his falling into complete poverty; his art was acknowledged in Greece much later. In one of the displayed letters addressed to the mayor of Athens (14 October 1952), Bouzianis, “an artist who devoted all his life to art”, offers to sell one of his paintings to the Municipal Gallery. In his relevant report (1 July 1954), Spyros Papaloukas, the director of the gallery, concludes: “The work belongs to this category, in which the physical object is analysed in shape, colour, tone. To achieve that aim, the artist has to make a long journey through the demands of painting.” In a second letter to the mayor (16 April 1957), Papaloukas is also in favour of purchasing some works by Vitsoris. “A thorough artist – who escaped the attention of the uneducated and wealthy public, while the cultivated public, today, due to the adverse circumstances, is in a position to support him only morally – is in financial difficulty,” reports the painter Koula Marangopoulou in a recommendation letter (17 January 1951) for her teacher, Bouzianis, condensing the suffocating economic and social situation in which most of the artists – “exceptions” – created; many of them had to bear the weight of a mental illness, as well.

¹⁵ Dimitris Pavlopoulos, *Ζογγολόπουλος* (Athens: Adam, 2007), 35.

The exhibition of the above-mentioned letters demonstrates the importance of archival material for the documentation of artworks. In parallel, they pay tribute to Papaloukas; due to his actions and criteria as director from 1941 to 1957, the Municipal Gallery collection was enriched with masterpieces of modern Greek art. This topic was extensively elaborated in the exhibition “Art and Era: The Collection of the Athens Municipal Gallery through the Eyes of Spyros Papaloukas”, organised at the New Municipal Gallery in the previous year, 2018–2019.

The role of artistic groups – such as the Association of Greek Artists (1911–1939), the Union of Free Artists (1935–1949), the Art Group (1917–1944), the Stathmi group (literally “level”) (1949) – in the configuration and promotion of several of the creators who were represented in the exhibition, is underlined in particular in Zacharopoulos’ text, published in the elegant leaflet that was distributed to the visitors of the exhibition.¹⁶ This specially important view would have been developed further had an exhibition catalogue been published.

In addition to the networking of artistic groups, the works in the exhibition allowed connections concerning various other networks – such as apprenticeships, wider educational or even family relations – highlighting them as factors in artistic creation. We have already referred to the Bouzianis circle and his pupils, which was clearly displayed in the third room. The artistic heritage of Parthenis,

not represented in the exhibition, was evident in the works of his students, Bekiari, Papa and Sermetzidis being the most typical cases. Women creators were represented in a remarkable way; we have indicatively mentioned Bekiari, Papa, Lagana, Zongolopoulou, Marangopoulou – personalities who were brought up, educated and artistically shaped in the context of important family, educational and cultural networks of their time.

To sum up, the exhibition “Exceptions: Aspects of Expressionism in Greece” generously offered an opportunity to encounter works of art not often exhibited and artists who are only partially known, as their works are scattered in private collections. It is worth noting that for the same reasons the exhibition was ideal for didactic use. Artists, “exceptions”, extra-institutional, sometimes marginalised, often exhausted by the vortex of the historical conjuncture; cosmopolitan nevertheless, they conversed in various ways, as the exhibition showed, with international artistic movements; going through “a long journey through the demands of painting”, they elaborated and incorporated in their art the expressive abilities of Expressionism, concluding in individual formulations – pieces of Hellenic Modernism – and finally delivering to students and younger artists not so much the continuation of their art, but the lesson of the constant and free pursuit of personal expression.

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¹⁶ Zacharopoulos, “Exceptions.”