

# **Heritage at Risk**

## **The educational role of Museums in rescuing and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage**

### **The Benaki Museum example**

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**Abstract.** The recent directive of the European Union for merging tradition with innovation for the sustainability of European culture and particularly for the resilience of traditional arts has found its perfect example in the past in the seminars of traditional jewellery-making techniques organized for 25 years at the Benaki Museum by the undersigned with the collaboration of several colleagues of the museum. The seminar drew on inspiration from the itinerant goldsmiths of Epirus region and was based on the need for a portable workshop; it was thus traditional in both its concept and implementation. On the other hand, it was also innovative, as it didn't stop with the graduation of the students, but it included a great deal of mentoring, which led to the formation of new businesses (start-ups we would call them today) by the students themselves. Nowadays, when the shops tend to be more and more inundated by computerized designs, this continuing education seminar could become again a highlight for museums which would merge cultural heritage with Creative and Cultural Industries.

**Keywords:** Heritage, traditional, goldsmiths, continuing education

## **1 Introduction: The European realization of the value of traditional arts**

Since 2018, European Year of Cultural Heritage, the European Commission and other organizations have focused on the need to re-discover and revive traditional arts, albeit with a twist of innovation [1]. The new prerogative is the merging of cultural heritage with creative and cultural industries, in order to maintain a distinct "European" identity in artifacts and works of art, instead of succumbing to globalized aesthetic tendencies, usually imported. A series of programmes have been designed to support this general guideline: Creative Europe and Horizon calls have stressed the need for a rediscovery of long-lost traditional arts and their merging with innovative technologies for a modern, up-to-date and resilient effect. Meanwhile, all over Europe hubs for

cultural and artisanal creation make their appearance, enabling artisans to make a living with reduced costs through renting a space and using a basic set of equipment and the mentoring facilitation of the hub organizers. Some examples include the Make Ici organization with 4 hubs all over France ([www.makeici.org](http://www.makeici.org)) and the Craft Hub Project, co-funded by the European Union ([www.crafthub.eu](http://www.crafthub.eu)). Integrated within the New European Bauhaus philosophy, this prerogative, to which abide also museums and cultural centres, aims at creating a new, citizen- and creative-friendly environment and at rekindling the European creativity which highlighted European civilization in the previous, centuries.

## **2 Continuing education seminars on traditional gold-and silver-smithing in the Benaki Museum (1989-2014): Materials and Methods**

Long before the orchestrated European initiative, however, some museums had already realized that their role, apart from safeguarding heritage artifacts and works of art, was also to preserve intangible tradition and the knowledge of traditional arts that went extinct within the hi-tech frenzy of the '90s and beyond. One of them was the Benaki Museum, which instigated the first adult continuing education seminar on its premises, apart from the educational programmes which were already established towards the end of the 1980s.

This idea for this seminar was first conceived in 1987. and it was designed as a unique seminar in the field of gold-and silver-smithing, even on a professional level, both in Greece and worldwide.[2] Within the international atmosphere advocating the new role that the museums were called to play in the '80s regarding Continuing Education for Adults, Mrs. Niki Belesioti, responsible for the childrens' educational programmes in the Benaki Museum, at the instigation of the former director of the museum, Prof. Angelos Delivorrias, and of Aemilia Geroulanou, asked me to inaugurate the first jewellery-making seminar for adults, as she knew that I already had a long experience in the field. [3] In those days I was curator of the Coptic Textiles Collection of the Benaki Museum, which was one of the most important collections of the sort worldwide. Niki Belesioti knew that before I became a member of the Benaki Museum, I had been a consultant for the National Organization of Greek Handcrafts, and that due to my academic specialization in Comparative Ethnology I was an expert in the study both of textiles and of Costumes. I had also been awarded during an exhibition of Greek jewellery in New York. [4]

Inaugurated two years later, in 1989, it was, in those days, a Startup seminar, following present-day terminology, which has been attended by about 1,500 people in total in the course of the 25 years of its implementation. It was obvious that the museum wanted to take its social responsibility and community participation to another level. This had been a long-standing stance of the late Director of the Museum, Prof. Angelos Delivorrias. [5]



**Fig. 1.** The implementation of the seminar in the Benaki Museum

## 2.1 “Traditional resourcefulness”

At first, I became enthusiastic with the idea, but I soon realized that the creation of an educational programme (seminar) for hand-made jewellery would be an impossible endeavour due to practical difficulties.

I had to mobilize all my resourcefulness and imagination in order to transform the practical difficulties for organizing a workshop of gold- and silver-smithing in a museum. The reason is that such a workshop requires a permanent space, a workbench, propanium bottles and fuses, oxides and other caustic fluids, heavy steel tools such as clamps, items that are not allowed within a museum. Nevertheless, I managed to find solutions to all that through my study of the gold- and silversmiths’ practices from Kalarrytes in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, who had to commute within Greece and the Balkans carrying their tools within chests from one town to another.[6]

That seminar was welcomed with applause by the broader public and had been taking place annually for 25 years. For a rather long period it constituted the only school for traditional jewellery making, apart from the one of the Vocational Training National Organization destined for young people without income or the State School for gold- and silver-smithing in Ioannina. It is a well-known fact that this art in Greece was a “closed” profession restricted to members of the same family, usually taught from father to son. Apart from the Benaki Museum, this seminar was implemented also in other cultural organizations, such as the Educational Programmes of the Athens’ College and the Cultural Club of Palaeo Psychico. Furthermore, the Southeastern College of Greece, acknowledging the importance of the Greek gold- and silver-smithing created a specialised BA and MA. Finally, NTUA also recognized the fundamental value of this seminar by according its accreditation to it.

This educational programme proved a valuable tool of culture, learning, skill building and financial development for a wide public, leading the students to a ludicrous

profession. Thus, we attained one of the goals of Antonis Benakis, founder of the Benaki Museum back in 1930, who envisioned a museum which would “contribute to the cultural education of the broader public”.

The seminar of “wandering silversmiths” has been internationally acknowledged for its originality and some of the former students have become not only designers, artisans or industrialists but also professors, teaching in municipal or other cultural organisations and transmitting the art of silver-smithing in other cities and islands of Greece.

Furthermore, another positive contribution of these educational programmes of the Museum was the preservation and revival of some ancient techniques of hand-made jewellery, such as *embossing*, an ancient practice that was almost extinct at the end of the 1980s, *filigree* (working with fine threads of metal), *granulation* (an ancient Greek method for chain-making), as well as the rare, for Greek standards, Medieval technique of *incised jewels with nitric acid*. [7]

Let’s have a look now into the ways I used for overcoming the practical difficulties regarding the implementation of the seminar in 1989 within the Museum. Its uniqueness and efficiency lay in the fact that it was taught once a week on the basis of a movable workshop: the students were taught one technique every week and they practiced at home. The difficulties they encountered would be resolved in the next lesson, for each one of them, whereas a new technique would be taught as well. This weekly schedule allowed working people to participate at the seminar, who, otherwise would be excluded from daily tuition. The seminar was used as a model for other educational organisations and for fields such as painting, icon-painting, doll-making, hot-wax (encaustic) painting etc.

Beyond the practical aspect of the training in these particular techniques, I was also offering e-mentoring (with modern standards) to my students. By acknowledging their special artistic talents, I provided professional counsels, thus leading them to professional success.

## 2.2 The “portable” workshop



**Fig. 2.** The portable workshop

At first, I tried to find tools that would not be permanently settled within a workshop. I therefore looked into the tool market of Athinas street. I realised that there were no metal jigsaws in the market; the ones extant served for sawing wood. Thus I ordered metal jigsaws from abroad. The second step was to order at Dilmas shop a wooden jigsaw-file board with an adjusted screw that allowed it to be fitted on common wooden tables that the Benaki museum used for educational programmes, transforming them into temporary gold-smithing benches for the duration of each seminar module. I then looked for hand-driven drills, given the fact that in this seminar I wanted us to be totally electricity-free, like the old silversmiths and not to be dependent on electric power for cutting or polishing metals like modern artisans.

In 1989 the shops providing jewellers' equipment were only few and far between. I collaborated with one of them, in particular, namely S. Michaelides SA, as they imported tools from Germany, tested by the owner's own son who studied in Germany. In those days the Germans had created light fireproof plaques, made of a new, ground-breaking material, suitable for high-temperature silver melding. This enabled not only my students but also silversmiths in general to avoid "deadly asbestos". As the seminar was taking place on Tuesdays, when the Museum was closed for the public, instead of ventilators we could work in front of open windows when we worked on chemical incisions and oxidation.

Instead of large propane bottles we used little welding torches, which had just arrived from Italy in those days. They proved extremely effective. As for the necessary tools, the guardian angel of the seminar –and guard of the museum, mr. Vassilis Stravoskoufis helped me carry several heavy toolboxes and store them in specific spaces which allowed the museum to keep the hall empty for the public.

The metals I gave to novices were copper and bronze sheets that I bought at Vi-ochalko, measuring 30x40 with a height of 0,5-1.00 mm. After the first lessons, we worked on precious metals and then took the created items to specialised workshops downtown.

### **3 Design implementation techniques**

During the first lesson I presented an introduction to the morphological and structural elements of metals as well as a historic retrospective from the Neolithic period onwards based on archaeological data. I also presented the characteristic techniques compatible to particular metals for creating jewellery based on their use. Aspects such as the ability of metals to be stretched and torn were also presented, thus offering an idea about the metals' structure and features, e.g. their degree of oxidation.

Part of the introductory lesson was also the method of archiving and creating a portfolio, through photographing each creation and placing a date on it, thus making it retrievable for orders of unique, hand-made items.



**Fig. 3.** Embossed ancient Greek-style by our student Panos Kardasis

#### *Beginners' Techniques:*

For eight weeks I taught jigsawing, cutting into metal, filing with files of different sizes, filing through metal, polishing with sandpaper (finishing), metal piercing, incising with nitric acid, hammering (decorative finishing), matière. Also, open chains with wire, rings with open shank, open chains, metal-colouring.

#### *Advanced Techniques:*

For another eight weeks I taught hard and soft silver soldering of metals and wires, polishing, annealing, soldering of multi-level compositions with a combination of metals (topography), hand-made clasps for earrings (hooks, nails), construction of compact granules, granulation (from Latin *granum*=grain), sizing rings, oxidation for silver, reticulation, mokume technique, loop in loop chains (ancient Greek design), gem stone settings. [8]

## **4 Results: Professional advance and mentoring**

There was not an age or other type of barrier for these seminars. Thus, my advice to younger students, was to follow the artistic production, selling their items through art galleries and exhibitions, like other artists, painters, sculptors etc. did.

At this point I have to express my gratitude to the Titanium art gallery and its owner, the late Aristeides Giagiannos, for hosting exhibitions of the best students of the seminars upon their completion of both beginners' and advanced courses. This opened up the perspective of a professional career for them.



**Fig. 4.** Artistic by our student Beky Doriza



**Fig. 5.** Ring by our student Stylia Kapitsimadi

On the contrary, some students with family obligations, particularly women, were advised to appropriate the embossing technique with cold chisels copied from ancient Greek tools from the National Archaeological Museum; I managed to introduce them into the commercial world, so that they could become “modelists”. Their original hand-made items were well paid for. For example a hand-made model in those days could be sold for as much as 50.000 drachmas (at a time when an average salary was about 150.000). This professional perspective had created a high reputation for the Benaki Museum seminar.

Through this seminar, people who were already professionals in other fields had managed to find an outlet for their creative talent: architects, artists, biologists counted among our students. Many women, who needed to learn a profession in a short period of time and with little money in order to be able to make a living were also part of our audience; they confessed, later on, that in this way they managed to help their children study or start their life.

All the above is proof that the seminar had become a tutorial with a very low cost and a fast professional development. Some of our graduates were accepted as interns at the workshop of the famous jewellery designer Ilias Lalaounis, in the neoclassical building where now stands the Lalaounis' museum, close to the Acropolis. They produced high-quality hammered jewellery, made through ancient Greek techniques as I had taught them. [9]

In the course of the 25 years of this original and successful seminar, most of our students participated at large professional exhibitions and then created their own shops in Plaka or their own export companies. Some of them have also evolved as artists and they have their own ateliers or exhibit their work in London and New York as well-established designers. Others, became also teachers in similar seminars which started being created in neighborhoods of Athens and other cities all over Greece, such as YMCA, the municipality of Kifissia and other cultural centres. Hence, the interest of the public towards jewellery-making as a creative and lucrative profession offered the incentive to the state authorities to create public Institutes of Vocational Training, whereas the famous gold-and silversmithing school of Stemnitsa, Arcadia, re-opened in 2013.

Important exhibitions also took place at the Athens' College and the Cultural Club of Palaeo Phychico, as well as in the Benaki Museum itself in 1994 and 2000. During the refurbishment of the Benaki Museum, the courses took place at the Goulandris-Horn Foundation in Plaka, a kind offer of the late Dimitris Horn and the Director S. Filinis.



**Fig. 6.** Silver earrings by our student Tasos Papanastasiou

It is particularly moving that we had students coming to this seminar from all over Greece, from Thessaloniki, Patras, Herakleion, Samos, Lamia, Xanthi. The groups were enthusiastic and exchanged ideas, collaborating in perfect harmony. Friendships and business partnerships were also part of the fruitful side-results of the courses throughout those 25 years.

In the course of my long professional involvement with Greek Gold-and Silversmithing, always from the educational point of view, I also contributed to the enhancement of this art through publications in specialised magazines, such as 24 Carati, Kosmima, The Jeweller etc. My publications were relative to the public's interests as the artisans needed to know the Art Historical aspects of jewellery-making.



## 5 Discussion: Academic outcomes

In 1993, in the course of the first Presidency of Greece in Europe, I wrote the first book for the global history of the Greek , titled: “The Greek jewellery from antiquity to the present. History-Art-Technique”. It was published through support by the Hellenic Organization of Professional Handcrafts and it demonstrated the ancient Greek origins of jewellery. Later on, another monumental collective work, “5000 years of Greek jewellery” was published by Greek Center for Silversmithing. All this had as a result the enhancement of gold-and silversmithing as an important art and not only as a “guild handcraft” as was the established concept of it within the broader public. I personally became a member of the Board of Trustees of the Greek Center for Silversmithing, which is a state organisation, whereas in 2018, as founder of the not-for-profit organization Heritage and Museums, I have signed a memorandum of collaboration with the Pan-Hellenic Confederation of Artisanal Gold-and Silversmiths and Watch sellers, in order to continue to enhance Greek jewellery beyond the borders of Greece, as an art developed already in the Neolithic and Mycenaean period to the Classical, the Byzantine and the Modern period, in a time-transcending journey. Finally, I would like to stress that my precious assistant during this journey was my student Eirini Sikiaridi, who followed me throughout the Benaki Museum seminars all these years, offering me her support voluntarily. She has become a well-known designer herself.



**Fig. 7.** Earrings by our student Evelina Papantoniou

## 6 Conclusion: Future steps

The modern approach to jewellery-making is, of course, striving away from the content of the Benaki Museum seminar. Computerized design and 3D printing are steadily taking their place behind the fashionable window-cases of expensive jewelers. However, there are several techniques that can never be mechanically reproduced. Fine jewellery and artistic jewellery are still pretty much the result of personal inspiration and

hand work. The financial crisis in Greece was more or less the reason why the Benaki museum seminar was discontinued. Within a period of instability and with the prices of precious metals skyrocketing, it was a difficult period for the country, let alone design and luxury products. However, the touristic growth in Greece and the request for Greek handcrafts in all e-shops and exhibitions demonstrate that it is high time such seminars take place again. Naturally, the times nowadays request for greater innovation as well as for the digital dimension of every educational activity. Hence, we could propose the organization of hybrid seminars (which would save students from other areas of Greece or even from abroad the cost of commuting) as well as the creation of an e-exhibition space for all specimens of work of the students. Modern networking facilities and selling platforms such as Etsy allow for faster professional development and for participation at joint events. Digitized processes of recording even the minor details in the jewellery design and construction allow for detailed documentation and the creation of digital toolkits to help novices in the jewellery-makers profession to feel more secure. Last but not least, the modern role of museums, which can develop into hubs for merging cultural heritage with Creative and Cultural Industries offers the potential for the merging of modern design with historic patterns, symbols and techniques and produce completely new and appealing results in the jewellery and ornaments field. If museums abide to this role, a fascinating process is about to begin!

For Angelos Delivorrias, former Director of the Benaki Museum,

**In memoriam**

*A little contribution to the man who always believed that a museum ought to have a dynamic presence in the field of culture and education and who managed to rank the Benaki Museum among the greatest museums in the world.*

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