

## **The Emergence of Modern Greek Painting, 1830-1930 From the Bank of Greece collection**

This exhibition of paintings and prints from the Bank of Greece collection does not claim to document the first hundred years of modern Greek art in full, not only because only a small part of the Bank's collection is on display, but also because several significant painters and works, which would have made this exhibition more comprehensive, are not represented. Instead, the exhibition should be seen as a sample of the creativity of major Greek artists during the period 1830-1930.

There is no consensus among art historians about when modern Greek painting actually emerged. Some historians place its beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, in which case it would include late Byzantine art. According to others, it appeared in the eighteenth century as a derivation of the Italian Renaissance practised by artists in the Ionian Islands. The prevailing view, however, is that modern Greek painting emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century, after the modern Greek State was founded.

Modern Greek painting, whether evolved from late Byzantine or Italian art, is rich in religious and secular works, in which one can discern influences from the late Renaissance as well as from artists from the Greek islands, particularly Crete and the Ionian Islands. Some are imaginative compositions depicting a number of figures, and others are portraits with a profound rendering of their subject's inner self.

This past would certainly include the Greek folk art tradition, which flourished throughout the nineteenth century and in the late decades of that century gave a prominent representative, also famous in Western Europe, Theophilos Hatzimichail (1871-1834).

From the outset, modern Greek art broke with its Byzantine past and defined itself as purely European. The shift toward Europe was bold, yet circumspect. Early in the twentieth century, Greek artists would turn to their past, in their quest for an identity and a source of inspiration.

The Greek artists producing paintings immediately after the Greek War of Independence, which ended in 1829, drew their subjects from Greece's recent heroic past: battle scenes from the struggle against the Ottomans and portraits of famous fighters in the war. Two leading painters at that time were Theodoros Vryzakis (1814-1878) and Dionysios Tsokos (1820-1862). An idealized image of the freedom fighter can be seen in Vryzakis's painting *Karaouli*. It is a romantic work with classicist undertones and a tendency toward a precise rendering of the human figure and inanimate objects. Tsokos painted a rugged and imposing portrait of an elderly leader in a heavy-handed plastic style. Scenes of battle are not numerous at this time and, unlike such scenes by contemporary philhellene artists, do not depict extreme violence. Battles between Greeks and Ottomans were best left to the seascape painters of the next generation, Konstantinos Volanakis (1837-1907) and Ioannis Altamouras (1852-78), whose heroic views of naval engagements give a measure of Greece's struggle for independence.

When Otto, son of the fervent philhellene Ludwig I of Bavaria, was placed on the Greek throne in 1833, Greek artists turned their attention to Munich. This focus was reinforced by the founding in 1837 of the Athens School of Arts, which based its teaching methods on the German model. Though several Greek artists chose to study in other European capitals, such as Copenhagen, Brussels and Paris, Munich had the strongest appeal. Greek art would be permeated by German artistic currents during the second half of the nineteenth century.

At the Munich Academy, Greek students were imbued with ideas about art from academically conservative professors. In particular, as students of Karl von Piloty (1826-86), they acquired sound technique through an intensive curriculum based on drawing, elementary painting, and master classes. Though the academy had marked leanings toward historical representation and portraiture, it did not restrict the students' thematic choices or hold back the development of a personal style. The style in which most of the students expressed themselves—a high degree of attention to texture and detail—and which they brought back to the School of Art in Athens, became known as academic realism.

Greek painting in the second half of the nineteenth century was not different from elsewhere in Europe.

Genre painting, portraying everyday tasks in urban centers and the countryside, was prevalent particularly in agricultural and pastoral scenes, festivals, and scenes of mourning. Of special interest were architectural features, local costumes, and objects of everyday life. Portraiture was the second most popular thematic subject, with a shift in focus from freedom fighters to merchants and the middle class and an interest in the psychological profile of the person portrayed.

The Greek painters who stand out as authentic representatives of the school of Munich are Nikephoros Lytras (1832-1904), Konstantinos Volanakis (1837-1907), Nikolaos Gysis (1842-1901), and Georgios Iakovidis (1853-1932). The art of all four reveals diverse but strong artistic personalities, which cannot be fully appreciated from the few works in this exhibit. Arriving in Munich in 1865, Gysis remained at the academy and became an instructor and, in 1888, a full professor. The three other artists returned to Greece and taught at the Athens School of Arts. Their teaching and their art set the direction for artistic education in Greece through the turn of the century.

A gifted teacher, Nikephoros Lytras is considered the father of modern Greek painting. His oeuvre covers a wide range of themes, with particular emphasis on genre painting, characterized by an authentic portrayal of the people and life of his time. Nasredin Hodja was painted after his 1873 visit to Asia Minor with Nikolaos Gysis. The two were already familiar with the Orient because of the Ottoman occupation of Greece, and they returned to Athens with much pictorial material. The painting, despite its small size, displays Lytras's skill in characterization, his color preferences, and the bravura brushstroke that he acquired as a student at the Munich Academy in 1860-66.

Nikolaos Gysis spent most of his life in Germany, paying only occasional visits to Greece. He maintained strong ties with the Munich Academy, as seen in *Nature Morte*, a studio work painted according to the Munich taste for composition and projection of volume and color. His genre paintings depicted German themes at first and Greek themes later. An indirect influence came from French realism, introduced to Munich in the work of Gustave Courbet, which the circle of Wilhelm Leibl (Leiblkreis) favored. Toward the end of his life, Gysis's mysterious, allegorical, and symbolist paintings reflected the fin-de-siècle in which he lived. *Eros and Centaur* illustrates Gysis's original approach to a commonplace mythological theme with an emphasis placed on the powerful centaur's total submission to Eros. The dark color and mysterious lighting accentuate the symbolism of the scene. In *Pallas Athena*, which is a study for the design of the Athens University flag, the rigid, flatly articulated figure of the goddess Athena is appropriately emblematic. Gysis's oil sketches are artistic gems. Elegant, powerful, and quickly executed, they were probably intended as studies for larger works.

The *Standing Girl* by Ioannis Zacharias (1845-shortly after 1873) is not only a sensitive full-length portrait but also an account of the ethos, attire, and occupations of young Greek women in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. A skillful characterization and an evocative image of the subject's inner self, it assimilates genre elements to enhance the poetic quality of the figure. Zacharias was a gifted student of the Munich Academy, but he became mentally ill and died very young. This perceptive manner of characterization is sustained in the work of Hector Doukas (1886-1969). Doukas's image of a long-suffering old woman with a lifetime of worries carved on her face derives from a popular figure in traditional Greek life and one of the mainstays of genre painting.

Georgios Iakovidis, a portraitist and narrator of children's scenes, brought what he had learned in Munich to the Athens School of Arts, where he taught for many years. In *Father's Atelier* and *La Toilette* show two of the artist's favorite themes-children and the bourgeoisie. In the first painting, which is imbued with the innocence and freshness of childhood, Iakovidis proves to be a keen observer of children's faces and behavior. In the second, the flattering likeness of a fashionable and elegant young lady of the middle class is representative of the development of art patronage in Athens around the turn of the century.

While Konstantinos Volanakis introduced landscape painting to Greece, he won renown as the foremost seascape painter of the nineteenth century with his masterful representations of ships and sensitive renderings of atmospheric changes. The European tradition of seascape painting, mainly from the seventeenth century Dutch School and the French School of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is discernible in his work. The two paintings included in the exhibition are typical of Volanakis's calm temperament, and they epitomize his descriptive accuracy and finesse as well as his admirable and poetic rendering of the atmosphere of the harbor and its surroundings.

Ioannis Altamouras (1852-78) studied first under Nikephoros Lytras at the Athens School of Arts and then, from 1873 to 1876, on a scholarship from King George I, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen under Karl Frederik Soerensen. An outstanding painter of seascapes, Altamouras studied the atmosphere of the sea and plein air effect of light in the spirit of the French. Painters such as Volanakis and Altamouras, who were familiar with the particularities of the sea and seagoing vessels, tried to render the marine environment faithfully, depicting it without compromising its integrity and keeping it free of affectation or oversimplification.

An explicit adherence to impressionism and to the tendencies that developed in European centers other than Munich would first be observed in the work of Periklis Pantazis (1849-84). After studying in Athens and Munich and residing briefly in Paris, Pantazis settled in Brussels, where he became active in artistic circles and distinguished himself as a fine painter. It is evident from his work that Pantazis had come into contact with the realism of the French painters Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet, and then with impressionism. Pantazis's focus of interest is well illustrated in *Le Larcin*, which features a young boy sneaking up to a table to snatch a piece of fruit. An admirable combination of portrait and still-life, this work bears the stamp of Cézanne in its structure and perception of space and volume, but it is reminiscent of Manet in its use of color. This similarity with the work of Manet becomes apparent when one compares the painting to Manet's *Boy with Cherries* (1858, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon). This painting could be interpreted as an allegory of taste, since the boy's lips are practically touching the fruit.

Thalia Flora-Karavia (1871-1960) studied art at private schools in Munich from 1895 to 1900. Restless and energetic, she traveled extensively through Europe, and to Asia Minor and Egypt seeking to expand her thematic repertoire and to develop her own technique. In 1907, on a trip to Egypt, she married a journalist, and they settled in Alexandria. Both her *Self-Portrait* and her small study *Solitude* reveal her knowledge of and response to European currents such as post-impressionism. If her early works bear signs of her German schooling, her later works attest to the ease with which she assimilated fundamental changes in art.

Several painters and engravers produced representations of ancient ruins. Vincenzo Lanza (1822-1902), an Italian painter who took refuge in Greece and made a name for himself in Athens, painted ancient ruins almost exclusively. His paintings, which call to mind the works of foreign travelers to Greece in the early nineteenth century, rendered the relics of the ancient past accurately and with emotional intensity. His watercolors are unique in capturing the light of Athens, reflected by the marble surfaces.

Reaction against the Munich tendency for realism, a dark palette and broad brushstroke came not only from Greek artists who had graduated from other schools in Europe but also from former students of the Munich Academy who had been deeply stirred by the innovations of the Parisian avant-garde in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The works of Georgios Chatzopoulos (1858-1935) and Symeon Savvidis (1859-1927), for example, both of whom studied under Gysis at the Munich Academy, are marked not only by a departure from the Munich conventions and a gradual shift toward impressionism but also by a much broader preoccupation, particularly with color.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Paris began to supplant Munich as an art center. The City of Light introduced new ways of painting, freeing the work of art from the confines of visible reality and, thus, from the slavish imitations that Munich was accused of propagating. Paris also supported artists in their subjectiveness and welcomed freedom of expression. In Greece changes came about with the introduction of impressionism. This rejuvenating movement, which was not readily accepted, gained ground and managed to endure. This does not mean that the impressionist movement was fully understood or that it reached its full potential, for there were a number of inherent obstacles to its reception.

Born in northern Europe, impressionism was a medium for plein air painting conceived for the light atmosphere of the North. The subjects depicted, shrouded by the broken brushstroke of the impressionist style, lost their sharp outline and pureness of color. On the other hand, the Mediterranean light is bright and strong. This quality is faithfully transposed by Greek artists in paintings with sharply diffused surfaces, bold shapes, a lack of detail, and a flattening of the chromatic surface. This style and technique is distinctly different from the Impressionists' with the dilution of shapes, fragmentation of the chromatic tone, and array of pure colors. The uniqueness of the Greek landscape called for an

adaptation that came closer to the post-impressionist currents, such as the Nabis, fauvism and expressionism. Variations fashioned by Konstantinos Maleas, Michael Oikonomou, and other Greek painters captured Greek nature with resourcefulness and dynamism. This rejuvenating movement was promoted by the group Techni ('Art'), formed in 1917 by artists and art critics united in their pursuit of individual stylistic expression.

As late as the 1920s, the Munich style was perpetuated at the Athens School of Arts by Spyros Vikatos (1878-1960), who painted realistically with a dark palette and a bravura brush. His work is distinctly personal. Bold and irregular brushstrokes, highlighted with white, form a pulsating surface from which a figure emerges. Vikatos's style is directly reminiscent of the work of Frans Hals; his two portraits—the young boy in *The Tyrolean* and the old man in *Double Winter*—give a measure of his distinctive style and technique.

The changes made in the teachings of the Athens School of Arts were due mainly to Nikolaos Lytras (1883-1927), son of Nikephoros Lytras, and to Konstantinos Parthenis (1878-1967). Lytras introduced the concept of free, expressive drawing covered by a thick layer of paint, which calls to mind the French fauvists and the German expressionists. Parthenis brought about a radical revision of themes, form, and color treatment in Greek painting during the first half of the twentieth century. With his knowledge of Greek tradition from antiquity to the late Byzantine period and of Greek folk art, the Vienna Sezession, and the French movements at the turn of the century, Parthenis developed an evocative poetic and spiritual style (plates 27 and 28). His greatness as an innovator lay in his ability to strike an amazing balance between external influences and personal inclination. These same influences were brought to bear on the work of other artists such as Agenor Asteriadis (1898-1977), Georgios Bouzianis (1885-1959), and the popular Fotis Kontoglou (c. 1895-1965).

The styles of Konstantinos Maleas (1879-1928) and Spyros Papaloukas (1892-1957) reflect the nature of the changes made at the Athens School of Arts. Maleas painted in a vivid and austere style, merging details into large shapes of flat color enclosed in heavy outlines. He became a leading figure in twentieth-century Greek painting alongside Parthenis and Papaloukas. A landscape painter, Papaloukas admired the art of the Nabis. He boldly and convincingly combined Byzantine iconography with post-impressionist currents, as for example in *Boy with Suspenders*.

The Greek artists born around 1900 are known as the Generation of the Thirties. Reaching maturity during World War I, some of these artists took part in Greece's unsuccessful military campaign in Asia Minor and witnessed the Asia Minor disaster of 1922. Receptive to new European trends, this generation was influenced by a number of new currents (such as fauvism, expressionism, cubism, metaphysical painting, abstract art, and surrealism). After a period of adaptation, these currents were apparent in the work of Greek painters. However, movements whose formal versions at least were purely intellectual in nature, such as cubism and abstract art, were not so well received in Greece.

The importance of the opening decades of the twentieth century does not, however, lie only in this influx of new currents from Europe. It lies also in the freedom and subjectiveness of the choices of style and technique with which the artists expressed purely Greek themes. What is valued in their work is the degree of differentiation from academic tenets and the freedom of personal expression.

The Generation of the Thirties stood mainly for a return to Greek tradition and for an interpretation of this tradition through the channels of modern art. After the Asia Minor disaster, finding refuge in the life and art of Hellenism, including folk art, once more became a standard with which modern art should be reconciled. The works of Papaloukas and those of Yannis Tsarouchis (1910-89) should be seen in this light.

Yannis Tsarouchis was an exceptional example of an artist, whose erudition and involvement in activities other than painting—writing, translating ancient tragedies, directing, set and costume designing—did not reduce the instinctiveness of his art or limit his productivity. He was a student and assistant of Fotis Kontoglou who preached a return to Byzantine tradition and a breaking of all ties with Western art. He had a familiarity with Greek and European traditions, and experimented with a variety of styles. As a sharp observer of the city and of the human condition he usually focused on the human figure. *Le Penseur* (1936), one of his early works, illustrates his fascination with the working-class Greek, a subject Tsarouchis studied with extreme dedication.

The opening of Greece to Western European influences and art trends after the War of Independence also permitted the introduction of printmaking and its many possibilities for secular themes. The first engravings produced in Greece date back to the late eighteenth century. Intended for religious purposes, they were printed on Mount Athos, usually by anonymous monks, and offered to pilgrims. They depict famous monasteries and churches as well as the figures of Christ, the Virgin and various saints.

Several engravers' workshops were set up in the nineteenth century, equipped with imported machinery and operated by artists who had studied in Europe. Engraving was added to the curriculum of the Athens School of Arts. The principal engravers were Lycourgos Kogevinas (1887-1940), Yiannis Kefallinos (1894-1957), and Dimitris Galanis (1879-1966). Galanis was a famous painter and engraver who spent most of his life in Paris. Kefallinos was a brilliant teacher at the school in Athens and mentor to a large number of engravers, including Stratis Axiotis (1907-1994), Georgios Moschos (1906-1999), Angelos Theodoropoulos (1883-1965) and Georgios Velissaridis (1909-1994).

During the 1930s, a century after Greek independence, the Generation of the Thirties succeeded in fusing western and eastern idioms. The painters of that group turned to the Hellenic past, and drew inspiration from Byzantine and folk art traditions. They combined the languishing influence of German style and technique with innovative French trends, placing particular emphasis on the treatment of light and color. By the second half of the twentieth century, modern Greek painting had achieved a prominent position in European art.

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