

The Paul And Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum



Home of the Immortals

Paul Canellopoulos has said that "the greatest culture ever to develop on the face of earth was that of the Greeks and I can prove it".

His intention in forming this collection was to show the unbroken continuity of Greek artistic genius in the long march of the Greeks since their first appearance in this country in remotest antiquity until the present, as well as its consistently high quality, its ever changing capacity, and its imaginative abundance. The Canellopoulos collection contains mainly works of the Hellenic world, extending from the prehistoric period to the present day, among which icons hold an outstanding place.

Mr. Canellopoulos has offered his collection to the state and ever since 1976 the Museum has been open daily to the public, housed in a beautiful Neoclassical building high up on the northern slope of the Acropolis.

The collection begins with prehistoric finds, the oldest objects belonging to the Neolithic and Sub-Neolithic periods, around 3000 B.C. There are Early Cycladic objects, mostly of white Parian marble (3rd millennium B.C.) as well as those of the Cretan Minoan culture (2000-1600 B.C.) and of the Mycenaean period. There are also treasures from various Eastern countries like Phoenicia, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. A room containing Geometric Art exhibits mostly works of the early centuries of the 1st millennium B.C. There are Attic pottery and figurines, Cypriot works and the so called "Phoenician" vases,

made of colored glass paste and dating from the 6th to the 2nd century B.C.

The main part of the antiquities collection includes Archaic (Boeotian-Attic), Classic, Hellenistic, and Roman. You will marvel at a larger-than-life size marble female head of "classical" type. Although inspired by major works of the 5th century B.C., such as the so-called Herak Borghese, the stylization of the hair, the strict triangular formation of the forehead, the composure and "grand" air, show clearly that the work is a classicist adaptation rather than a genuine copy of a classical work. A date late in the 2nd or even in the 3rd century A.D. is indicated by the highly polished surface and the use of the drill to distinguish hair strands from each other. There is a deep socket above the forehead hair, obviously for inserting a heavy object, perhaps a diadem. The interpretation which is most probable is that a Roman empress is represented in a highly idealized manner as an Olympian goddess.

The jewels of the Classical and Hellenistic periods are certainly breathtaking, especially the beautiful necklace composed of long, tubular gold beads and the "knot of Heracles" (symbol of the bond of love), decorated with very fine anthemias, as well as the case of Persian jewelry.

Further on, the exhibition of Corinthian pottery (end of the 8th to early 5th century B.C.) gives a good picture of the development of Corinthian vase painting as well as a selection of Corinthian terracottas.

In the case exhibiting the bronze

weapons there is a bronze helmet belonging to the middle 6th century B.C. An inscription in the Corinthian alphabet along its right side reads "I belong to Paion". The most probable explanation of this is that it was an offering to the god Paion, another name for the god Apollo, corresponding to "iatros" which means healer. It is possible that the helmet was found in one of the sanctuaries of Macedonia.

There are quite a few cases of Boeotian figurines and vases from the 8th to the 5th centuries B.C. as well as 6th century Attic vases, amphorae, terracotta figurines and busts of the late Archaic period, kraters, and white ground lekythoi. White ground lekythoi are among the most noble expressions of Attic Classical art. Vases of this shape first appeared in the early 6th century B.C. when they served as receptacles for perfumed oils. Outstanding among these is a work of the famous "Achilles Painter" of antiquity. In the middle is the tomb stele; on its steps are bands and a crown. To the left is the dead youth stretching out his hand to his old father who is covering his face with his robe in grief.

The Greco-Roman period refers to the centuries after the conquest of the East by Alexander and the subsequent spread of Roman rule over a large part of Europe, western Asia and the northern coast of Africa, up until the fall of the Roman world at the end of antiquity. Among the exhibited objects of this period is a large bronze statuette of a nude Aphrodite, standing in the center of

the case. Nude Aphrodites were first represented in Greek art in the 4th century B.C. but the subject acquired tremendous dimensions in Hellenistic times and later, when sensual tendencies prevailed over religious feelings. These tendencies are evident in this statuette which not only represents the goddess completely nude, but also with round, fleshy body forms. Clearly, the artist saw the goddess of love from a sensual aspect only. The goddess is also drying her hair after her bath, not unlike an ordinary woman, although her rich diadem distinguishes her as Aphrodite. This is probably a work of the 2nd or 3rd century A.D.

You will also be able to admire a number of "Tanagrian" terracotta figurines. Between 330 B.C. and 200 B.C., Tanagrian figurines were the best in the world and were traded far and wide. The main subjects were ladies or girls, richly dressed in a wide range of elegant fashions, standing or seated in charming, lifelike poses. Nearby, there is also an extensive collection of coins, mainly of Greek cities and coins of Greek rulers.

The icons in the Canellopoulos Museum comprise one of its most important exhibits. The term icon is applied to representations of divine persons, saints, and scenes from the Old and New Testament, particularly on panels of various sizes. It is important to remember that icons exist only in Eastern Christendom which always favored this type of art, especially in the later ages. Even in the richest churches of the East there were, in addition to their brilliant mosaics and frescoes, portable icons which considerably enhanced the decorative splendor of their interiors. The Christian West preferred to represent holy persons and Biblical scenes in sculpture, particularly on the facades of its churches, something to which the East remained forever hostile.

Although it is impossible to describe every icon in the exhibit, it is important to mention a few. "The Dormition of the Virgin", (of which Mr. Canellopoulos has said, "If you gave me \$10 million, I would not sell it") is dated at the end of the 14th century and depicts scenes from the Virgin's life around the central dormition scene. The main figures are those of the Virgin and Christ,



represented in a "glory", receiving into his hands the soul of the Virgin in the form of an infant, while the angels come to assist him.

"The Decapitation of St. Paraskevi" is a 16th century icon painted by Michael Damaskenos, known as the teacher of El Greco. In the center the Saint, with bound hands, awaits her decapitation. Behind her the executioner vigorously lifts his right hand, brandishing his sword. A crowd of soldiers and horsemen surrounds them. Cherubs and angels holding an inscribed band and laurel wreaths fly in the clouds, poised to crown the martyr. This icon is painted in a purely western style and must certainly have had western prototypes... the Venetian garments and armour, for example, and the laurel crowns which imitate and almost copy similar subjects in palaces of Western Europe.

A remarkable work of the Cretan school of icon painting is "Saint John the Baptist" of the 17th century. The winged saint stands in a rocky place in the desert. His ascetic face is surrounded by an aureole decorated with leaf scrolls. The wide-open brown wings, adorned with golden strokes, stand out sharply against the golden ground of the icon. At his feet a basin containing his cut head is surrounded by a similar aureole. To the left, there is a small tree and an

axe ("Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" — Luke 3,9). In the upper right hand corner Christ is blessing him.

The richness and luxury of Byzantium is certainly exhibited in the Museum with various ornaments and jewels of the early and middle Byzantine periods. There are earrings with hanging baskets, gold bracelets decorated with lions, elaborate gold crosses, and many more including an impressive wedding ring which shows a figure of Christ holding a man and woman by the hand.

You will also have a chance to view ecclesiastical objects from the Middle Byzantine period such as liturgical crosses, chalices, holy tongs, etc. Also, among the many other exhibits are objects from Egypt of the Greco-Roman period as well as painted and sculpted portraits from mummies. In addition, there are intricate "bread" stamps, ornaments from Constantinople taken from local costumes, parchments and manuscripts, and even pure gold Fabergé icons.

Paul Canellopoulos' definition of the ancient Greeks are "those who gave to the world much and who took very little". He has set out to prove this with his priceless collection and it seems he has succeeded. ○