

the canellopoulos museum

About fifty years ago, Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos began to collect Greek art. So many national treasures were being bought by foreign collectors and being taken abroad that the Canellopoulos began to be worried. If so many works of art leave the country how shall we know and respect our own heritage. Their idea was to collect objects from all periods and styles in the long history of Greek art in order to demonstrate both the continuity and the diversity in Greek artistic tradition. So slowly over the years their collection grew. It became a very personal collection, reflecting their own individual tastes and interests. Their keen interest in the Byzantine period prompted them to collect ikons and other ecclesiastical articles. However, their interests ranged from Cycladic art of the third millennium B.C. to the folk arts of the nineteenth century.

As their collection grew it became increasingly obvious that it needed a permanent home. But where could such a place be found? Should the collect be broken up and distributed among existing museums? Or should it remain intact and be housed on its own. Fortunately, the collection remained whole and it was decided to find a special home for it.

The Archeological Service of the Acropolis had acquired several old

mansions in the Plaka. In the mid and late nineteenth century many of the leading wealthy families of Athens built their large family homes on the very slopes of the Acropolis. The houses were built in the neo-classical style so identified with old Athens. By the 1960's, however, very few houses of this period survived. So it was very fortunate that the Archeological Service acquired the beautiful old house built by Ioannis Michaleas in 1884. The renovation and restoration, both inside and out, was begun in 1967 and finished in 1971. The superb work was carried out under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Science. This would be the permanent home of the Canellopoulos collection. The collection was presented to the Greek Nation as a gift and the museum was officially opened in June of 1976.

As previously mentioned the collection is highly eclectic. As the visitor passes from room to spacious room he finds case after case of fascinating objects. From gold objects from Persia to Coptic embroidery cloths. There are objects from ordinary everyday life in ancient times - from brass pots to lovely little glass vials for perfume - from coins to women's jewellery.

The collection is rich in Byzantine ecclesiastical objects. There is a large number of crosses from this period, some of which were used as reliquaries, others as processional crosses. There are also a number of large silver chalices. There are too examples of ornate ecclesiastical embroideries heavy with gold and silver threads.

It is in Byzantine ikons, however, that the collection excels. The walls are literally covered with ikons from all the different periods in the more than one thousand years of Byzantine tradition. There are large ikons meant for the church, small ikons meant for the home, even triptychs which people carried with them on their journeys. There are several ikons from the 18th century which show definite Italian influence and thus a degeneration of the pure Byzantine style. There are even a few ikons painted in the last century by "primitive" folk artists which have a distinct charm all their own. Unfor-

tunately the ikons are not labeled or identified in any way, thus making it difficult for the ordinary visitor to recognize the period or provenance of any particular ikon.

The collection also includes a representative selection of Greek pottery ranging from the Archaic and Minoan periods through to the red and black figured vases of the classical period. Of particular interest are two pots from the end of the 6th Century B.C. which are unusual because the painter actually signed his name: Nikosthenes. There is also an exquisite large red figure crater from the 4th century B.C.

There is a small but imposing collection of Cycladic marble figures. These figures, found only on these Aegean islands, go back to 3,000 B.C. Yet they are startling in their modernity. The female figures are crudely, primitively modeled. The almost face-less head is thrown up and back which creates a very dramatic gesture. Their meaning remains a mystery but they are priceless treasures of the earliest Greek sculpture.

As one wanders from floor to floor one passes through all of the epochs of Greek art. One moves from earliest times to the handicrafts and folk arts of the turn of the century. The various periods are all well displayed and extremely well lighted. A guide to the Museum is being prepared, but, unfortunately, has not yet been published. It will definitely be of use and interest to all visitors.

The great advantage of a small museum like the Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum is that it does not overwhelm you. Great museums (in size and reputation) like the National Archeological Museum of Athens are so huge and so full of things that the visitor soon becomes bewildered and exhausted. In the almost intimate atmosphere of the Canellopoulos Museum, the visitor can browse and take his time. The exhibits have been carefully selected to be the best representatives of their period. This means that the viewer can really see and appreciate individual works of art.

The Canellopoulos family and the Ministry of Culture and Science are to be congratulated for the creation of the museum and especially for choosing to place it in Plaka. The restoration of Plaka to its former elegance and the rejuvenation of Plaka as a center for art and culture are both highly laudable projects.

