

“Be realist, look for the impossible”

Marina Lambraki-Plaka

The impressive new National Gallery will welcome all those who loved it in its old form and those who are waiting to meet it for the first time in its new form.

The permanent collections of paintings, and in fact twice the number of artworks, will be presented in the new building of the museum, which is preparing to open its gates in the spring of the anniversary year 2021



Interview by George Vailakis

You have been the director of the Greek National Gallery for almost 30 years. What was the most important challenge for you when you started, and to what extent do you feel you have accomplished it? In addition, the long-awaited renovation of the Greek National Gallery is almost completed. It's undoubtedly a great achievement. What can we expect from it?

The expansion of the National Gallery
“Be realist, look for the impossible”

In my life I have adopted the slogan of the May '68 in Paris. If you aim for what I call creative utopia, if you do not bend from the inevitable difficulties, if you work systematically and at the same time keep your enthusiasm undiminished and if you manage to convey it to key people for the success of your goal, you will surely reach the coveted result.

From the first moment I took up my duties as director of the National Gallery, I realized that the building that housed the treasures of modern Greek art no longer met any of the operating conditions of a modern museum. My personal bet was to make a strategic plan to upgrade and promote the dynamics of the Gallery, as if we had at our disposal the most modern museum. Besides, we managed to renovate the building in 2000, the year the Gallery celebrated its 100th anniversary, which allowed us to brilliantly exhibit the rich collections, sponsored by the Niarchos Foundation, and to develop an amazing exhibition activity, which brought five and a half million Greeks to the museum.

And while the National Gallery building was surrounded by queues of art lovers, patiently waiting to enjoy exhibitions such as “From Theotokopoulos to Cézanne”, “El Greco, identity and trans-

formation”, or “The Light of Apollo, Italian Renaissance and Greece”, “Athens-Munich”, “Athens-Paris”, to mention only some of the great successes of the Gallery, the political leadership showed more and more vivid interest in the open issue of the expansion of the museum, which I did not stop even for a moment to put in absolute priority. Yes, I strongly believe this: if the Gallery continued to be a museum of a few art lovers, the political leadership and the big donors would not show the same zeal to allocate the substantial funds needed to fulfill this vision.

And here, after so many struggles, so many memos, so many tears –and these have permeated the foundations of the new Gallery– the almost utopian vision became a reality. Because many consecutive ministers believed in it and served it, from Evangelos Venizelos who started it, to Lina Mendoni, who completes it with



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firm supervision and under the constant vigilance of the technical services of the Ministry of Culture. And first of all, the Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who connected the opening of the Gallery with the 200th anniversary of the 1821 revolution from the first moment. The expansion, however, could not have taken place without the generous donation of the Niarchos Foundation, and recent large donations have provided the museum with full equipment.

The inspired design of the new National Gallery changes not only its function but also its appearance, adapting it to the functionality and the aesthetic perception of the 21st century. The impressive state-of-the-art new museum will soon open its gates to welcome all those who loved it in its old form and those who are waiting to meet it for the first time in its new form. The wonderful Greek art, which has



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The original building on the Vasilissis Sofias Avenue, designed by architects Paul Mylonas and Dimitris Fatouros, inaugurated in 1976

written its own epic, is of the same age as the modern Greek state. And just like that, Greek art was born from scratch and managed to reach great maturity within only a few decades. Greek artists have often surpassed their European teachers, and their works rightly claim a special place in the world history of art. For this reason, I am very happy that I played my part in securing a place that is worth the value of the masterpieces of Greek creators.

The new National Gallery is a very important milestone in your career. Still, what do you think are the worthiest achievements of yours and those of your colleagues all these years?

“Art is a privilege of many”

“The National Gallery will become the home of all Greeks”, because “Art is the privilege of many” were some of the titles of the first interviews I gave when I took office in January 1992. In December of the same year, an astounding number of Greek art lovers besieged the Gallery building to admire the masterpieces of the “From Theotokopoulos to Cézanne” exhibition, which had come from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in Washington as part of a successful exchange.

It was the first explosion of visitors to an art exhibition in Greece, which finally exceeded 600,000 and made the National Gallery a front page entitled “Are we waking up?” (Eleftherotypia). The exhibition was indeed unique, but that does not explain its huge impact on the public. For the first time, I used marketing strategies to promote the exhibition, defying the risk of being accused of populism, which I could not avoid in the end. The TV commercial featured the charming and popular actress Karyofyllia Karabeti. In the following exhibitions, which were vastly successful, famous actors and personalities such as Irene Papas, Giannis Fertis, Lydia Koniordou, Haris Alexiou, and even the then mayor of Athens Dimitris Avramopoulos agreed to present – always pro bono.

**The National Gallery as a school of national self-knowledge –
The presentation of the permanent collections**

As an art historian and professor, I was aware from the outset that the rich collections of artworks of the National Gallery, on top of their artistic value, were indisputable testaments of the histori-

Greek spirit

cal and social life of modern Greece. The National Gallery could and should therefore function as a great school of national self-knowledge. Thus, one of my main purposes was to exhibit and comment on the permanent collections with a new perspective, which, in addition to the aesthetic experience, would take into account the role performed by art in the various phases of the historical life of our country.

It was in that spirit that the permanent collections were presented in 2000, when the National Gallery was celebrating its 100th anniversary, in the renovated halls of the museum, donated by the Niarchos Foundation. In the anniversary volume "National Gallery, 100 years" I have presented this new interpretive approach to modern Greek art. In the same spirit, the permanent collections of paintings, and in fact twice the number of artworks, will be presented in the new building of the museum, which is preparing to open its gates in the spring of the anniversary year 2021.

Exhibition activity

The exhibitions organized during my term of office, thematic and monographic, by Greek and foreign artists, were more than 200. The exhibition activity we developed was in accordance with a specific program: the first goal was to re-evaluate, even to review the history of modern Greek art, which had often been misinterpreted or even underestimated. That was the purpose of the major thematic exhibitions "Athens-Munich", "Athens-Paris", "Transformations of the modern, the Greek experience", as well as many monographic presentations by artists. A second goal was to highlight the decisive influence of Greek culture on the formation of European art, older and newer.

It was in this spirit that the very important exhibitions "The Light of Apollo, Italian Renaissance and Greece" were organized, and "Six top sculptors conversing with man, Rodin, Bourdelle, Mayol, Brancusi, Giacometti, Henry Moore". All six sculptors were inspired by different periods of ancient Greek art.

We dedicated two exhibitions to our great compatriot, Domenikos Theotokopoulos: "El Greco in Italy and Italian Art" and "El Greco, Identity and Transformation", which we co-organized with Italy and Spain. The latest exhibition broke a



The particularly successful exhibitions organized during Marina Lambraki-Plaka's term of office, thematic and monographic, by Greek and foreign artists, were more than 200



world record with 618,000 visitors. The public awareness of the great Cretan painter contributed to the acquisition of two works by Greco with a pan-hellenic fundraiser: "St. Peter" and "The Burial of Christ".

In addition to the dozens of exhibitions held in many Greek cities, the National Gallery took care of the promotion of Greek art abroad. All reports were accompanied by important scientific catalogues. The budget for these costly events was 80% covered by sponsorships.

The creation of branches all around the country – The National Sculpture Gallery

The creation of branches all around the country has been one of the significant goals of my program. In addition to the pre-existing Koumandareio Gallery of Sparta, during my days were founded:

the Nafplio Branch, which is dedicated to the Greek Revolution and is housed in a magnificent neoclassical building, which was renovated with the sponsorship of the Onassis Foundation; the branch in Corfu, in a listed building in the area of Kato Korakiana; and the Kapralos Museum in Aegina, which is going to be housed in a new building, which will soon be erected next to the old sculptor's workshops.

One of the most important achievements of my term of office I believe is the creation of the National Sculpture Gallery in Goudi, which provided a solution to the chronic problem of housing the collections of modern Greek sculpture. The National Sculpture Gallery is housed in the two listed buildings of the old royal stables, which were rented to the National Gallery by the Ministry of Defense and were renovated with com-

munity funds and sponsored by the Ni-archos Foundation.

Enrichment of the collections

During my term, the museum's collections increased by more than 3,000 art works, coming from purchases and donations, bringing their total to 20,000. In addition to Theotokopoulos's two paintings, the National Gallery acquired works by Auguste Rodin, donated by the National Bank, and works by Antoine Bourdelle. Among the great donations made, it is worth mentioning the legacies of Froso Efthymiadi-Menegaki and Bella Raftopoulou, the great donation of the Kapralos Foundation, with all his works and assets. The sculptor Ioannis Avramidis and the painters P. Tetsis, N. Nikolaou, D. Mitaras, A. Fasianos, Daniel and many others contributed a large number of works to the National Gallery. The National Gallery is about to announce the construction of its museum in Aegina.

Are there any problems you still have to deal with? What is the current financial situation of the National Gallery?

The economic crisis has hit all cultural institutions, especially those operating under state subsidies. In recent years, the National Gallery grant has been sufficient only to cover staff salaries and inelastic costs. We hope that this will change now that the new museum will open, which is double in size and with multiple functionalities. Of course, we also count on revenue from commercial activities: a large shop, a 240-seat theater with conference center equipment, two café-restaurants, one on the ground floor and in the garden, and one on the third floor with panoramic views, from Parnassos and the Acropolis to Lycabettus.

What do you consider the most moving moment of your "journey" so far? Is there something that really motivated you?

I experienced the greatest emotions when I saw common people and many young people and children queuing around the Gallery building to enjoy the works of art of the big exhibitions. How can you not be moved when you see ordinary people offering money and young children emptying their piggy banks to help us buy a work by El Greco?

How did your interest in art begin?

In my village, Arkalochori in Heraklion,

Crete, there are important Minoan antiquities. So I first studied Archeology, then I followed a postgraduate course at the University of Athens on the relationship between presocratic philosophy and art, and then, at the Sorbonne in Paris, I got the title of Doctorat d'Etat ès Lettres on the influence of ancient art on modern sculpture. My studies had a natural consequence. I have always been fascinated by art and artistic creation. That's why I consider myself lucky, having been the first art history professor at the School of Fine Arts, and then the director of the National Gallery. I've spent my whole life in art and near the artists I adore and deeply respect.

Is there something you wanted to do in the past that has not been accomplished? Can this somehow be fulfilled? In addition, how do you see things in general? Is there room for real optimism?

When you have such great ambitions, when you constantly live in the "creative utopia", your achievements will always fall short of your desires and ideal goals. I would very much like to see the wonderful old and new Greek artists recognized and exhibited in the great museums abroad on an equal footing, along with their famous counterparts in Europe and America.

I have made many, unfortunately fruitless, efforts towards this goal. This is not the time to elaborate on the reasons for this unjust "exclusion". Of course there are, unfortunately, only a few Greek artists who have overcome this obstacle and are highly valued in the international art market. I am always optimistic. I believe that you should never leave the battlefield while you are alive.

Collaborations with the Louvre

This first year of the new Gallery's operation, we have two excellent collaborations with the Louvre, one of the largest museums in the world. We participate as co-organizers, but with many works of Greek art of the 19th and early 20th century, in the exhibition "Paris Athènes, La naissance de la Grèce moderne, 1780-1919".

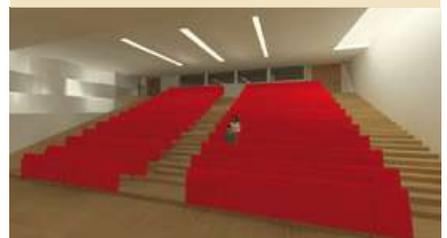
In November 2021 we will welcome in the new Gallery the unique exhibition "The art of portrait in the Louvre collections". ("L' Art du portrait dans les collections du Musée du Louvre"). This



Marina Lambraki-Plaka is Professor Emeritus of Art History and Director of the National Gallery for almost 30 years. First woman professor in the history of the Athens School of Fine Arts. After several years of efforts, the expansion of the National Gallery building is about to be completed, more than doubling the gallery's exhibition space and updating the museum in form and function.



In November 2021 the new Gallery will welcome the unique exhibition "The art of portrait in the Louvre collections". This exhibition will inaugurate the imposing 1,200m² periodic exhibition hall of the new museum



exhibition will inaugurate the imposing 1,200m² periodic exhibition hall of the new museum. Next will follow a large retrospective exhibition dedicated to Konstantinos Parthenis. I hope the pandemic is overcome quickly, to see again the National Gallery flooded by Greeks and foreign visitors.

