

“The Semiotics of the Imagery of the Greek War of Independence. From Delacroix to the Frieze in Otto’s Palace, The Current Hellenic Parliament”.

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ABSTRACT:- The iconography of the Greek War of Independence is quite broad and it includes both real and imaginary themes. Artists who were inspired by this particular and extremely important historical event originated from a variety of countries, some were already well-known, such as Eugène Delacroix, others were executing official commissions from kings of Western countries, and most of them were driven by the spirit of romanticism. This paper shall not so much focus on matters of art criticism, but rather explore the manner in which facts have been represented in specific works of art, referring to political, religious and cultural issues, which are still relevant to this day. In particular, I shall comment on *The Massacre at Chios* by Eugène Delacroix, painted in 1824, the *39 Scenes from the Greek War of Independence* by Peter von Hess, painted in 1835 and commissioned by King Ludwig I of Bavaria, and the frieze in the Trophy Room (currently Eleftherios Venizelos Hall) in Otto’s palace in Athens, currently housing the Hellenic Parliament, themed around the *Greek War of Independence* and the subsequent events. This great work was designed by German sculptor Ludwig Michael Schantahaler in 1840 and “transferred” to the walls of the hall by a group of Greek and German artists. The following aspects shall be highlighted with regard to the aforementioned works: (a) the starting point of the war episodes “narrated” in these works is the clash of two worlds, diametrically opposite in religious, cultural, and moral terms, reduced to the conflict between good and evil, and they refer to the clash of civilisations, (b) the heroes of the Greek War of Independence are represented like saints of the Church as well as descendants of ancient Greek legendary figures, (c) the Greek-Orthodox Church is omnipresent, in particular in large figurative ensembles, inextricably linking its existence to the Greek Nation, and (d) certain illustrations show elements of exercising political and cultural diplomacy. Lastly, and as far as large ensembles are concerned, the leaders of the Greek War of Independence were aware of the iconographic programme – indeed, several of them were still alive at the time the works were created – and this shows how the historical facts relating to the Greek War of Independence were both received and perpetuated for generations to come.

Keywords:- Greek War of Independence, Eugène Delacroix, Peter von Hess, Philhellenism, Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler, imagery, semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

The Greek War of Independence coincided with the heyday of the Romantic movement in art as well as with the coalition of the powerful states of that time, which by means of the “Holy Alliance” (1815), were seeking to maintain the *status quo* in Europe. These were the circumstances under which the Greek War of Independence against the Turks began in 1821, starting from the Danube regions under the leadership of Alexandros Ypsilantis. In spite of some initial failures, the Greek victories consolidated the revolution, in particular following the overwhelming defeat of the Ottoman navy as part of a joint British, French and Russian operation at the Battle of Navarino in 1827 (Burns 2006, p. 561). The newly founded Greek state became independent in 1830 through the “London Protocol”.

The uneven battle fought by the Greeks gave rise to a broad philhellenic movement which was not only political and military (with the participation of foreign soldiers in the fight), but also and mostly humanitarian, since many writers, musicians, and artists have been inspired by the Greek fight for freedom and have dedicated some of their works to it. Visual artists have led the way in this area.

Among the multitude of works listed by researchers (Mykoniatis 1979; Papanikolaou 1981), I shall refer here to some flagship works of that time and to large figurative ensembles commissioned by public authorities, and I shall comment on their special meaning which reflected the spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*). In addition to the individual cases of artists who were directly inspired by the Greek War of Independence, such as the famous artist Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), some works have also been commissioned by well-known personalities of that time.

One of the first illustrations originated from the Greek general Ioannis Makrygiannis, who tasked two folk painters from Sparta, a father and his son, Dimitris and Panagiotis, with reproducing war scenes based on his own narrations and descriptions. This resulted in a series of 25 paintings which were exhibited by Makrygiannis in his home, in Athens, in 1839 before the European ambassadors from France, Britain, and Russia (Petris 1975; Lambraki-Plaka 1976).

There exist further series of illustrations with particular relevance, commissioned by the King of Bavaria Ludwig I, father of Otto, the young King of Greece from 1835. The first one was painted by Peter von Hess (1792-1871), between 1833 and 1835, and bears the title "Scenes from the Greek War of Independence". As soon as the series, which includes 39 themes, was completed, it was lithographed in many prints in Munich, accompanied by texts in German, Greek, and French, and sent as a present to foreign politicians, monarchs, and princes. Through these works, Ludwig had intended to raise awareness about the new state abroad and to highlight the courageous fight of the Greeks (Papanikolaou 1980).

It is worth noting that, during the same period, King Ludwig also dispatched in Athens the renowned landscape painter Carl Rottmann (1797-1850), who painted Greek historical landscapes that were to be placed in the Hofgarten in Munich. They can be found now in the Neue Pinakothek in Munich (Kalligas 1977).

The last two ensembles can no longer be found at the place for which they had been intended. Indeed, they were destined to the Hofgarten which was, however, destroyed by air raids during World War II. Sketches, colour drawings, oil paintings, and aquarelles can be found in various German museums and collections.

Nevertheless, the most important figurative ensemble is probably the frieze that can be found in the former palace of Otto, currently housing the Hellenic Parliament (since 1929). This immense neoclassical building was designed by the German architect Friedrich von Gaertner (1791-1847) and constructed between 1836 and 1847 (Demenege-Viriraki, 1994). Many specialised craftsmen and artists had been invited from Bavaria to help complete the building. Over time, the building has sustained many damages, particularly from fires which have resulted in the loss of some unique illustrations. However, the frieze remains to this day in the Trophy Room (currently, Eleftherios Venizelos Hall), preserved almost in its entirety (except for the narrow western side), as restored based on the saved initial drawings of the artist who designed it, the sculptor Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler (1802-1848). The portraits of Greek heroes and philhellenes in the adjacent room, known as the Adjutants Room, are also in good condition (Papanikolaou 2007).

The above ensembles were made at the peak of the Romanticism area during which Europe and the world were shifting towards liberalisation, and national uprisings were viewed with a certain sympathy. It is interesting to discover in these images various political, religious, and national expediencies that, from a semiotic standpoint, constitute references to issues that to this day remain among the preoccupations of the international community.

II. PHILHELLENISM AND DELACROIX.

From the late 18th century, also prompted by the book of J. I. Winkelmann on the superiority of Ancient Greek art ("Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums", 1764), poets and writers, architects, archaeologists, and all sorts of intellectuals have expressed in every manner possible their nostalgia and love towards Greece, thus contributing to the development of a favourable perception for both the country and its Greek inhabitants. This was a humanistic philhellenism which has undoubtedly paved the way for the political philhellenism and the practical involvement of many Europeans in the Greek cause. On the military level, Ludwig, the King of Bavaria, a great philhellene, even before his son was nominated to be the king of the new country (although he had not been the Great Powers' first choice), sent a military corps in 1826 to reinforce the fight of the Greeks as well as money for the revolution, while taking care of orphaned children of Greek combatants in the Bavarian capital, Munich (Seidl 1981).

This was the romantic and idealistic climate in which several European artists, more or less famous or well-known, were to evolve, who, upon the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence would illustrate every dramatic moment as made known through the reporting and descriptions of journalists.

Looking at some examples, one notes certain features which cannot be seen in other periods of art (Papanikolaou 2002,p.62 ff). Although there is no lack of exaggeration, for example in expression and a certain spike of imagination, there is a widespread impression that the fighting Greeks represent “Good”, because they are fighting for their freedom, while their Ottoman adversaries are the exact opposite, i.e. the absolute incarnation of “Evil”, being represented as cruel actors of destruction. The beholder can easily distinguish one party from the other, from their overall appearance, their clothing, and the landscape. From a semiotic standpoint, images of this type are a reference to a “clash of civilisations”, indeed in line with contemporary references.

There was also another perception as to how contemporary Greeks appeared in the imagination and in the eyes of foreigners. It has been observed that reports from correspondent journalists were particularly admiring and exaggerating the exploits of individual Greek combatants, such as Markos Botsaris, whom they identified to Leonidas from Antiquity, as well as to martyr saints of the Orthodox Church. These were views that elevated the fighting Greeks which were considered to be both carriers of the ancient culture as well as representatives of the Christian world.

The famous painting by Eugène Delacroix, “Massacre at Chios” (Louvre Museum), painted in 1824 (**fig.1**), i.e. two years after the tragic event, was made in a similar spirit. The painting clearly shows who the oppressor is and who the victim is. Forms, colours, and clothing, light and darkness help to distinguish the parties: cruelty and violence as opposed to innocence and humility. Women are depicted with their dead babies, others are captured to become slaves, and small children stand distraught before their dead parents. In the background, the small Aegean island is ablaze. The end is incredibly tragic.

In the same spirit, Delacroix also painted in 1826 the stunning painting “Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi” (Museum of Fine Arts of Bordeaux). In another work painted by the French artist in 1856, entitled “Scene from the War between the Turks and Greeks” (Athens, National Gallery), the Greek revolutionary is depicted triumphant on horseback and glorified as the expression of the Christian and Western cultural concept.

The romantic French painter clearly shows his preference. He takes side with the Christian West that views the Greek War of Independence as a “movement for national liberation”, in spite of the negative reactions by the governments of that time (Despotopoulos 1975, p. 204). Delacroix has removed from his work the exotic elements particularly favoured by romantic painters and has described in the most dramatic manner one of the cruellest images of the Greek War of Independence, addressing an audience that understood the Greek-Turkish conflict as a constant battle between two culturally and ideologically different camps.

III. PETER VON HESS AND LUDWIG MICHAEL SCHWANTHALER

Upon the nomination of Otto (Otto Friedrich Ludwig von Wittelsbach, 1815-1867) as King of Greece (after Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, who was later to become the first King of Belgium, refused the proposed crown), a true renaissance made its appearance in arts and literature. The Greeks were reaping the fruits of freedom.

As indicated above, the first official artistic mission from Bavaria to Greece was that of Peter von Hess, who immortalised the arrival of the new King in Nauplia in 1833 and afterwards (from 1833 to 1835) travelled around Greece to paint his favourable themes: genre painting, landscapes, and portraits. However, Ludwig ordered Hess to illustrate the Greek War of Independence. The artist’s visual activity produced 39 scenes. Indeed, those images were “transferred” on the walls of the arcades in the Hofgarten in Munich (**fig.2**), in 1841-1844, above Carl Rottmann’s historical landscapes, but they were destroyed in World War II, as aforementioned. However, the original drawings, the lithographed series, and various sketches have been preserved.

Hess’ “Greek War of Independence” not only depicts current events, i.e. the then recent historical events, but emphasises first and foremost the intemporal character of Hellenism through the use of Ancient Greek motives (ancient ruins and columns), in the spirit promoted by philhellenic circles. At the same time, it lauds the courageousness of Greeks and their just cause, contrasting them with their adversaries, who are depicted in particularly violent and horrible conditions. In terms of semiotics, these images refer to the conflict

between Good and Evil, represented in this case by religious and cultural differences, a perception that has been widespread in the imagery of the Greek War of Independence.

Around 1843, when the palace of the new King was still under construction and was to be completed in a few years, the decision was made to illustrate its interior spaces. The most significant among these illustrations were the ones referring to current historical events, for example in the famous “Trophy Room”. To this end, many well-known artists have been recruited from Bavaria. The principal work was undertaken by sculptor Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler, who made the initial drawings, without ever actually setting foot in Greece (fig.3). This was a large frieze with themes exclusively from the Greek War of Independence: from the symbolic depiction of the Greek fighters swearing an oath before the clergy to the arrival of King Otto in Nauplia. The representation, as a whole, is triumphant and in full harmony with the premises of the royal palace, the most prominent building in Athens. It is a series of events, presented as a whole, mostly emphasising the superhuman effort of the *Genos* (the Greek people), while also showcasing its protagonists. This is a manner of turning history into legend; it is the expression of “the prevailing ideology” and the new model of governance for the country (Papanikolaou 2006).

Schwanthaler, famous for his colossal statue “Bavaria”, located in the area where the annual beer feast currently takes place in Munich (Oktoberfest), has managed to present in relief, through seventeen themes, the Greek epopee. The purpose of the ensemble was to promote the nation and consolidate the monarchy. The deeper meanings of the scenes include heroism, individuality together with collective effort, the link between the ancient world and contemporary Greece, and the close relationship between the Greek nation and the Christian Orthodox tradition as a reference to the transcending dimension of the revolution. The artist’s classical education has helped him create a representation of history with contemporary characteristics, projecting both the historical memory and the cultural character of the Greek War of Independence.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Greek War of Independence has been one of the most significant political events in Europe in the 19th century having started at a difficult international conjuncture, where the Great Powers of the time had conflicting interests. Art, however, has followed its own path in promoting human values: freedom, justice, and egalitarianism. The movement of Romanticism, at its peak at that time, has contributed in this. Artists from all over the world have continued to be fascinated by the Greek struggle for freedom for decades after it had ended. Virtually all works produced during this period acknowledged the just cause of the Greeks and denounced, in a visual manner, cruelty and injustice, as well as the violation of human dignity. They also lauded the courageousness of the Greek protagonists of the revolution, praising their bravery and projecting their love of freedom. In the eyes of the Europeans, Greece was idealised and treated in an idealistic manner as the country of great civilisations. The association made between contemporary and Ancient Greece was not casual. Such ideas were also being promoted by the monarchy, with the view of consolidating the institution. Lastly, there is no lack of visual references to the fighters’ religiosity and to the role that the Greek Orthodox Church played in the national cause, by identifying Church and Nation, a notion that was deeply ingrained in all aspects of the life of Greeks.

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FIGURES



Fig.1 E. Delacroix, *The Massacre at Chios*, 1824, oil on canvas, 419x354cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.
(www.louvre.fr)



Fig.2 P. von Hess, *Alexandros Ypsilantis passes through river Prut*, 1942, lithograph, Museum of the city of Munich, Munich
(www.muenchner-stadtmuseum.de)



Fig.3 L. M. Schwanthaler, *The vow of Greek revolutionaries in Vostica*, 1836, ink and pencil on paper, 15,6x27,4cm, Museum of the city of Munich, Munich
(www.muenchner-stadtmuseum.de)