

Understanding Greek Art History.

A Review of: Evgenios Matthiopoulos, ed. *Art History in Greece: Selected Essays* (Athens: Melissa, 2018). Paperback. 150 pp. ISBN 978-960-204-379

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For many art history students of a certain generation, courses on art historical method were likely to have included a book titled *Art History and Class Struggle*.¹ An extensive discussion of Marxist art history, it was part of the transformation of art history in the 1970s and early 1980s that saw the appearance of a number of pioneering works of social art history by scholars such as T. J. Clark, Horst Bredekamp and Albert Boime.² Yet its author, Nicos Hadjinicolaou, remained a largely unknown figure. His book was first published in French in 1973, and by the time it gained wider prominence in English translation, he had already returned to the University of Crete, where he made a reputation as a scholar of El Greco.³

Art History and Class Struggle may have ended up becoming eclipsed by later authors as an exemplar of the social history of art, yet it was testimony to a practice of art history writing in Greece that was, and remains, barely known outside of the country. The reasons for this are numerous, but there are three main factors. The first and most obvious is linguistic; the limited international knowledge of modern Greek guarantees that it could only reach a limited readership. The second is institutional and disciplinary; state resources in Greece (and Cyprus) were almost exclusively devoted to archaeology, and wider public interest in Greek culture has also focused on its archaeological heritage. The numerous international archaeological institutes in Athens provide palpable evidence of this. Art history, in contrast, has always been a minority pursuit. The third, and final, reason lay in the fact that post-classical Greek art has occupied a marginal position in the landscape of art history. Byzantine art has often been poorly integrated into larger art historical narratives, its main function being to act as a precursor to the Venetian Renaissance, and it has often comprised a sub-discipline of its own. The most famous Greek artist, Domenikos Theotokopoulos, only became a subject of interest internationally once he left Crete and moved to Spain to become El Greco. Other major figures in more recent Greek art, such as Nikolaos Gyzis (1842–1901), Constantinos Parthenis (1878–1967) and Yiannis Tsarouchis (1910–1989), remain completely unknown. As a result, studies of Greek art, no matter how sophisticated and original, have usually languished in international obscurity.

1) Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle*, trans. Louise Asmal, London: Pluto Press, 1978.

2) See for example, Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Phaidon Press, 1971; T. J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848–1851*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973; Horst Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte: Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975; Albert Boime,

3) Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *La lutte des classes en France dans la production d'images de l'année 1830*, Paris: Maspéro, 1973.

An additional reason for such marginalisation is undoubtedly, too, the fact that a question-mark hangs over where modern Greek culture may even be located. A review of art history in Greece may be unexpected in a journal focused on East Central Europe, but this also illustrates the problem in hand. For while the independent Greek state and its institutions have, for political, economic and social reasons, always promoted its classical heritage, the latter is in many respects a distant memory, and has little to do with the vibrant culture of modern Greece. Given its legacy of Byzantine and Ottoman rule, and with Orthodox Christianity being so central to the formation of national identity (Catholic Greek and Islamic minorities have always played a marginal role), Greece has more in common with its neighbours Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia than with that other home of classical art: Italy.

Art History in Greece touches on a range of issues that are of wider pertinence and repay examination. Its appearance was prompted by the invitation to Greece to be the partner country for the 2018 Festival of Art History staged by the Institut national de l'histoire de l'art (INHA) in Paris. As the editor, Evgenios Matthiopoulos, states in the Preface, upon being invited it was decided 'to produce a book that would give the international academic community as broad a picture as possible of the historical development of and main trends in the history of art in Greece, along with the level of educational achievements in that field.'⁴ The volume certainly fulfils that aim, with a collection of excellent essays that cast an often unflinching critical gaze on the current and past practices of Greek art historians.

In fact, while it is archaeology that has enjoyed the most attention, there has been a continuous tradition of writing on Greek art since the early nineteenth century. It was often conflated with archaeology or Enlightenment encyclopaedism, but this tradition nevertheless tried to define the place of Greek art in the history of European civilisation. Thus, as early as 1811, the politician and scholar Anthimos Gazis (1758–1828) authored an article on 'The Universal History of the Arts and Sciences' in *Hermes o Logios* (Hermes the Scholar) the most important pre-independence Greek-language periodical, published in Vienna.⁵ The points of reference for authors of this era included figures such as Winckelmann and the French art historian Séroux d'Agincourt. Greek art historians were thus working with a similar intellectual genealogy to their peers in Austria, France, Italy, Germany and Britain. The major difference between post-independence Greece and other European states in the nineteenth century was that art history was not institutionally formalised until much later in Greece. Classes were taught in art schools, but degrees in art history did not exist, nor did departments of art history. There was also no major gallery of art before the early twentieth century. The jurist Alexandros Soutzos (1839–1895) bequeathed his art collection to the Greek state, but it was not until 1915 that the 'Athens Picture Gallery' opened its doors to the public. It was housed in spare rooms in the Technical University, a situation that persisted until 1953 when it moved to the Zappeion Exhibition Hall in the centre of Athens. In 1959 the Zappeion was closed down, and the collection had to wait a further 10 years for the first section of the new purpose-built National Gallery to open. This situation was in contrast to archaeology, to which considerable resources were dedicated. The National Archaeological Service was founded as early as 1833, while the National Archaeological Museum was set up in 1888.

4) Evgenios Matthiopoulos, ed., 'Preface,' in *Art History in Greece*, 7.

5) Anthimos Gazis, 'Katholiki istoria ton technon kai epistemon,' *Hermes o Logios*, 15 August 1811, 266–75.

The discipline of art history consequently lacked the infrastructure that was built up in other countries during the nineteenth century, yet the study of art was nevertheless seen as important and became a potent political and ideological instrument. Matthiopoulos lays out with admirable clarity in his chapter in this volume, ‘Art History with National Borders,’ how, as soon as the Greek state was founded in 1829, the visual arts and art historical scholarship were drawn into the ideological work of cultural and political legitimation. Nationalism was, Matthiopoulos acknowledges, a fundamental element in art history in most countries, but in Greece it was particularly important, since the architectural and sculptural ruins of the past played such a defining role in the creation of Greek identity, both locally and in the eyes of international onlookers. Art historians thus became entangled in various, often competing, national myths and debates. These included, for example, the question as to whether post-independence Greek art constituted a moment of rebirth, or whether it was just the latest chapter in a narrative of deep continuity with the ancient past. Continuity was a particularly contested topic in the twentieth century, too. In the 1930s the assumption of continuity, based on a tripartite historical division of classical, Byzantine and modern, was a matter of official state orthodoxy. Yet the idea was attacked in certain quarters. In 1942, for example, the conservative politician Panayiotis Kanellopoulos (best known, perhaps, as the prime minister deposed by the military junta in 1967) authored a study that laid perhaps predictable emphasis on the ‘Europeanness’ of Greek culture and explicitly excluded Byzantine as being ‘Asiatic.’⁶ He thereby introduced notions of rupture and discontinuity into the history of Greece. On the other hand, the idea of continuity took on importance after the Civil War of 1946 to 1949 as an instrument of anti-Communism. In 1946 the Greek government staged a large exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, *Greek Art 3000 BC – AD 1945* meant to show Greece’s place in the western European mainstream. Mounted at a time of national crisis, it was a clear sign of the role art and its history could play in furthering diplomatic and political goals. In the late 1960s and 1970s the idea of continuity gained renewed life, as part of a reactionary vision of Greek culture held by the generals of the junta. The book nowhere states this openly, but one presumes, too, that the sojourn of Hadjinicolaou in France was due to political exile, given the oppressive cultural politics of the junta of the late 1960s and early 1970s and its persecution of its opponents.

The attitude of Panayiotis Kanellopoulos towards Byzantine art raised the broader question of its place in European art. It had a particular significance for Greeks, but art historians elsewhere struggled equally with its meaning, since it highlighted the difficulty of describing the nature of the classical tradition. Most notably, of course, turn-of-the-century art historians of the Vienna School such as Alois Riegl, Franz Wickhoff and Josef Strzygowski, as well as their pupils in other central European states, debated endlessly the nature of Byzantine culture and its legacy. For Greeks, too, its status was not unambiguous. On the one hand, it could be read as a stage in the Hellenocentric narrative of continuity; on the other, its transnational character, the fact that the Balkan peninsula and Russia comprised a common Byzantine space, put that narrative into doubt. Even if Byzantine art was deemed unequivocally ‘Greek’ there was the question as to how its Greek character could be demonstrated. It was insufficient merely

6) Panayiotis Kanellopoulos, *Istoria tou europaikou pneymatos: Apo ton Voltairo os tin Tzein Osten* [History of the European spirit: From Voltaire to Jane Austen], Athens: Aetos, 1942. The book is still in print.

to point to the putative ethnic identity of artists, or of the institutions and individuals that commissioned works. For many art historians ‘Greekness’ had to be visible, Matthiopoulos notes, as a specific aesthetic quality. This culminated in the influential notion of the ‘Greek line’ and ‘Greek colour’ formulated at the turn of the twentieth century by the poet and critic Pericles Giannopoulos.⁷ Such ideas proved remarkably tenacious, and they were bound up with a deep emotional investment in ideas of national identity that, even now, resurface.

In his study of the National Gallery in this volume, Lefteris Spyrou demonstrates how much this institution, although a relative latecomer, shaped art historical discourse.⁸ The Gallery is known for its collection of art by Greek artists since the early 19th century, but the original bequest by Soutzos, as well as subsequent donations, was dominated by Italian and French paintings. In other words, the Gallery was initially a museum of western European art. In 1949, with the appointment of the Byzantine art historian Marinus Kalligas (1906–1985) as director, it took a marked shift in orientation, and became a museum of modern Greek art. Kalligas was a graduate of Munich and, informed by Wölfflinian formalism, sought to identify the essential formal characteristics of ‘Greekness’ in art. When the collections were put on display in the Zappeion hall, he devoted almost all the space to Greek painters and sculptors. Care was taken to display works by artists who had either trained elsewhere in Europe or who had pursued a career in Germany or France, since this was evidence of parity of esteem that underpinned arguments as to the place of post-independence Greece in European culture. Arguably, Spyrou claims, little has changed since; Kalligas may have left the Gallery several decades ago but the Hellenocentric orientation he laid down in the 1950s continue to shape its policies.

In the contribution on ‘Art History in Greece Today’ Aris Sarafianos moves away from the issue of nationalism to that of methodology. This slightly polemical essay is less a survey of models than an attempt to lay out future possibilities. It also criticises, *en passant*, archaeologists, who traditionally monopolised the study of Greek art using connoisseurial and other outmoded methods of analysis. This may be an accurate description of classical archaeology 30 years ago, but few would recognise the contemporary state of the discipline in this image, although Sarafianos does acknowledge that it has changed considerably since the 1980s. He also points towards a number of possibilities that still need to be explored by art historians in Greece: post-colonial theory, visual studies and, in particular, renewed attention to the materiality of works of art. Understanding of their specific pertinence and meaning in Greek art history would have benefitted from a slightly less sketchy account, but the chapter clearly demonstrates how far contemporary Greek art history has distanced itself from its recent past.

Both this chapter and Areti Adamopoulou’s thoughtful discussion ‘Born of a “Peripheral” Modernism: Art History in Greece and Cyprus,’ demonstrate some of the anxieties that persist amongst the profession in Greece. Responding to the ideological demands of the state, art history in Greece was, for a long time, an introverted enterprise. In 2000, when the first conference of the Association of Greek Art Historians’ took place, almost all the papers were on Greek art. The observation of the apparently greater success and recognition enjoyed by Greek art historians working or publishing abroad – in addition to Hadjinicolaou one

7) A French edition of the relevant essays has been published as Périklis Yannopoulos, *La ligne grecque*, trans. and ed. Marc Terrades, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2006.

8) Lefteris Spyrou, ‘The National Gallery’s Display in the 1950s and its Contribution towards the Formation of the History of Art in Greece and the Canon of Modern Greek Art’ (73–96).

might think of the architectural historians Alexander Tzonis or Panayiotis Tournikiotis – reveals a notable degree of self-doubt. Indeed, Adamopoulou’s self-description of Greece as ‘peripheral’ betrays a comparable hesitancy. Even though the discipline is now anything but introverted, Sarafianos’s hope that, at some point in the future, modern Greek art will have its due place in leading international journals betrays the lingering worries over the place of Greece and the need for international recognition that have been characteristic of writing on art in Greece since 1829.

Art History in Greece presents an informative, insightful and critically detached account of Greek art history. It is also particularly welcome that it is available as an openly accessible ebook.⁹ For all its many qualities, however, it does raise certain questions and in certain respects it allows itself to be framed by the very phenomenon it is describing. This is particularly so when it comes to the dominance of the preoccupation in the essays with the art historical debates about national identity. For in this respect the concerns of Greek art historians were not so particular to Greece. The debate about continuity and discontinuity in Greece, for instance, parallels the longstanding preoccupation of Romanian art historians with the classical inheritance of Dacia. Were latter-day Romanians the inheritors of an unbroken tradition stretching back to classical times – hence the Latin roots of the vernacular language – or was modern Romanian culture the result of a post-classical incursion by Wallachians? The answer to this question was ideologically loaded and shaped the character of much art historical scholarship in the country.¹⁰ The preoccupation with the place of the national culture in ‘European civilisation’ was a central feature of art history across much of Europe, most especially as it was enmeshed in politically charged debates about the meaning of the term. The effort, in the later nineteenth century, to define specifically Greek aesthetic qualities would not have looked out of place in contemporary Prague or Budapest. But by focusing exclusively on Greece, the essays in this volume exhibit, ironically, the ‘introversion’ of which they speak so eloquently. The authors occasionally refer to prevailing methods of analysis – Wölfflin was influential for some authors – but the book might have benefitted from a more detailed analysis of this theme. Throughout, reference is made to leftist currents of thinking, of which Hadjinicolaou is the best-known representative, but to what extent did this underpin a broader distinctive Marxist or social history of art in Greece?

The book prompts the asking of other questions, too. We learn that since 2000, Greek art historians have ceased to be so Hellenocentric, but if this is so, what have been the more notable topics of interest since then? Moreover, if Byzantine art has presented a complex legacy, how has the *Ottoman* heritage been addressed by art historians? Or has this been delegated to archaeologists and scholars of Islamic studies? And if that is the case, what does this tell us about how art historians perceive the boundaries of their own discipline? Indeed, while the problem of tradition and continuity is addressed with considerable intelligence, the unstated assumption is of ‘Greek’ as a single homogeneous culture. How are minorities, such as Catholics, Roma, Jews and others integrated into the narrative of Greek art? And in what ways have questions of gender and sexuality entered into art historical discourse?

9) The volume can be accessed here: https://www.academia.edu/36716665/Art_History_in_Greece_pdf

10) The classic discussion of this issue is Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001. For a useful outline of this issue in relation to Romanian art history writing see Vlad Ţoca, *Art Historical Discourse in Romania, 1919–1947*, Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2011.

Finally, what of Greek modernism? Painters such as Parthenis and Nikos Ghika (1906–1994), or the architect Dimitris Pikionis (1887–1968), provided Greece with a very distinctive set of modernist practices. Mindful of Hans Belting’s claim that modernism spelled the end of art history as a unified narrative, how have art historians in Greece interpreted it and the ruptures it enacted?¹¹ How did that relate to the broader theme of continuity and rupture in the national culture? Moreover, should Greek modernism be seen as a response to one of what Eisenstadt has described as the multiple modernities of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries?¹² Or has it been understood in terms of its relation to modernism in Paris or somewhere else? This latter question, endlessly debated in relation to East Central Europe. is pertinent to Greece, too.

As Matthiopoulos acknowledges, this book was put together rapidly in response to the INHA invitation, so it is perhaps unfair to pile on these questions; to answer them (and others) a much more extensive publication would have been necessary. Indeed, it should be noted that some of them are addressed in a much more extensive Greek-language volume, edited by Matthiopoulos and Hadjinicolaou, that was the outcome of the 2000 conference and to which some of the authors of this book also contributed.¹³ This volume should therefore be recognised for what it is: an outline for international readers of some of the key preoccupations of Greek art historians together with an analysis of their genealogy and an indication of the political and ideological stakes. Despite the omissions, its appearance is a most welcome event, especially as the issues it discusses point towards further possibilities of research. Indeed, while the ostensible theme is Greek art historiography, it will be of value to anyone with a broader interest in modern Greek culture and politics as well as in Greece as an emblem of the wider problems with which scholars in East Central Europe have had to deal with. Its authors have provided us with an engaging and astute set of essays.

11) Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* trans. Christopher Wood, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987.

12) Shmuel Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities,’ in Eisenstadt, ed. *Multiple Modernities*, London: Routledge, 2017, 1–30.

13) Evgenios Matthiopoulos and Nicos Hadjinicolaou, eds, *I Istorias tis Tekhnis stin Ellada*, Athens: University of Crete 2003.



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