American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)
e-ISSN:2378-703X
Volume-4, Issue-3- pp-67-71
www.ajhssr.com
Research Paper Open Access

ART AND POLITICS: THE EXPEDIENCIES OF THE ARTISTIC CHOICES MADE BY THE NEWLY-FOUNDED GREEK STATE (1830)

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ABSTRACT: *The Greek War of Independence, which upset the status quo in Europe in the early 19th century, triggered the interest of the European intelligentsia, because it brought to the forefront a country which had historically concerned European citizens since the time of the Renaissance. Classicism and romanticism, in particular, were two of the visual arts movements of that time that demonstrated particular interest in the history of a country that appeared to be on the verge of achieving its own national renaissance. It was not just ancient history and mythology that resonated with the artists' feelings; it was the uneven battle fought by the contemporary inhabitants of this small country against a powerful adversary, the Ottoman Turks. Correlating contemporary Greeks with ancients Greeks was inevitable. It was the language, the mores and customs, the historical places, and the ancient monuments gradually brought to light by archaeologists that made contemporary Europeans, in particular the literary and artistic intelligentsia, take part, in their own way, in the Greek War of Independence (mainly by providing financial and military support). The illustrative depictions that have been saved to this day have some distinctive features, regardless of whether they had been commissioned by Greek protagonists of the Revolution or originated from Western leaders: these include linking contemporary Greeks to ancient Greeks, showcasing the development of Greek civilisation through time, directly correlating the Christian Orthodox tradition and the Greek nation, exercising cultural "propaganda" in the form of contemporary cultural diplomacy, as well as the self-evident objective of integrating contemporary Greece into the West.*

Key Words: *ancient and contemporary Greece, classicism, cultural diplomacy, Greece and Western Europe, Greek nation, Greek War of Independence, romanticism.*

I. Introduction

Setting aside architecture, which has implemented the standards of classicism throughout the 19th century in Greece, there remain to be examined some characteristic iconographic sets that also bear witness to the policy followed by the new Greek state. Besides, the mere choice of classicism meant that it had become the vehicle for conveying ideas that were intended to reinforce the prestige of Greece, as successor of the ancient Greek spirit.

In the field of painting, on the other hand, iconography referring to the Greek War of Independence of 1821 has been particularly extensive. Famous and less famous artists from many European countries, in particular France, Germany and Italy, have dealt with the visual rendition of themes, both war events and landscapes, such as ancient ruins, portraits, and genre scenes. Indeed, representations of architectural monuments, such as the Acropolis, and publications of large albums were quite frequent in Europe and have had significant influence. Ancient visual art values have also been particularly appealing to the artistic movement of classicism and have been widely embraced by artists, designers, and architects. Ancient Greece came to the forefront once again through the ancient ruins and the works of art that saw the light of day as a result of archaeological excavations.

Contemporary Greece was also brought to the forefront. The Greek War of Independence and the sacrifices of the Revolution's protagonists did not only capture the interest of politicians in the powerful states of that time, but also of romantic artists (poets, painters, and sculptors) who became inspired from the display of patriotism, courageousness, and dedication to the new values: freedom, justice, and human rights. Some of those artists travelled to Greece, in spite of all the risks that such a long journey entailed.

In addition to the individual actions of artists in Greece and Europe, there have also been initiatives from institutional actors, such as Greek General Ioannis Makrygiannis and King Ludwig I of Bavaria, a well-known philhellene, whose second-born son, Otto, was designated to be the first King of Greece in 1832 ("Treaty of London") by decision of the great powers of that time, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia. Otto arrived in Nauplia (the then capital of the newly founded Greek state) in 1833. His entourage included, in addition to members of the Regency, government actors and artists, including Peter von Hess (1792-1871). In addition to his other tasks, such as the "The Entry of King Othon of Greece into Nauplia", Hess also undertook to paint images from the Greek War of Independence that were to illustrate the arcades of the Hofgarten in Munich.

A year later, in 1834, Carl Rottmann (1797-1850), a landscape painter, was also dispatched to Greece to paint historical landscapes that were also destined to the Hofgarten in Munich.

However, King Ludwig's did not limit his activity to the above. Around 1840, when construction of the royal palace was still underway, he dispatched a group of artists to Greece tasked with illustrating its rooms. One of the murals that has been preserved to this day in the Trophy Room (currently, Eleftherios Venizelos Hall) had been designed by Bavarian sculptor Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler (1802-1848).

The aforementioned works are the most extensive and complete to have been saved to this day and they were made for specific purposes. Our approach to these works does not focus so much on their aesthetics as on the message they were meant to convey betraying the practice of a specific policy aimed at promoting the new state which was seeking to put forward its own "identity" to the international public.

II. Politics and Art

The philhellenic activity of European artists had been an unexpected gift for the fighting Greeks, who sensed that it would capture the ideology which they had been endeavouring to promote to the international public opinion in every way possible. The fact that their Struggle was about independence and that they were seeking to obtain freedom sufficed to create a favourable climate among the European intelligentsia. Notwithstanding the official policies of the powerful states, Enlightenment had instilled into the minds of Europeans ideas and values that favoured the Greek cause. Freedom, democracy, and justice were the spiritual values *par excellence* which had great power. On the other hand, Greece appeared anew as the birthplace of civilisation and this fact justified by definition the Struggle ([1]).

A careful study of some themes from the aforementioned iconography clearly reveals that the "values", explicitly or implicitly, promoted are those emphasising the intemporal character of Greek civilisation, lauding ancient Greece, correlating national continuity and contemporaneity, exhibiting admiration for ancient monuments, referring to the just struggle of the Greeks, identifying the Greek state with the Christian Church, attributing supernatural character to the Revolution, and elevating those who died on the battlefields to the sphere of sainthood thus establishing an equation of the type Heroes = Saints ([2]) .

At the same time, a rudimentary cultural diplomacy was being deployed, on the occasion of the lithographic reproduction of specific works with historical contents, in order to raise awareness about the Greek Struggle abroad and in particular towards those powers that played a decisive role in political developments in Europe. On the other hand, implementation of this policy sought to confer prestige to the newly-founded small state in South-eastern Europe that aspired to stand on its own (politically, financially, and culturally) on the international stage.

III. The great iconographic sets

The visual art works that will be referred to below include three large illustrations of the Greek War of Independence and one illustration of historical landscapes that falls within the same spirit. These include the work commissioned by General Makrygiannis, who has guided, through his narrations and experiences, two folk painters from Sparta, a father and his son, Dimitris and Panagiotis Zografos. They worked for three years (1836-1839) and produced a series of 25 paintings. The final result was a set of 25 images, of which copies were made and distributed to the King of Greece and the ambassadors of the United Kingdom, Russia, and France. Makrygiannis also intended to have them lithographed in Italy, a project which finally never came to fruition. In any event, the General's overall endeavour demonstrates his willingness to spread the message of the Revolution to the highest levels of international policy, deploying a kind of "cultural diplomacy". It is worth noting that the first painting in the series symbolically depicts the three Great Powers being rewarded by the Creator-God himself, who "righteously decided the liberation of Greece" (**fig. 1**). This is a typical representation with supernatural characteristics, whereas the next representation is that of "The Fall of Constantinople" in 1453, a painting with particular semiotic value.

This painting, albeit of folk style, has exercised considerable influence on the following generations of the country's intellectuals, mainly because of the multitude of messages conveyed and the manner in which politics were dealt with, as may be been on many levels of this iconography.

The remaining illustrative sets are works by German artists. Two of those, the landscapes by Rottmann and the war scenes by Hess, were made almost at the same time (1833-1835) and were intended for the same place, i.e. the arcades in the Hofgarten in Munich. Both painters belonged to the so-called "Munich School" and already had a large portfolio of works ([3]). Rottmann had previously painted landscapes from Italy and it was now Greece's turn, respecting once again the wishes of King Ludwig. The difference in the case of the Greek landscapes lay in the fact that the artist exclusively painted historical places, such as Mycenae (**fig. 2**), Olympia, Salamis, Marathon, etc. These landscapes carried over historical memories and places where significant events had taken place in the distant past. The painter has conferred to the landscapes, in a particularly smart and visually implicit manner, the historical weight they had; while linking them, through discreet patterns, to contemporary Greece and the everyday reality in the country. This was an indirect way of promoting the intemporal character of Hellenism and its importance for modern day Greeks. This was also a perception promoted by King Ludwig on every occasion and in every manner possible.

The "39 Scenes from the Greek War of Independence" by Peter von Hess have been even more direct and impressive in terms of promoting the Greek War of Independence through the values that justified it. This series is a heroic depiction of the struggle of the Greeks opposed to their rivals, the Turks, who are depicted as the representatives of "evil" (**fig. 3**). In other words, it is a representation of the clash of civilisations, a political position held by liberal people in the West, the scale being titled in favour of the Greek Christians. It is worth noting that these are not images freely produced by an individual artist, but works commissioned by a European king intended to decorate the royal arcades of his palace in Munich.

One should also bear in mind that Hess's compositions had been lithographed in Munich and printed in many copies with a view of raising the awareness of European kings and politicians. Similarly to the painters hired by General Makrygiannis, a specific policy was also being implemented in this case. It consisted in disseminating events through art, like any government would do today as part of its cultural diplomacy.

The last series of illustrations of great scope and significance was the frieze in the palace of Otto, the new King of Greece, in Athens. Its theme was the Greek War of Independence, from its start in 1821 to the arrival of Otto in Greece in 1833. The iconographic material for this series also originated from a Bavarian artist. It is very likely that the theme was inspired by some Greek, possibly General Makrygiannis, or by Friedrich Tiersch, the classical scholar, professor at the University of Munich and friend of King Ludwig ([4]).

The work was designed in its entirety by sculptor Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler (1802-1848), but it was "transferred" on the walls of the hall in the palace by a team of at least five artists who came from Germany. For the 17 themes of the overall representation, the same comments apply as those made for the work of Hess. In this case, in the palace, Schwanthaler paid tribute to the Great Powers, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom, twice: by executing – most probably – the "Treaty of London" in 1830 (**fig. 4**) and also through "The Battle of Navarino" (**fig. 5**) in 1827. It is clear that the illustrator had intended to immortalise, in a solemn manner, the contribution of Europeans to the independence of Greece during this critical period, by sending a political message to those who held in their hands the fate of Europe. At the same time, this was a way of expressing gratitude to the European nations and symbolically confirming that the new state, Greece, was now also part of the great European family.

IV. Conclusion

It is evident from the brief analysis of the above examples that art, as expressed both in individual cases and in well-known sets of images having a particular mission and destination, was serving expediencies determined to a great extent by the dominant policy. Its purpose was to promote the values that had been disseminated through Europe by Enlightenment and were considered to be fundamental. These were the values of freedom, justice, and democracy, for which the Greeks had actually shed their blood, and this fact has been particularly and firstly appreciated by the artists themselves. All representations emphasise the just struggle of the Greeks, who were depicted as the continuators of Ancient Greeks and the custodians of their ideas and values. Furthermore, certain rules of ethics were strictly complied with, for example by demonstrating that Greece was grateful to the Europeans for their help – in addition, of course, to the mercy shown by God himself –, and that it was also part of the great European family. Although *prima facie* these works did not appear to have any political contents, it has however become clear that, once again, art has helped with specific expediencies, in an implicit and visually smart manner, not losing in the slightest the vitality of the high aesthetics which it serves by definition.

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Figures

Fig. 1 "Painter of Makrygiannis", *The Righteous Decision of God for the liberation of Greece*, 1836, egg tempera on wood, 39.3x55.7 cm, National Historical Museum, Athens (www.nhmuseum.gr)

Fig. 2 C. Rottmann, *Mycenae*, 1835-1836, watercolour and pencil on paper, 30.3x38.7 cm, State Collection of Graphic Arts, Munich (www.sgsm.eu)

Fig. 3 P. von Hess, *Rigas fires the love of the Greeks for freedom*, lithograph, Museum of the city of Munich, Munich (www.muenchner-stadtmuseum.de)

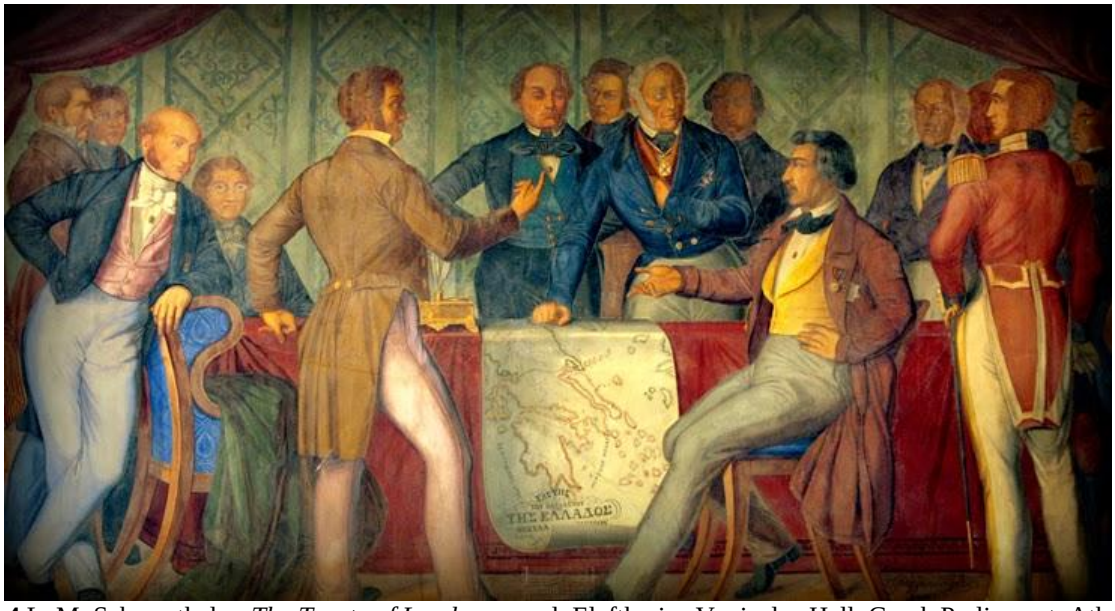

Fig. 4 L. M. Schwanthaler, *The Treaty of London*, mural, Eleftherios Venizelos Hall, Greek Parliament, Athens

Fig. 5 L. M. Schwanthaler, *The Battle of Navarino*, mural, Eleftherios Venizelos Hall, Greek Parliament, Athens