

Inovace Muzea Byzance a křesťanství v Athénách /

The Innovation of The Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens

Dimitrios Konstantios

Muzeum Byzance a křesťanství, Athény /

Byzantine & Christian Museum, Athens

As you all know, museums are creations of modern times. The earlier places that were called Museums were either areas where the cult of the Muses was practised (ancient Greece) or buildings in which valuable ancient artefacts were assembled (Renaissance).

Romanticism and the attainment of nationhood by many European countries led to the rediscovery of the Middle Ages. In this same context, Byzantium was also rediscovered by men of learning and the new Greek bourgeoisie after the national uprising against the Ottoman empire in 1821.

Historians today have a different perspective on the period from the 4th century to 1453, which is now known as the Byzantine period. It was a time when the Eastern Roman empire flourished and, with its capital at Constantinople, using the Greek language, and having Greek and Roman traditions and the Greek Orthodox religion, proved to be one of the most powerful medieval empires for over a thousand years.

Byzantium is the bridge in the tripartite history of Greece (ancient times – Byzantine empire – modern period) and formed a solid ideological substructure for the Greek state. This period of history is in any case of importance for a large part of the modern world, from Greece to Egypt and Palestine, Russia and the Balkans, and also for the whole of Europe.

On this historical canvas rested the aspirations of the late 19th and early 20th century to found a Byzantine Museum. It was created, in the end, in 1914 as the Byzantine and Christian Museum, a name reflecting the ideological compromises of the time. Down to 1930, the Museum had no permanent home, and was housed in a small part of the Athens Academy. Its director, however, Professor Georgios Sotiriou, succeeded in persuading the army to cede to him the building complex erected in the centre of Athens between 1840 and 1848 by the famous Greek architect, Stamatis Kleanthis, for Sophie de Marbois, the Duchess of Plaisance. This complex is the Villa Ilissia. It consists of a main, marble, two-storey building with austere proportions, and two wings and a main, vaulted entrance, flanked by two adjacent buildings (phot. 1). It is called 'Ilissia' because it is located near the river Ilissos that ran through Athens.

The Museum was inaugurated in 1930, on the occasion of the Third International Congress of Byzantine Studies.

G. Sotiriou's approach to museology was pioneering for that time. On the ground floor of the main building he laid out three types of church (Early Christian basilica, Byzantine domed church and Post-Byzantine chapel) so as to make the architecture and internal decoration of each of these periods, comprehensible to visitors. In the display, he used not only authentic artefacts, but also plaster casts.

On the upper storey and in the wings he displayed wall-paintings, mosaics, minor arts and manuscripts, arranged in chronological order and by style.

Didacticism was prominent, but the entire design proved to be enduring, since it remained unchanged in its basic features until about 2000, despite the significant interventions by later directors, such as M. Chatzidakis and P. Lazaridis. The Museum gradually became 'sacrosanct' and remained outside the life of the city: an important place for the study of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine culture, but of no interest to the citizens. Visitors to it were few in number and it was out of step with the modern role of the Museum and the demands of society.

In 1999, (phot. 2) we began to plan a comprehensive change in the orientation of the Museum. If its new role requires an essentially open institution that is familiar and friendly to the public, then the Museum had to set new objectives and design new policies to make it more person-centred and social. To change its perceptions, infrastructures and structures. To transform itself and change its general image.

We therefore designed an open-plan museum, with rooms containing information for the public, a new permanent display, new rooms for temporary exhibitions, a coffee-bar/restaurant, shop, amphitheatre and gardens open to the public.

The greatest difficulty we encountered was in changing structures and attitudes.

Let us take examine things more closely. The Museum needed an extension, since it was bursting at the seams in the small buildings of the Villa Ilissia.

As early as the 1980s, a study had been assigned to the architect Manos Perakis. Ingeniously exploiting the differences in height of the space, Perakis designed and built a huge semi-basement extension of thirteen thousand square metres [13,000 m²]. Completed in 1999, this included new exhibition rooms with an area of six thousand square metres [6,000 m²], an amphitheatre, rooms for temporary exhibitions, etc. The completion of this extension was the first step in the modernisation of all the Museum infrastructures. One of the fundamental features of the entire modernisation project was the new display of the collections. As you know, how a Museum 'reads' the past is reflected in its permanent exhibition.

We rejected a 'uniform national narrative' and designed an interpretative, thematic approach based on aspects of the Byzantine empire and the Early Modern period, with five major axes, made up of thirty thematic units (phot. 3). The Work Group comprised two architects-museographers, more than twenty archaeologists, art historians, museologists, draughtsmen, etc. Specialists in colour, lighting and audiovisual aids were employed. The modern materials used were poros, stainless steel, glass and plexiglass. The exhibition was designed to be read at five levels. The first of these consists of a basic introductory text to each unit. The second level is that of the authentic objects themselves, the only ones that today convey a 'whisper' of the past. The third consists of extended captions and visual material, which help to assign the objects to their historical and cultural context. The fourth level is that of electronic information, communicated through audiovisual systems (touch screens, computers, etc.), while the fifth includes documents/ pamphlets, lectures, guided tours, etc. I would like to note that a tactile tour for the blind has been implemented – the only one in Greece and one of the few in Europe (phot.4)

Some two thousand three hundred (2300) objects from the 3rd to the 19th century are displayed in an area of six thousand square metres (6,000 m²). The total cost of the project was nine million (9,000,000) Euros.

The heart of the Museum is its storerooms. Security and good conditions for preventative conservation, research and study are essential to the modern functioning of a museum. The outmoded storerooms of

the Museum had to be modernised (phot. 5). In a space of one thousand five hundred square metres (1500 m²), the architect Avgi Tzakou designed special storage systems exclusively for the objects in the Museum. Mobile electronic units, stainless steel structures and special climatic conditions create secure archaeological rooms, controlled electronically and by the presence of human beings, to house icons, wall-paintings, sculptures, wood-carvings, pottery, paper items, paintings, textiles, parchments, old photographs and artefacts made of precious and semiprecious stones.

About twenty thousand (20,000) objects were placed in storage and the structures cost a total of five million (5,000,000) Euros. The artefacts kept in the Museum were given new documentation and digitized – a measure of great importance.

Based in the old handwritten record cards and the various inventory books that had accumulated over the decades, a single, unique number was given to each object, which forms its identity number. A new database, using modern terminology was of decisive importance in the Museum's planning. Based on this work, and on the formation of a group of conservators and a specially designed system of standard checks, scheduling and management, twenty thousand (20,000) objects were transferred to the new storerooms, after the Documentation Office had completed the new digital management system for the new Museum storerooms. This management system consists of a Visual Studio 2003 programme that runs under SQL, and covers information relating to

- a) the identity of the object
- b) the movement of the object
- c) storage and
- d) state of preservation

The above reveals the vital role played by conservators in the Museum. Taking an icon laboratory as our starting point, we designed and implemented the new Conservation Centre of the Byzantine Museum. This comprises nine laboratories (icons, wall-paintings, mosaics, pottery and minor arts, paintings, textiles, paper items and old photographs), in which thirty-five specialist conservators are employed (phot. 6). It is also planned to create a physico-chemical analysis laboratory.

The new coffee-bar/restaurant, the shop, the administrative buildings and new Lobby –a reception and information area for visitors– will be opened in summer 2009 (phot. 7). The events hall is already functioning and it is anticipated that a new temporary exhibitions room with eight hundred square metres (800 m²) on the first floor of the main building will be handed over at the end of 2009. The cost of the building modifications comes to four million (4,000,000) Euros.

A major change in the image of the Museum is the result of the laying out of twenty five thousand square metres (25,000 m²) of gardens. The Museum has designed and implemented a cultural park in the heart of Athens with a small open theatre of three hundred (300) seats (phot.8) to be used for various cultural events, and three open-air museum activities:

- a) Early Christian funerary architecture, or how a major find becomes an exhibit in the Museum (phot.9).
- b) The 'marble road'. An open-air gallery of Byzantine marble sculpture. (at the planning stage).
- c) 'The water-supply of Athens' through the showcasing of a well-shaft of Late Antiquity.

Alongside all this, the Museum is making progress with the planting of over five hundred (500) trees and two thousand five hundred (2,500) shrubs.

A network of pathways and sitting areas, specially lit for the evenings, creates an attractive atmosphere for visitors. The cost of laying out the park, the coffee-bar/restaurant, and the shop was three million

(3,000,000) Euros. The Museum library, which specialises in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Culture and Art, has been constructed on the ground floor of the administration building B and is due to open its doors to the public at the end of 2009.

The most substantial change instituted, however, was at the level of attitudes and structures.

Modern Archaeology, cultural management and museology have already disturbed firmly established balances. The concept of cultural heritage and, consequently, objectives and cultural approaches to the material and immaterial remains of the past had already been broadened. The new role of museums demands strategic aims, political understanding and planning. We therefore had to implement modern cultural management principles, involving an exhibitions policy, educational and social policy, public attendance policies, etc.

Importantly, the archaeologists, art historians and other scholars had to transform themselves from specialist scholars into good museum curators. A 'museum culture' aimed at the general public gradually began to be cultivated. New museologists were employed who fertilised ideas and attitudes. Modern collection management practices began to be implemented. Important European programmes were completed profitably, not only in money terms but also in terms of the exchange of experiences and the establishing of relations with large international museums. This last was also aided by participation in major exhibitions in Europe and America.

Without a change in the Museum's structures, however, most of the objectives would not have been achieved. As you know, it is difficult for a state Museum to rise above bureaucracy and formal structures. In order to overcome these problems, we created 'informal' Offices for the sectors in which we wished to be active.

We created a European Programmes Office, since Europe is a prominent field of collaboration for us. In this way, we have implemented dozens of European programmes (e.g. diARTgnosis, Lastor, ACCU, ICON-NETWORK, etc.) in collaboration with many European countries.

We created an Educational Programmes Office and have implemented programmes for sixty thousand (60,000) children, adults, migrants, people with special needs, people striving to give up drugs, etc. (phot. 10).

We created a Publications Office and have initiated our own publications programme, with catalogues, pamphlets, conference proceedings, electronic publications, a new website, etc. (phot. 11), and we now regularly publish our bilingual (Greek-English) periodical edition ILISSIA.

We created a Documentation Office to document all the information produced by the Museum and develop new databases.

We created the Communications Office, to secure better contact with the Media and the public.

Our turn to the public required the organisation and activation of the Exhibitions Department, which organises dozens of temporary exhibitions in Greece and abroad (phot. 12). One-day meetings, conferences, international meetings, concerts and other cultural events now create a different climate (phot. 13). The Museum is gradually become a cell of society.

We must not forget, however, that a Museum is like a bicycle. You can ride it quickly or you can ride it slowly. But if you stop pedalling, you fall off.

Resumé

Muzeum Byzance a křesťanství v Athénách je národní muzeum, které bylo založeno v roce 1914. Je nejstarším byzantským muzeem na světě a výrazně přispělo ke zlepšení znalostí o byzantském a pobyzantském umění a kultuře.

Od roku 1930 muzeum sídlí ve Villa Ilissia, rezidenci, která byla postavena významným řeckým architektem Stamatisem Kleanthisem mezi lety 1840 a 1848, a měla sloužit jako zimní sídlo Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun, vévodkyně z Plaisance.

Muzeum vlastní více než 30.000 předmětů a v současné době zaměstnává přes 280 lidí (z nich 58 vědců, 25 techniků, 162 administrativních a finančních pracovníků, pracovníků bezpečnostní služby, dělníků, atd.).

Už v roce 1980 bylo jasné, že bude nutné muzeum rozšířit. Přístavba byla dokončena v roce 1999 a muzeum tak získalo dalších 13.000 m² suterénního prostoru. Byla však nutná i celková rekonstrukce a modernizace muzea. Byly provedeny rozsáhlé práce nejen v souvislosti s infrastrukturou budovy, zařízením a okolním prostorem, ale také byl, na provozní úrovni, restrukturalizován systém spravování sbírek, výstavní politika byla vylepšena novou stálou expozicí a krátkodobými výstavami, administrativní struktura byla přepracována a byla vytvořena specializovaná oddělení (Publikace, Vzdělávací programy, Komunikace, Dokumentace, Evropské programy). Muzeum v podstatě předefinovalo svou podobu a rozšířilo řadu svých funkcí.

Během minulých deseti let byly rozšířeny výstavní prostory a Konzervační centrum (s devíti laboratořemi o 5.000 m² a 8.000 m²), zatímco amfiteátr, místnosti pro uložení archeologických památek atd. byly nově vybudovány. Pokračují také práce na přestavbě hlavní budovy, zatímco boční budovy jsou adaptovány, jedna na moderní obchod a druhá na kavárnu s restaurací a občerstvením. Byly osázeny zahrady o rozloze 20.000 m².

V roce 2004 byla slavnostně otevřena první část nové stálé expozice. Je věnována Byzanci (4.–15. století) a obsahuje 1.200 artefaktů. Druhá část expozice, věnovaná pobyzantskému umění a kultuře, která zahrnuje 1.000 předmětů, bude slavnostně otevřena v květnu 2009. Ústřední budova komplexu Ilissia, která se stane centrem muzea a místem setkávání, kde se návštěvníci budou moci dozvědět o historii muzea a akcích, které probíhají a proběhnou, se dosud rekonstruuje a bude otevřena pro veřejnost koncem roku 2009. Většina projektu je spolufinancována Evropskou unií a státem.



Phot. 1



Phot. 2



Phot. 3



Phot. 4



Phot. 5



Phot. 6



Phot. 7



Phot. 8



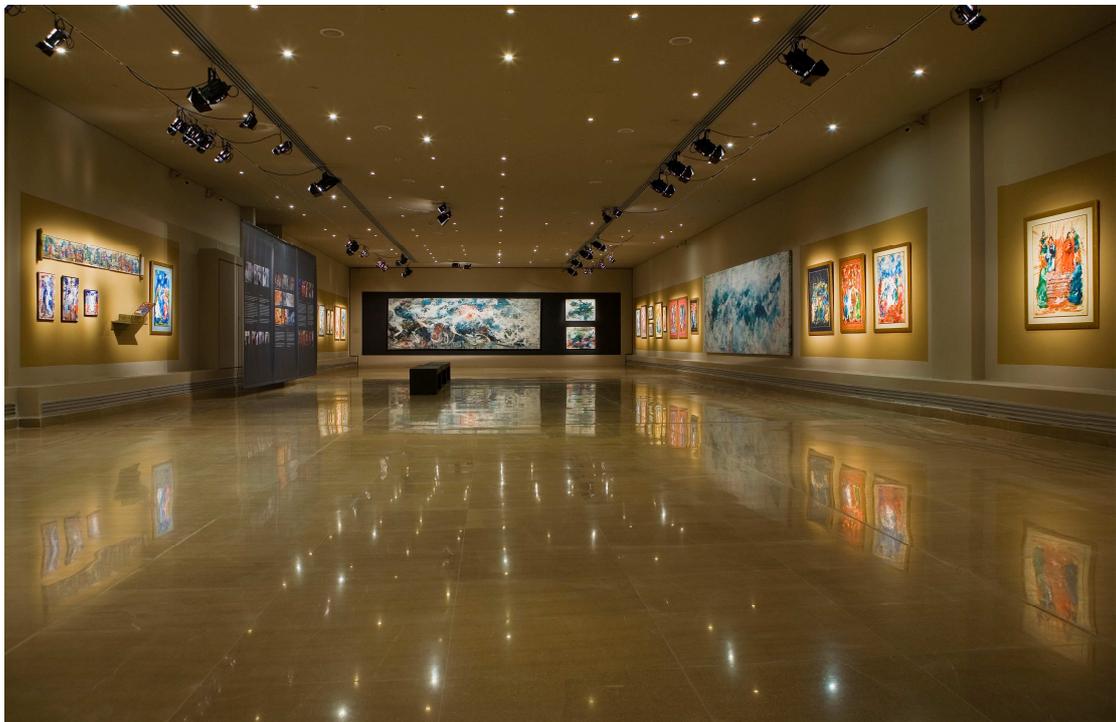
Phot. 9



Phot. 10



Phot. 11



Phot. 12



Phot. 13