

Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece

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The Museum of Byzantine Culture is a state museum, subject to the Hellenic Ministry of Culture (Figure 1). It opened its doors to the public in 1994.

The establishment in Thessaloniki of a byzantine museum was the vision and the aspiration of all the byzantinologists who worked in the city after its liberation in 1912 by the Ottomans and its annexation to the Hellenic state. The reason was that Thessaloniki is the most "byzantine" city of Greece and its monuments, which are in UNESCO'S World Heritage List, present a panorama of byzantine art from 4th to 15th centuries, while the post-byzantine churches of the city present the survival of the byzantine legacy during the Ottoman empire.

For that reason, the city should have a byzantine museum worthy of its glorious past. Only after the restoration of Democracy in Greece in 1975 started the process of founding a byzantine museum in Thessaloniki. The exceptional building, which hosts the Museum, was created by an inspired architect, the late Kyriakos Krokos, following a nationwide architecture competition held in 1977 (Krokos et al., 1998, 16-18). The project of the building was incorporated in the European Community's Integrated Mediterranean Programmes and was completed and handed over for use by the end of 1993.

The Museum was build in a plot of 15.400 square metres. The building covers 11.500 square metres; 3.000 of them are taken up by the permanent exhibitions and over 5.000 square metres by the laboratories and the archaeological storerooms (Association of the Friends of the Museum of Byzantine Culture, 1993, cover page).

Figura 1. The Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessalonik.



The Museum also has a separate temporary exhibitions wing, a space dedicated to educational programmes with its own courtyard, an amphitheatre of 75-100 seating people, a shop and a bar – restaurant with separate entrance, which operates beyond Museum opening hours;

The exhibits of the Museum of Byzantine Culture mainly come from Thessaloniki and the archaeological deposit is continuously enriched mainly from the rescue excavations. Thus we were obliged, already from the building's foundation, to emphasize on the organisation of the Museum capacities, namely the conservation laboratories and the archaeological storerooms.

The Museum boasts seven well equipped conservation laboratories, each specializing in the conservation of archaeological material of one kind, or of a number of related kinds. Thus there are laboratories for the conservation of 1) icons and wood 2) ceramics and glass 3) metals 4) parchment and paper 5) frescoes 6) mosaics and 7) marble and stone.

While the organization and layout of the storerooms were being planned, we decided to draw upon the experience gained in issues of storage and space-saving in the sectors of commerce and industry and adapt it to the specific needs of archaeological storerooms. This was especially the case of storage system for bulky and heavy architectural sculptures. The system for storing pottery in rolling units of shelves was inspired by that in public libraries and adapted to the needs of this kind. For the storing of restored icons, restored frescoes and restored mosaics the systems in sliding frames and rolling unit were used (Papanikola-Bakirtzi, Skordali, 1999, 56-59). Finally the large number of amphoras owned by the Museum have largely been stored in the "ancient" way, in the hold of a replica ship (Figure 2) which was constructed by a traditional shipwright relying on data yielded by research into Byzantine shipwrecks, especially that of Yassi Ada on the coast of Asia Minor (Bass, Van Doorninck, 1982, vol. I, 65-86).

The museum aims in being an exemplary center for the preservation, conservations and research in Byzantine archaeology. At the same time, as its own name suggests, the museum's main goal was to present the rich diversity of Byzantine culture casting light on as many aspects as possible from the organisation of communal and religious life, contact with other cultures and the interchange of influences, art and intellectual development, production and trade relations, ways of thinking and preferences, to the influence which political events and historical realities had on people's daily lives. We endeavored to show breaks and survivals, some of which latter still run through modern Greek life today. In short, we tried to disprove stereotypes which narrowly associate Byzantium with religiousness. Indeed in the territory of the Byzantine Empire, which included various peoples within its continuously transforming boundaries, a unique synthesis of cultural elements occurred whose main characteristics were the Greek language and culture, the Roman law and state administration system, Christianity as a spiritual and social force, and the inclusion of eastern elements from the Hellenistic cities of the Mediterranean region (Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, 1994, 14-20).



Figura 2. Replica ship constructed by a traditional shipwright relying on data yielded by research into Byzantine shipwrecks.

The fact that most of the material exhibited originates from Thessaloniki - one of the major centers of the Byzantine empire - has enabled us to present Byzantine culture in the most coherent and integrated way possible, which could set a more general example.

The museological approach which we implemented took us in a difficult - and for Greek museums of the 1990s, fairly novel - direction, with the visitor rather than the exhibits taking centre stage. This was the basic philosophy of our project, to bring the Museum's social and educational character to the fore.

Starting from the cultural-anthropological notion that all cultural records are important, archaeological objects were treated as a means of interpreting the culture from whence they came, to be used in the exhibition not merely as works of art, but as products of a culture - and as a means of understanding that culture. Hence the display of an object did not constitute an end in itself; instead, we took advantage of that object's potential to tell us about the historical process which created it, and the society which made use of it.

2.905 of the Museum's 42.882 objects, distributed throughout 11 galleries together tell a story which unfolds from room to room, proceeding along two parallel axes, the one chronological - starting from the 3rd and concluding in the 19th century - and the other thematic (Tourta, Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, 2005, 4-5).

Each gallery contains various types of material and gives an idea of aspects of the culture of a particular period. Where feasible, details are provided about the production and technology of specific items, such as ceramics. Objects of a similar kind exhaust their potential to yield diverse information, being used in the exhibition in multiple ways, depending on the specific theme being set forth. For example, the amphoras are presented as: household equipment, as a building material as a kind of tomb and so on.

The archaeological exhibit is reinforced with a variety of information and visual material, making it easier to identify and creating a context that recalls and evokes the exhibit's original setting. Nowhere in the exhibition do we reconstruct original settings and functions, but rather give hints as to these.

Even the choice of materials is rich in semiotic clues; so the red marble used as a base for the gold-embroidered liturgical cloth from early 14th c. is an allusion to the "red stone" upon which legend has it that the body of Christ was placed after He was taken down from the cross. This important relic, «the red stone», was brought to Constantinople from Ephesus during the 12th c., inspiring a new iconographical type of Lamentation at the Tomb which predominated from then on (Choniates, 1975, 222).

We consciously avoided to use showcases which keep the visitor at a distance and alienate him from the exhibit. Only small, highly valuable or fragile articles are displayed in showcases. The open display of most of the exhibits evokes their original settings and functions, and at the same time creates in the visitor a feeling of immediacy and familiarity. Many of these items, such as fishing equipment and farming implements, are still used in traditional rural communities in Greece and in the wider Mediterranean area, unchanged in form. The icons are also displayed without cases, since for Orthodox Christians they are not museum pieces but a living tradition, still worshipped both in church and in the home.



Figura 3. Gallery 1
"Early Christian Church"



Figura 4. Gallery 2 "Early Christian
City and Private Dwelling"

We paid particular attention to the colour schemes and lighting of the galleries, since it is the handling of these two museographical parameters which gives each gallery its own special atmosphere. The colour scheme of each gallery was dictated by its theme, and resulted from research into the plastered or painted surfaces of the monuments of the period in question. The aim was to convey the atmosphere of the places from which the exhibits originate; this enhances visitors' reception of them; they are in a sense "reinstated" in their "original" place and time. The quality and intensity of the lighting were also determined by the theme in each gallery.

We were also eager to make use of modern technologies, and did not hesitate to juxtapose ancient objects with contemporary artistic work in order to maximize the semiotic richness of the exhibition.

The principles which I have discussed above should make it easier to understand the way in which we have used archaeological material to serve our museological choices.

Thus, the exhibits in **Gallery 1 "Early Christian Church"** (Figure 3), which looks at the early Christian church as the principal expression of the triumph of the Church, present it as a shell-like edifice which serves needs of worship, and simultaneously draw attention to the aesthetic values of the period, which are evident in the architectural sculptures, decoration and the equipment of the church (Katsanika-Stefanou, Papadeli-Marconi, 1998, 62-67).

Gallery 2 "Early Christian City and Private Dwelling" (Figure 4), shows how public and private life were organised in the early Christian period. The exhibition presents urban infrastructure and commercial activities, which went on in cities, activities relating to the countryside and the sea, as well as aspects of domestic life (Papadeli-Marconi, Katsanika-Stefanou, 2001, 66-68).

Gallery 3 "From the Elysian Field to the Christian Paradise" looks at the fundamental changes in ideas about death which Christianity brought about (Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, 1997, 128-142. Eadem, 1997, 6-10). It presents the typology of tombs and the development of tomb painting from the 3rd to the 6th century. The Christian worldview is conveyed through the iconography and symbolisms in the burial frescoes, texts of tomb inscriptions, and also through burial customs (Papadeli-Marconi, Katsanika-Stefanou, 2002, 90-93).

Gallery 4 "From Iconoclasm to the splendor of Macedonian and Komnenian Dynasties (8th-12th c.)" deals with a range of subjects such as: the changes in church decoration brought about by the prevalence of the new, domed type of church, and the triumph of the icons; the consequences of moving cemeteries inside the cities and burying the dead around or inside churches, changes in the technology and art of pottery-making, with the practice of glazing, the rise of pilgrimage, particularly to St Demetrius in Thessaloniki, e.t.c.

Gallery 5 presents the "Dynasties of Byzantine Emperors". Displays of coins demonstrate the function of currency as a major vehicle for the spreading of imperial ideology.

In **Gallery 6 "The Byzantine Castle"**, archaeological material and visual aids describe the



Figura 5. Gallery 11, "Discovering the Past"

reasons and preconditions for the founding of Byzantine castles, the defence and accommodation needs which they served, town planning and the architecture of houses, the organisation of life within the castle, and military equipment.

The exhibition in **Gallery 7 "The Twilight of Byzantium 1204-1453"** looks at the final centuries of the Byzantine empire focusing on Thessaloniki's role as a major artistic centre with influence to the neighbouring Slav peoples.

Two donated private collections are included in the temporal strand of the exhibition, **Dori Pa-pastratou Collection** consisting of religious engravings and that of **Dimitrios Economopoulos Collection**, consisting mainly of icons. Representative pieces from these collections are presented in **Galleries 8 and 9** (Papadeli-Marconi, 2003, 110-112).

The exhibits in **Gallery 10 "Byzantium after Byzantium. The Byzantine Legacy after the Fall of Constantinople (1453-19th c.)"** present the features of Byzantine culture which survived in the Hellenic world after the Fall of Constantinople, and show how the development of religious painting differed depending on whether an area was under Ottoman or Venetian rule.

Gallery 11, which is the culmination of the exhibition, is entitled **"Discovering the Past"** (Figure 5). The display attempts to provide visitors with some answers to questions that may have occurred to them during their visit to the Museum, or to any archaeological museum. Questions relating to the timeless and very human need for knowledge about the past, to the methods of acquiring this, to the ways in which the material remains of the past are dated; to the fate of antiquities uncovered in modern cities; to the role of conservation and so on. The display also attempts to take visitors behind the scenes of the exhibition and to describe the intellectual and technical processes by which an archaeological find is converted into a museum exhibit. These subjects are presented through visual aids, with particular use of modern technology. The only authentic exhibit is a large mosaic floor from a 5th century urban villa found in a rescue excavation on a building plot in the upper town of Thessaloniki. Detached from its original position, the mosaic floor is surrounded, and evocatively annotated, by a modern visual creation, a mural by a well-known artist. This calls to mind the familiar urban landscape of modern Greek towns, in which antiquities are often discovered coexisting with it, stifled and downgraded.

The exhibition concludes with two interactive screens presenting the history of museums from antiquity to the present day, and showing how the meaning of "museum" has varied throughout time, as historical and social conditions have changed (Vranikas, Nikolaidou, 2008).

The archaeological material of the Museum which is not exhibited does not lie inactive, it is either used in thematic exhibitions organised by the museum itself or borrowed in exhibitions organised by acquainted museum throughout the world.

The Museum apart from its website (www.mbp.gr) also publishes an annual journal in three languages (Greek, English and French) which presents its activities as well as brief articles concerning objects from its exhibitions.

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