

“Heroes” in Neo-Hellenic Art (19th – 20th Centuries) the New National Models and their Development

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“Pity the country that needs heroes.”

Bertolt Brecht

Abstract

The outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821 acted as a catalyst for the country and put in place the conditions for the occurrence of many new phenomena, such as the emergence of art, for example, which was influenced by Western mannerisms. This has been considered absolutely normal, because this is when the actual conditions for the development of art were met. The social, legal, moral and political conditions were completely overhauled and this enabled citizens to express themselves freely. (1)

For Greeks, the Greek Revolution has been the great historical event out of which the new Greek state emerged. However, to achieve this, sacrifices and struggles have been necessary, which resulted in certain people standing out for their achievements, bringing back to the people’s memory the ancient myths about semi-gods and heroes as well as the saints of the Christian religion.

The heroes and heroines of the new Hellenism leapt out of the Greek Revolution, lauded by poets and represented by artists.

In general, there are many categories of “heroes”, as there are many definitions thereof. According to dictionaries, a “hero” is someone “who commits a valiant act, often to the point of sacrificing themselves”, a person who achieves something particularly difficult and who is admired by others. (2) It goes without saying that a hero is not someone distinguished solely for their body endowments but also for their intellectual achievements.

The Greek Revolution generated many heroes, who were those who distinguished themselves in battles with their bravery, achieved important victories, demonstrated strategic insight, and performed generous and kind actions, so as to be considered by human societies as the essential players in the liberation of the country and its redemption from the yoke of slavery. Regarding, in particular, the heroes of the Greek Revolution Vasilis Gounaris has said: “The Greek independence gave them (i.e. the heroes) *de facto* the status of national fighters, while their sacrifices of all kinds have been consecrated, in exactly the same manner as in other countries. This was normal and should have been expected. It represented the dramatic participation of the population in the founding act of the Greek State.” (3)

Keywords: Greek Revolution, National Heroes and Unknown “Heroes”, New National Symbols, Ethnographical Models, Art and History.

INTRODUCTION

The heroisation of persons is a process adopted by an organised society and it often arises from an “association of myths” referring to the hero’s personality. “A hero” –writes Joseph Campbell (4) – “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

The new “hero” is promoted as a model of moral behaviour and, depending on the dynamics of the “myth” surrounding them, heroes are proposed as the “good example” to be followed by the younger. Heroes cause awe and respect and they have been, at times, the necessary creations of people’s imagination. In particular, in post-revolutionary Greece, “heroes” had to promote the new ideals and the values of the Greek race. They were the new models for the Greeks who had deep roots in the past. As expected, the new “hero” is the creation of the new era, i.e. the new established order, and he/she serves the new moral, ideological and social reality in the new Greece. Above all, heroes are true persons, who have lived and died in the service of the common good of freedom.

THE HEROES OF THE GREEK REVOLUTION IN ART. THE CREATION OF NEW MODELS

The first images of heroes in Greek art were those of the heroes of the 1821 Revolution, who had helped liberate the country. During this period, heroic figures arose from all kinds of categories of art, in particular painting and sculpture, and were mostly depicted in the visual art categories of portrait and historical theme. The initiators have been foreign painters who happened to be in Greece for various reasons, either as philhellene servicemen and amateur artists or as professional painters executing various orders, mostly by the Bavarian kings. They had the opportunity of actively participating in the war for the country's liberation and visually capture their impressions and, in particular, paint the famous as well as the unknown fighters, those that we call "heroes" for the aforementioned reasons.

The greatness and importance of the persons who went down in history as "heroes" –at times after the fact – is something that needs to be investigated. It is nevertheless true that fame and glory have accompanied many of the main characters of the 1821 Revolution during their lifetime, and these persons subsequently became legends for some people. The activity of the aforementioned artists can be mostly identified with the period of King Otto's reign (1833-1862).

Later on, these themes were also taken up by Greek painters from various regions of Greece (the Ionian Islands and elsewhere), indeed to a great extent. For them, the concepts of heroism and sacrifice were qualities put forward more than ever before. Besides, around the mid-19th century, Greece started promoting its new identity in every manner possible and such images of "brave men" had quite an appeal. An unprecedented production of portraits of "heroes", as well as of war scenes focused on well-known historical persons, can be noted during that time.

The "Munich School" (1860-1900) ensued, which showed less interest in dealing with the recent historical past and, consequently, the heroic spirit, and replaced them with the everyday life of people together with their achievements. In their art, these artists have replaced the "heroes" by contemporary everyday people, the so-called "unknown heroes" (5). This is the period when the new Greek bourgeois state is taking shape.

According to scholars (6), the first artists to deal with such themes were influenced by the Romantic movement, were admirers of the Greek culture, and were characterised by their commitment to the ideas of Enlightenment. They also supported humanitarian values and the ideals of freedom and justice. They were, as a rule, possessed by a religious kind of emotion and were emotionally involved in the events. They composed a personality combining the "hero" and the "saint", they created conflicting conditions between "good" and "evil", and they did not hesitate to show their preference.

Greeks are depicted as the descendants of brave people, they are the representatives of an ancient and high civilisation, they are fighting for justice in an unequal war, and they deserve the favour of God to gain their freedom. Their struggle is sacred, morally justified and just. All elements betray their origin, such as their clothes, their racial characteristics, and the venue. The symbols permanently accompanying them are the Greek flag, indicating their origin, and the cross, indicating their religion. The venue is the Greek landscape with ancient ruins, well-known castles, as well as ships with Greek symbols and cities with Christian churches.

The first famous portraits of "heroes" were those created by the Bavarian philhellene military painter **Carl Krazeisen** and published in an album in Munich between 1828 and 1831. Theodoros Kolokotronis, Konstantinos Kanaris, Ioannis Makrygiannis are some of the Revolution's main actors depicted in this album.

This amateur foreign painter captured the combative and moral nature of these persons seeking to cause maximum emotion to the beholders, which were the kings and princes of the time. This was essentially the first time that the model of the new Greek was created, who was the representative of a great historical name.

A similar manner was also adopted by Krazeisen's compatriot, **Peter von Hess**, a professional painter who came to Greece in 1833 upon the order of Bavarian King Ludwig, accompanied Otto in Greece, and illustrated the Greek Revolution and the Greek fighters. The result of this trip was a spectacular album with Greek historical themes printed in Munich 1841. Some of the most famous portraits of Greek heroes include those of Andreas Miaoulis, Bouboulina, Alexandros Mavrokordatos, Alexandros Ypsilantis, and others. The painter's purpose was to create a type of new hero that was based on the visions of the representatives of European Romanticism.

However, the hero who exceeded all expectations and went beyond all boundaries and who may be seen in a great number of works of art of all types, both Greek and foreign, is Markos Botsaris. Quite often his description approximates that of a saint or an ancient hero, thus transforming his image into a real legend. His brave death in 1823 inspired many poets and mostly artists of all kinds, both sophisticated and popular.

The most famous paintings depicting the death of Markos Botsaris are those by **Eugène Delacroix**, the great French Romantic artist, the Italian **Ludovico Liparini**, the German **Peter von Hess**, as well as paintings by several Greeks, such as **Dionysios Tsokos** from the Ionian Islands and – later on – **Theophilos**. His death is a real “Pietà”, a lamentation for the most courageous Greek fighter for freedom. This was the person who caught the attention of Europeans, who was mentioned by newspapers, magazines and artists, and who was the international symbol of a struggle, evolving between myth and history. He is probably the only Greek hero whose short-lived presence in the fight for the Greek independence – he was killed at the age of 33 – was idealized to such an extent, who was assimilated to the saints and martyrs of Christianity as well as to ancient heroes, such as Leonidas and the demi-gods.

His legacy is considered to be very important both for future painters and for the newly founded Greek society that was in need of heroes, now representing a new spirit, fully idealised, which conveyed the brilliant past into the present. Markos Botsaris represented Good, his death redeeming an entire people, in harmony with the Christian perception. Besides, God was on his side.

Whether foreigner or Greek, the painters adopted more or less the same imagery. Images were philhellenic and they expressed the established perception regarding the important role of the Church and the nation. From a political point of view, these images represented an appeal to Christian Europe to defend and support the Greece in its struggle with all their might. One can see in this conflict the rivalry between two worlds, represented by the two big religions, Christianity and Islam. Delacroix's famous work, “The Massacre at Chios” (1824), was the most convincing example for putting forward this conception. Two years later (in 1826), the French painter painted in a similar manner his “Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi”.

On the Greek side, a typical example of the ideological nature of this conflict is “The Exodus of Missolonghi” by **Theodoros Vryzakis**, who imitated contemporary models of the philhellene and romantic painters, as well as models by previous artists, representatives of the Byzantine art. In this work, the painter depicts the historical event of the “Exodus” in the form of religious representations, such as, for example, “The Second Coming”. The whole scenery is a reference to religious images of the past with the main actors accomplishing a specific role, the Greeks being the innocent people who incarnate Good, while their adversaries are depicted as representatives of cruelty and absolute Evil.

The work was created in Munich, where Vryzakis lived, in 1855, at a rather critical point in time for the newly founded Greek State, which was in search for its identity. The Greek Revolution was still fresh and the idealisation of the recent past was a necessity in order to maintain peace and calmness, as well as to emotionally influence Europeans.

During Otto's reign, Greek artists who excelled in portrait and historical theme painting included, aside from Vryzakis, Georgios Margaritis and Dionysios Tsokos. These were artists

involved in historical portrait painting who put forward those features of people that turned them into heroes. This means that they used the tools of their art in order to convince the beholder of the heroic personality of the person depicted.

“Georgios Karaiskakis” (1844) by **Georgios Margaritis** is one of the earliest works of Greek painting of this type and it keeps up with the French romantic tradition. The hero lunges forward towards the Acropolis on his horse, wielding his sword, leaving behind him a multitude of dead enemies. Nothing can stop him. He has the appearance of Saint George and the impetus of Alexander the Great. In this work Karaiskakis is depicted as a personality having supernatural powers, defying danger, showing no regard for his own life, and performing unusual acts. His purpose is noble and, most of all, sacred. It is not only related to human freedom but also to safeguarding the culture he represents. Thus, the presence in the background of the Acropolis with the Parthenon is one of the main references in the painting, and the reason for the hero’s god-sent mission.

The portraits of Greek fighters of the Revolution made by **Dionysios Tsokos** from Zante are renowned. Some of his portraits represent anonymous fighters, and this indicates that he was interested in showcasing typical figures emphasising their heroic character. Portraits of well-known fighters include, among others, “Ilias Mavromichalis”, “Georgios Kountouriotis”, but paintings also include group historical scenes, such as “The death of Markos Botsaris”, “The Captain Bids Farewell”, “Fleeing Parga”, etc.

The general impression is that Tsokos describes a world of heroes, a world of myths and legends. This is a moral world, which is proposed as a model. Tsokos is also a follower of the French romantic spirit and the bulk of its work was created around the mid-19th century. His heroes, men or women, are idealised through their acts and their overall appearance. Their love for their country, their family and their religion is immense.

The historical personalities Tsokos paints refer to the heroic past immortalising noble ideas and national ideals. Tsokos and Vryzakis were the first Greek artists to present through their images the Greek Revolution as an achievement of heroes, who achieved the unachievable through their supernatural acts.

In addition to painting, sculpture also produced many works having similar character.

Statues and busts of heroes of the Revolution of 1821 filled the parks and avenues of Athens immediately after the Revolution, rising towards the capital’s free sky. Their message is clear. The nation honours its heroes and derives strength from their presence through time. Rigas Ferraios, Patriarch Gregory V, Theodoros Kolokotronis, Konstantinos Kanaris, Georgios Karaiskakis, Andreas Miaoulis and many others were included in the main repertoire of Greek sculptors. The characteristics of their elaboration are more or less identical. Supernatural size, intense movement of the hands, reminiscent of the Baroque style, robustness and plastic force in line with the ancient models, and imagery with specific symbolism, according to each hero’s accomplishments (7).

Georgios Fytalis, originating from a family of sculptors, created in 1872 the marble statue of “Patriarch Gregory V” to be found at the Propylaea of the University of Athens. The work is impressive. The robe’s rich ruffles make the figure numinous. The Patriarch appears as the “good shepherd”, protecting and guiding his flock. This is the ultimate moral elevation of a religious leader who died as a martyr before the main gate of the Patriarchate.

Sculptor **Ioannis Kossos** also originated from a family of artists. He dealt with the heroes of the Revolution more than any other artist. In 1872 (on the same year as the previously described work) he created the statue of “Rigas Ferraios” also to be found at the Propylaea of the University of Athens. Rigas Ferraios has been a historical personality with great popular appeal.

Other sculptors, such as Georgios Vitalis, Lazaros Sochos, Georgios Bonanos, etc., representatives

of the Munich School, systematically dealt with the creation of statues, sensibly improving their technique. Their classicism brought along many resources, not only from a figurative but also from an aesthetic point of view. Indeed, the idealism of classicism satisfied to a great extent the ideological quest of the time, in particular with regard to legendary figures.

Georgios Vitalis created “Konstantinos Kanaris” (1889, Tinos, Evangelistria Foundation), bearing all the tools of his heroic martial activity and making a gesture that lifts the entire work upwards in an intense spiritual elevation.

The equestrian statue of “Theodoros Kolokotronis” (1901), located outside the Old Parliament in Athens, possibly recapitulates the entire monumental and heroic 19th-century sculpture. This oversized statue was created by **Lazaros Sochos**. It is extremely high (4 m), taking into consideration the technical capabilities of its time, due to its elevated pedestal. The symplegma is impressive and in its way overwhelms the beholder. Kolokotronis is the man who achieved the unachievable, who made centuries-old dreams come true. The hero has now entered the realm of legend.

Another sculptor who dealt with Greek heroes was **Georgios Bonanos**. He is the creator of the marble statue of “Andreas Miaoulis” to be found in the Central Square of Ermoupoli, in Syros. “Miaoulis” is also placed on a high pedestal. This actual elevation enhances the spiritual exaltation of the person represented, who may be seen navigating his boat. He is the captain-leader, just like “Kolokotronis”, and this is a symbolic reference to security, safety and trust, qualities that befit heroes, such as the popular imagination wanted them to be and such as an entire people had captured them in its mind.

This perception is dominant throughout the 19th century. The country’s national identity is taking shape little by little and Greece enjoys its freedom. The heroic past is gradually left behind as the country is now involved in peaceful projects. Heroes remain silent on their pedestals.

THE ANONYMOUS “HEROES”

As mentioned above, many artists, not only those from the Munich School, but also artists from other schools, such as the French and the Italian schools, have dealt with Greece’s national heroes, to a larger or smaller extent. However, as time went by, and Greece passed from the 19th to the 20th century, these themes became less predominant and were replaced by others that were more realistic. Historical themes and portraits of heroes were replaced by scenes of everyday life, both in villages and in the city. Greek society had changed in a sensible manner. Classes of traders and educated *petit bourgeois* had been formed as a result of the new conditions prevailing in economy and culture.

Art is now oriented towards the achievements of these people and follows their activities from their cradle to grave. Also in this art category people are represented idealised as they deal with their everyday activities. They keep Greek traditions and local customs, they honour their family, they love their country, they protect their children, and they are religious. In general, they adopt a bourgeois lifestyle. Their appearance is embellished and idealistic. One could argue that in this manner new models for people are created. They are the ones having the leading part in Greek art during this period.

These people are anonymous, familiar and friendly, ethnographically recognisable having an ethical character and a formal behaviour. They are the new “heroes” of Greeks, the models of a new moral perception about man. (8)

Their “achievements” are measurable and understandable. They represent all kinds of human beings, young and old, burghers and peasants, they exercise various professions, and they go through various situations that may be dramatic, funny or humorous. These were the models of the new heroes that accompanied Greece until the turn of the century. According to Marilena

Kasimati, (9) “through painting – and we have here the excellent example of Gyzis visual expertise – the symbolic value of each character is revealed and these characters are now required to become an example to be followed”.

This was the new theme that the most important Greek painters in the 19th century, known as masters of the “Munich School”, delved into. They are Nikolaos Gyzis, Nikiforos Lytras and Georgios Iakovidis.

Nikolaos Gyzis is the creator of certain works – typical examples of the representation of human characters – putting forward the ideal models of Greek society. One could say that these are the contemporary heroes leaving among us. These works include “Engagement Ceremony”, “Carnival at Athens”, “Cards”, “Le don”, among many others.

Gyzis is fully aware of the purpose of these works, such as, for example, the “Engagement Ceremony” dated in 1877. All kinds of human characters play specific roles. They speak, they talk, they laugh, and they spend time in a pleasant way in a familiar place among friends and family. Besides, this is the engagement of two small children before a priest.

This is a “serious” story, albeit taking place in a humorous manner inside a home, with all its main actors, representing a new society and its new models. These are the models created by the new Greek bourgeoisie and put forward in any manner available to confirm its strong presence in the new social, political and economic environment (10).

Nikiforos Lytras painted similar works, such as “Return from a Feast at Penteli”, “Carols”, “The Milkman”, etc. In his works, he gives form to values and ideas, gifts of the Greek race, which are represented through widely known and popular customs, as well as through the structures of Greek society.

Lastly, **Georgios Iakovidis** has lauded, more than any other artist, family and the relationship between children and their elders. These are the values of the Greek patriarchal society which now acquire a Christian wrapping. His most famous works include “Children’s Concert”, “First Steps”, “Cold Shower”, and many others.

It is evident that promoting these moral values was expected by the new bourgeoisie of Athens. Anonymous heroes were ideal to represent these values. Indeed, the orientation towards the innocent and pure world of children confirmed these intentions. These new ideas and moral perceptions are fully crystallised in the famous “Children’s Concert” painted by Iakovidis in 1900.

HEROES IN MORE RECENT TIMES. MOVING FROM THE “I” TO THE “WE”

The 20th century has been particularly critical for Greece. Immediately after the onset of the new century, the country became involved in a series of wars. First, the Macedonian Struggle, and then the Balkan Wars, War World I and almost two decades later World War II. Greece has been directly involved in all these events.

It is a fact that wars create heroes. We already saw that with the Greek Revolution in 1821. However, things were different in the 20th century. Individual heroes became rare. Conversely, collective memory was highlighted. The “we” replaced the “I”. Artistic monuments lauded this great fact, immortalising bravery, courage and military success on the collective level. Individual contribution is almost conspicuously absent, with a few exceptions, one of them being the case of the hero Pavlos Melas. Personal participation is identified at the local level, in villages and cities. This is where one can usually find these sculpture symplegmas, busts of heroes and their monuments.

An important exception to this rule is the very frequent presence of a classic Greek hero, Alexander the Great. In spite of the fact that Alexander lived thousands of years ago, he is present in every city in Macedonia.

The history of contemporary Greek art includes several works of collective memory, heroism

and bravery. From the Macedonian Struggle, it is worth mentioning the work of **Dimitris Kalamaras** “Captain Kottas”, representing the hero Macedonian Fighter standing, in spite of the intense signs of his torment that have deformed him.

The best known of all Macedonian Fighters, Pavlos Melas, is a supranational figure. Many artists have captured his figure as an intertemporal hero having all the features of ancient heroes and of the heroes of the 1821 Revolution. This is an idealistic and, at the same time, forceful presence with embellished features that suggest immortality and internal beauty. In painting, Pavlos Melas has been depicted by the old master, Georgios Iakovidis, while in sculpture he has been represented by his grand-daughter, sculptress Natalia Mela.

As mentioned above, the Balkan Wars and World War I created their own heroes, albeit seen through the collective effort. The best known monuments and commemorative stones referring to this heroic era are the “Commemorative Stone of Kilkis”, created in 1928 by sculptor **Georgios Dimitriadis**, and the “Giannitsa Monument”, a work created in 1925 by sculptor **Grigorios Zevgolis**.

Both contemporary works are a praise to the heroic dead of the country, who fell fighting like real martyrs. Both works are symplegmas of figures and form particularly expressive ensembles. The message is clear: promoting the idea of collective effort, unity and solidarity in a period of national discord, which the country had paid so dearly with the Catastrophe in Asia Minor a few years back (1922). In this instance, heroes are the apostles of self-sacrifice, patriotism and national effort.

Similar messages are also sent by the works relating to the Epic of 1940, such as the paintings of Umvertos Argyros and Alekos Alexandrakis.

These are patriotic works *par excellence* which seek to present in an narrative manner the heroism of Greeks, in line with the verses of poet Kostis Palamas, referring to “heroes who are in our hearts, the martyrs, the brave dead and the beautiful” (freely translated).

The Greek Resistance during the period of the German occupation (1941-45) also created “heroes and martyrs” captured for the most part on engravings allowing for their easy and quick movement in times of prohibition and persecutions. Engravers **Tasos** and **Vaso Katraki** excelled in this art category. Their images show a tragic religiosity which we can see in images of the Passion of the Christ. They are characterised by populous representations, aimed at underlying the mass character of the resistance and the sacrifice, in order to have a propagandistic effect, to reinforce national unity and to lift national morale.

After World War II, the Greek people has lived in peace and enjoyed their freedom for approximately seventy years. The artistic repertoire has radically changed and, perhaps for the first time, art appears particularly pluralistic.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented the national heroes, so-called based on the history of myths and legends of the far past. There exist many categories of heroes. However, those who have been established in Greek history are the great fighters and winners of the 1821 Revolution, the people who sacrificed themselves, and who went down in history as rare or unique.

Portraits and historical themes have captured the fighters and the heroes, and the passing of time has turned them into legendary figures. From the onset, national reasons made the heroic figures models for the generations to come. Even at times of peace, a different line of themes, genre painting, created the anonymous heroes. Their idealistic appearance resulted from the need to put forward a moral man, who would live his life as good patriot, a good Christian, and a good family man.

The 20th century differed from the previous one. There were more wars and each generation

has had its own tragic experience. The Macedonian Struggle, the Balkan Wars, World War I, and World War II generated many opportunities for creating new heroes that would lift the national morale and would be monuments of collective memory. Thus, commemorative stones made their appearance throughout the Greek territory. The difference in this case is that the commemorative stones refer mostly to collective efforts and less to individual actions.

In Northern Greece, the presence of Alexander the Great is of particular importance, not simply as a hero, but as the expression of the national unity of Macedonians from antiquity to our times.

In the current era of globalisation, heroes seem to be international and they are no longer exclusive to specific nations. Super heroes from movies and novels dominate, fighting Evil in general and saving Humanity. In Greece, in times of peace and consumerism, as well as in times of crises, heroes have not survived, at least not with the historical dimension and the great past we have known until recently.

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