

HOMAGE TO MELINA' S PROGRAMME “Education and Culture”: From the Educational Programmes of Greek Museums to Art Competitions in Schools.

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Abstract

Melina Mercuri's mandate at the Ministry of Culture of Greece has been marked by various actions regarding culture, including the programme bearing her name and involving promoting culture in education, thus inaugurating a new era in the relationship between schools and museums in Greece. The programme was implemented as a pilot in the mid-90s and it has had a significant impact on the development of educational programmes by Greek museums, highlighting their pedagogical role as well as the schools' duty to offer knowledge to students through their own experiences arising from systematic visits to culture venues. Furthermore, the curriculum of Greek schools has been enriched with art courses, and art competitions have been put in place for young students in the country. In particular, the “Education and Culture” programme has sparked the dissemination throughout the Greek territory of the need to organise education services in museums having a clear pedagogical orientation and aiming primarily at attracting young students.

Keywords: Melina's Program, Museum and School, Educational Programs, Museum Education, Greek museums, Education and Culture.

Introduction

Recognising museums as institutions available to society and aiming at its development (ICOM, 1974) has considerably broadened their scope and influence on an extraordinary wide public, without any restrictions based on economy, policy, religion, or race. The museums' educational dimension is at the heart of their existence, consisting in imparting knowledge and skills, aimed at developing the visitors' cultural education, self-fulfilment and mental advancement and at ensuring their personal development (Desvallées, A. & Mairesse, 2010: 32). In particular, education within the framework of museums, which is theoretically and methodologically defined as “museum pedagogy”, achieves the “mobilisation of knowledge [and] the development of new sensitivities and the realisation of new experiences (ibid.). The threesome “education – learning – knowledge” is what defines the continuous process of assimilating new knowledge and information, thus allowing individuals to acquire the necessary skills for their mental and bodily fulfilment. Therefore, museums have targeted individuals within society, and they have had to create special conditions to attract as many individuals as possible, so as to increase the museum's visitability and to make the museum provide in turn its information on the “product” it held, thus placing the visitor in the centre of its interest. The strategy adopted by new museums was based on such objectives (Black, 2005).

Indeed, the policy of education has also been embraced by the International Council of Museums, which has included it in its updated definition of the term “museum”, reading as follows: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of **education**, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, 2007) (my emphasis).

However, education primarily concerns younger children and, therefore, museums have turned to the immense and “magical” world of children, putting in place appropriate conditions to broaden their public, while creating motives for their visits and new forms for exploiting the potential of schools (Black, ibid.).

The role of museums in education has now become particularly important. According to Mitsel (2006: 37-38), “the relationship between school and museum has crystallised into two models: (a) the programmes of museums aimed at imparting the aesthetic experience and at making young people encounter elements of culture, and (b) the model that may be found in museums in the United States aimed at supporting school work”. There are many reasons for which students visit museums, including that they promote active learning, they provide opportunities for inspiration, they satisfy the needs of school courses, they contribute to the development of skills, they make cultural heritage known, and they increase social behaviour and collaboration (Mitsel: 38-48).

In the field of museum education, US and European museums have taken the lead, taking it upon themselves to educate the public, providing already since the late 19th century many learning opportunities within the museum premises. Already at that time, “the power of museums to educate and train had been acknowledged, because they were considered to be the guardians not only of the past but also of scientific truth. On the other hand, education is turning to museums wishing to enrich the school curriculum with experiences stemming from reality and this has given rise to the relationship between museum and school” (Nikonanou, 2010: 39). Thereafter, promotion of education has been a basic constant in the planning of most museums.

In Greece, adaptation to the new reality came much later. However, following World War II, the increase in the number of museums, in particular archaeological ones, and the need for young people to become aware of, and acquainted with, the historical past have brought about the necessary changes, both in museums and in schools, which led to establishing the link between museums and schools, pursued by many parties, at the level of interaction in matters of education.

Melina’s Programme “Education and Culture”

Melina Mercouri (1920-1994) was Minister of Culture in Greece for many years and from such position she launched important policy initiatives to highlight European culture, as a result of her deep involvement with art, being herself an internationally recognised actress. Her better known proposal is the one made to the European Ministers of Culture in 1983 regarding the establishment of an annual art festival in a European city, to be selected every year, with the purpose of highlighting Europe’s cultural identity and the coming together of peoples. This initiative materialised in 1985 (Athens) and has continued to this day with great success under the name “European Capital of Culture” (Gold & Gold, 1995).

The “Education and Culture” Programme bearing Melina Mercouri’s name originated from the Ministry of Culture in 1993, was implemented on a pilot basis in many schools in Greece until 2003, and it has left behind a particularly important legacy in Greek education. According to Mercouri, “if we can raise the children’s awareness of culture, this will create a different society, a different mentality, a different policy” (Mitsel, 2006: 209). The programme has had a multi-faceted impact in many areas of intellectual life in Greece and has become the object of various research studies, in particular in the field of education, as may be seen from the multitude of relevant publications (see recent references to the matter, Votsou, 2014).

The objective of the programme was to “familiarise students with art through teaching and to train teachers with the purpose of developing a positive attitude towards Culture and of acknowledging its pedagogical relevance” (Raptou, 2006). The programme has embraced various themes including in particular matters of art and culture, such as visual arts, music, dance, drama, and language. According to the Programme’s declaration, its main objectives were: (a) to highlight the cultural dimension of education and to revive the core of everyday school action through the eternal force of art and culture, (b) to upgrade aesthetic training in education, by focusing on the cultural and artistic aspects of education, (c) to develop a cultural strategy to raise the children’s awareness of cultural heritage and to familiarise children with contemporary forms of artistic expression.

The Programme was implemented in 92 schools in Greece and more than 26 educational programmes were accordingly developed, the most interesting of which included the following: *A day in ancient Kalydona* (developed by the 6th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classic Antiquities). A board game for children played with dice, where each student player pretends to be the inhabitant of this ancient city exiting the city’s walls and heading to the sanctuaries and the shrines dedicated to heroes to finally reach the port. Each player moves according to the answers given to a specific questionnaire. The players who give the correct answers move ahead while those who give the wrong answers remain at the walls. The purpose of the game is to reach the port. The children use a leaflet with historical information and images of ancient objects to help them through the game. The teacher also has a similar leaflet allowing him/her to guide young students.

At the ancient Odeon of Patras is a programme developed by the aforementioned service relating to a visit at the city's ancient Odeon. Both students and teachers are provided with historical and other information on the background and the types of ancient theatres and odeons, accompanied by models and drawings for the proposed theme. On this occasion, young students are invited to get involved with paper craft, i.e. to make an ancient odeon (the orchestra, the proscenium, the scene, the wings, and the hollow) using the paper parts provided to them. Instructions are also provided on how to finally complete the model of the odeon, colouring the relevant parts, placing the figures of the actors at the right positions with colours, also suggesting to the students to direct a play. Another interesting educational programme developed by the same service is called *Looking for Ithaca* and it evolves in the form of a game. The game is played by two teams. Each team gets a card and attempts to identify the ancient objects to be found on smaller cards, according to the riddles that relate to each of them. The winner is the team completing its card first. Where there are more than two teams, cards may be reproduced in photocopies. This programme also provides educational material to students and teachers, in order to make their collaboration more efficient and effective.

The above are just a few examples. Dozens of actions have been recorded throughout Greece, unprecedented in Greek culture and education. A press release dating from 1997 includes, in the form of an epigram, the following text: *The art of teaching,/ guiding in space and time / listening, singing, dancing and playing/ mentally going through/ the great journey of life, of human thinking,/ of world civilisation / looking / in the happy eyes of adults / for the redemption of "... and they lived happily ever after"/ is/ the deeper meaning of the adventure called /Melina's Programme "Education and Culture"*.

Jules Dassin added: *"To learn by taking pleasure, to take advantage of the children's natural curiosity. In the end, this is the message that Melina's Programme should put forward"*.

The educational programmes of Greek museums

Melina's Programme made waves in the fields of education and culture, activating almost all public and private cultural institutions in Greece. Museums, universities, ministries, archaeological services, and municipalities joined forces to design and prepare educational programmes to be used in schools to the benefit of students. More specifically, it became clear that the relationship between schools and museums is useful in multiple ways and can offer unique experiences. "It is a fact that museums provide experiences based on the contact with actual three-dimensional objects, which have the power to stir up the students' strong interest, because they stimulate their natural curiosity and exploratory predisposition while providing them with the possibility of creating a code for communicating" (Raptou, *ibid.*).

From the outset, Greek museums have turned their interest to showcasing their collections and promoting knowledge about art as well as the study of visual arts. The main objective of most museums, in particular archaeological ones, which exist in considerably greater numbers and are among the more visible ones, involved approaching Greek art from an intertemporal perspective.

Some museums had implemented educational programmes earlier on, in a scientific manner and applying pedagogically adequate methods. The first museum to implement educational programmes was the *Benaki Museum*, which was also among those that collaborated with the Ministry of Culture to implement Melina's Programme. The 80s were marked by educational activities of this type, which were, however, limited "for the most part to complementary actions in the already arranged exhibition space" (Nikonanou, 2010: 63). In 1985 Athens became the European Capital of Culture and this led to noteworthy cultural activities, where the State promoted actions aiming at safeguarding and showcasing cultural heritage.

The aforementioned activity was the precursor of Melina's Programme which was launched in the mid-90s. Indeed, in both periods, the same person, Melina Mercouri, was Minister of Culture. As indicated above, the Benaki Museum, implemented educational programmes for groups of students, using to this end visual material, called *educational kits*, provided to the interested parties (teachers and students). The museum had created special workshops for children, where young students made objects having a cultural characters (for example, masks) working together with artists. "*Traditional Greek Headgear*" (headgear from various regions of Greece) and "*The Icon-painter's box*", which offers guidance to students to paint an icon using the tools of the icon-painter included in the kit, are among the most popular educational kits. As a rule, the educational programmes of the Benaki Museum are related to the contents of its collections ranging from ancient Greek art and Byzantine art to modern art and folk art (Mitsel, 2006: 196-201).

The example set by the Benaki Museum has been followed by almost all major museums in Athens, such as the National Gallery, the National Archaeological Museum, the Museum of Cycladic Art, and the **Byzantine and Christian Museum**, and others, which have developed educational programmes and collaborated with primary education schools. In this regard, important activities were also undertaken by smaller museums both in Athens and in other cities. The *Hellenic Children's Museum*, located in a traditional neighbourhood in Athens, Plaka, is one of the most recently established in Greece (it was created in 1987). Nevertheless, it organised many interesting educational programmes, in particular for young children. The objective of such actions is to attract children to the museum, to allow them to live exciting experiences, develop their skills, and learn through the exhibits. Some of its educational programmes, also implemented in other museums, include the following: *The Greek Revolution*, *Hello, Pythagoras!*, *Olive tree and olive oil*, etc. As part of the first programme, children work applying the methods of the historian, gathering information of the Greek Revolution, and making their own book on the subject, while they are encouraged to write an essay on the period of the Greek Revolution. The material provided to them has been adapted to their age and the ideas have come from the *War Museum*, where the educational programme took place.

The second programme, *Hello, Pythagoras!*, was organised in the premises of the Museum to allow children to experiment with shapes, to understand geometrical concepts, and to develop logical mathematical intelligence, and to allow them to become familiar with the exhibits. The third programme, *Olive tree and olive oil*, was organised at the plant of the *Elais* olive oil manufacturer. The objective of this educational programme is obvious. Its purpose is to bring children in an industrial area, where a staple of the Mediterranean diet is produced, to allow them to develop their power of observation and to use critical thinking. The material provided both to the teachers and the students is also rather helpful.

Sparta has an art gallery called the *Koumantareios Art Gallery of Sparta*, operating as a branch of the National Gallery, where works of modern Greek art are displayed. It implements several interesting educational programmes, such as, for example, *Helen's enigmatic smile*, referring to the heroine of ancient Sparta, whom the children are invited to get acquainted with through antiquities (the palace of Menelaus), and other exhibits on display at the archaeological museum of the city. According to its records, this small art gallery in the south of Peloponnesus has implemented an impressive number of educational programmes.

Another gallery of modern Greek art in rural Greece, the *Averoff Museum of Neohellenic Art* in Metsovo, in North-Western Greece, has developed similar activities. Its programmes, where artists discuss with children, answer their questions, explain aspects of their work (painting and sculpture), and play with them, attempting to switch roles, are of particular interest. The museum has a special room for educational programmes, with visual material, adapted to the age of young visitors.

Lastly, the museums in Thessaloniki (Archaeological Museum, Museum of Byzantine Culture, State Museum of Contemporary Art, Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art) have also collaborated with Melina's Programme and have implemented several educational programmes. The Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art has implemented educational programmes from early on and has followed the basic principles of museum education. The museum has specialised staff and dedicated areas to implement its programmes. The programme *Shall we play Art?* has been a great success and has had a participation of more than 12,000 students. The visual material distributed to young visitors included information on exhibits and artists and provided explanations on the process to follow, urging children to play and "discuss" with the works, and encouraging them to evaluate the entire programme. A questionnaire addressed to students, who had to give their answers by watching certain works of specific artists (*In the company of 9 artists*), was of particular interest. The museum has occasionally organised special training sessions for teachers as well as workshops and conferences on matters of museology and museum pedagogy.

Art Competitions in Schools

There can be no doubt that Melina's Programme has had an impact not only on the pedagogical value of museums, almost all of them having been led to prepare educational programmes, but also forced schools to look for further knowledge in museums as part of their curricula. At the same time, Melina's Programme has been an opportunity to improve the provision of aesthetic and art education in schools, which has become a stand-alone course in a few schools. The founding act of Melina's Programme expressly cites the importance of teaching art as part of education, and this objective has led to extending the course in many schools. In large cities art schools were also created with curricula specialising in arts and culture (visual arts, music, drama, etc.).

As a consequence, art competitions between students, taking place every year, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, as part of the teaching of art in primary education schools, have been developed. The competitions of the art festival revolve around visual arts, drama, literature, and dance. The competitions began around the late 90s and, according to their organisers, their purpose was to “promote the aesthetic education of students, to link education to art, and to foster good sportsmanship between students”. The competitions are still held to this day and the participation of students is quite impressive.

The *Hellenic Children’s Museum* also organises annual painting competitions for young students, aged from 5 to 14 years, awarding prizes to the best works.

There exist now several artistic actions in schools and this unambiguously demonstrates that schools are an important place for generating art and creative expression, thus fulfilling in the best manner possible their educational role. This was precisely the message promoted, in such a pioneering and inspired manner, by Melina’s Programme.

Conclusion

Melina’s Programme “Education and Culture” has been a pioneering programme implemented throughout Greece for approximately ten years. It involved promoting art in schools, its main objective being to link schools to museums so as to connect the courses with the actual objects of art, thus increasing the sources of knowledge. Cultural heritage has been the main subject-matter of the initiative, and it has required an approach based on the methods of pedagogy, in line with international standards. Educational programmes were largely promoted in this manner, so as to allow for a direct, creative understanding of art based on experience. Gradually, small and large museums have started implementing their own educational programmes, while schools, guided by the State, have started adapting and looking for collaborations with museums. From then on, the relationship between museums and schools has been founded on a new basis. Museums have acquired special spaces for educating young students and schools have reformed their curricula. On the other hand, the basis for the teaching of art in schools has changed, so as to achieve the creative participation of students. Art competitions have arisen in this context, which continue to this day their quite successful course. In spite of its premature ending, Melina’s Programme has left behind a great legacy for culture and education.

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