

## What Are You Wearing? What Did They Wear?

### Re-exhibiting the Costume Collection at the New Museum of Modern Greek Culture

This article provides a brief historical overview of the ways in which the Museum of Modern Greek Culture has displayed its costume collection and focuses on the new exhibition which is currently being developed at the Museum's new premises on Monastiraki Square, downtown Athens, scheduled to open in 2023. Utilizing many state-of-the-art display techniques, the new exhibition is shaped by the qualities and values associated with traditional dress and provides a privileged space for diverse representations of the collection and the ideas related to it as well as for the exploration of the Museum's "Grand Idea": the strong correlation between modern Greek culture and the making of modern Greek identity.

Established over a century ago, today the Museum of Modern Greek Culture (formerly known as the Museum of Greek Folk Art) is one of the twelve major public museums in Greece. It presents Modern Greek civilization, the third and last link in the chain of the historical continuity of Hellenism, as perceived and represented in the discourse of Greek national museums<sup>1</sup> (Gazi 2011). Its rich collections comprise items indicative of most aspects of Modern Greek culture and showcase the essential elements that shaped Greek cultural identity from the 17th to the 20th centuries.

The works for the refurbishment of the Museum's main permanent exhibition began in 2011, after a lengthy planning process. The new Museum premises comprise an entire old

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1. P. Zora, director of the Museum from 1956 to 1981, commented regarding its foundation: "[...] αποφάσισαν να ιδρύσουν ένα καινούργιο Μουσείο που το υλικό του, προχωρώντας πέρα από το υλικό του Αρχαιολογικού και του Βυζαντινού, θα αντιπροσώπευε το τελευταίο κεφάλαιο της ιστορίας της ελληνικής τέχνης. [...] Στα εκθέματα αυτά, κυρίως στο κίνημα και τα κοσμήματα, μπορεί κανείς να παρακολουθήσει την αισθητική και διακοσμητική αντίληψη της κάθε περιοχής [...] οδηγημένη όχι μόνον από την αισθητική συγκίνηση της ομαδικής λαϊκής ψυχής αλλά και από άγνωστους και αμελέτητους ακόμη νόμους, κληρονομημένους από το μακρύτατο καλλιτεχνικό παρελθόν της ελληνικής φυλής" ("[...] so they decided to establish a new Museum which would go beyond the scope of the Archaeological and Byzantine Museums and showcase the last chapter of the history of Greek art. [...] Such exhibits, mainly jewelry and embroidery items, allow the opportunity to study the aesthetic and decorative approach of each region [...] that was guided not only by the emotional aspect of the aesthetics of the "collective folk soul" but also from the still unknown and unresearched laws inherited from the artistic, deep past of the Greek people") (Zora 1958).

20 | Athenian neighborhood consisting of 23 buildings in the Monastiraki area (fig.1). The restoration of the buildings and the incorporation of museum activities in them will boost and promote the development of the area, ensuring the preservation of the natural, built and cultural landscape.



Fig.1. View of a section of the city block that houses the new Museum. Photo created and published for the “2020 Europe in My Region” Postcards Campaign, ©European Union

The new permanent exhibition<sup>2</sup> (Melidi-Nikiforidou 2014) is based on a “people-centered” approach. The focus has shifted from the presentation of “folk art for the sake of art” to the essential elements of Modern Greek culture. Emphasis is

given, according to the principles of experiential approach and edutainment (Bantimaroudis 2011; Roppola 2015), on offering the visitor an integrated experience, not just information, and on relating the themes of the exhibition with the familiarity of the everyday and the mundane. The Museum aspires to establish a new powerful brand, to increase public awareness, to offer a place for dialogue and the shaping of identities and to develop a more outgoing and active policy of collaborations and activities.

It is in this new and impressive museum environment that the costume collection will be re-exhibited and re-defined. Its origins date back to the Museum’s establishment in the early 20th century. Since then, it has been at the heart of the Museum’s function and planning, growing in parallel with the Museum.

The Museum of Modern Greek Culture was founded in 1918, at a time when the perception and the content of the Greek identity were being redefined and took their final form, along with the state boundaries that this identity had to justify and defend (Hadjinicolaou 2003: 11-16 and Hadjinicolaou 2012). The need to prove the continuity of Hellenism from the ancient times to the present made the “discovery” and promotion of the “purity” of folk culture essential for citizen identity in the newly formed Greek state (Gazi 2011). The intelligentsia of the time perceived any item used by the rural population, who back then still lived a traditional agrarian lifestyle, as a work of art and as a source of inspiration for modern creation and the arts and crafts industry (Matthiopoulos 2012). This approach to the material elements of folk culture, reflected in the Museum’s mission as well,<sup>3</sup> remained more or less the same until recently. In

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2. The exhibition was designed by Stamatis Zannos, Nikos Kyriakopoulos, Spyros Nasainas and Filippos Kitsios; Ifigeneia Demetriou contributed during the first stage of the design.

3. The Royal Decree of 1923 changed the name from Museum of Greek Handicrafts to National Museum of Decorative Arts: “*Το Μουσείον σκοπόν έχει την διά της σπουδής των εν αυτώ συγκεντρωμένων αντικειμένων δημιουργίαν εθνικής κοσμητικής τέχνης κατά τας ποικίλας αυτής εφαρμογάς*” (ΦΕΚ

this context, we should examine the way the costume collection was compiled, interpreted and exhibited.



Fig.2. Bridal and festive costume of Attica. MMGC collection.

Today the costume collection comprises 8,029 objects, dating from the late 18th century to the 1980s. They were made or used in areas inhabited mostly by Greek populations at the time. Most of the items fall under the category of the so-called traditional attire, reflecting the way people dressed both in rural and in urban communities until the early 20th century (Papantoniou 1978; Papantoniou 2000). The basic characteristics of this kind of dress are standardization and codification according to geographical origin and social structure as well as its slow change over time. In the early decades of the 20th century, the Museum mostly collected individual items such as chemises, aprons, head coverings and coats; it appears that these were treated more as embroidery handicrafts than garments. Since the late 1950s, more and more costume ensembles have been registered. At the same time, the Museum acquired large groups of objects of the same kind and origin (e.g. aprons from the Sarakatsani nomads), with the objective of rescuing the last material remnants of a lifestyle that has been lost for good. Apparently, till then the main criteria for the selection were the luxury, the rarity, the beauty, the wealth, the craftsmanship and the decoration of the garments. As a result, the collection holds mostly women bridal and festive costumes (fig.2) and only few clothes

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245/31-8-1923)" [*The purpose of the Museum is to study the items in its collections and thus create a national decorative arts framework for the full range of their expression*] (GG245/31-8-1923)]. A few months earlier (January 1923), the Museum published a call for objects (*Εκκλησις*), stating that the Museum's objects "θα παρέχουν εις τον ερευνητήν, ιδία του από της Αλώσεως της Κωνσταντινουπόλεως αισθητικού βίου του Ελληνικού λαού, πολύτιμα στοιχεία, ενώ εξ άλλου θ' αποδεικνύουν, ότι η προσπάθεια της συναρμογής του ωραίου και προς αυτό το απολύτως χρήσιμον παρέμεινε λανθάνουσα και κατά τους μακρούς της δουλείας αιώνας, ως ιερά προγονική κληρονομία, όχι μόνον εις τα εργαστήρια των τεχνιτών και εις τα κελλία των μοναχών, αλλά και υπ' αυτήν την αχυρίνην στέγην της απωτάτης ποιμενικής καλύβης" [*will provide researchers with valuable evidence on the aesthetic perception of the Greek people from the Fall of Constantinople onwards, while at the same time prove that the effort to combine beauty with utility was kept alive as ancestral sacred legacy even during the long years of the Ottoman occupation, not only in the craftsmen's workshops and the cells of the monks but also under the straw roof of the most remote shepherd's hut*]].

22 | used for daily wear, for children and the elderly, for the military and other professions. In the late 1980s, the Museum also started collecting clothes and accessories of the so-called European fashion, which from the 19th century onwards rapidly prevailed throughout Greece (Droulia 2001; Fotopoulos 1999). From 1918 until 1973, the Museum was housed in the Tzisdarakis Mosque in Monastiraki. Under Anna Apostolaki as director (1926-1953), the exhibits were mostly presented as artworks (fig.3). Under Popi Zora as director (1956-1981), in the late 1960s for the first time costumes were displayed on mannequins in separate showcases. In 1973,

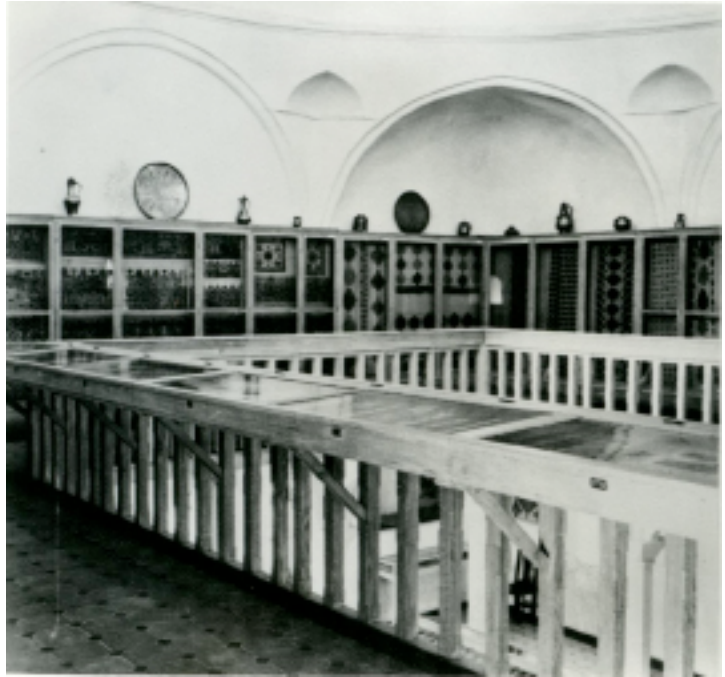


Fig.3. View of the Museum's permanent exhibition at the Tzisdarakis Mosque. MMGC Photo Archive.

following the large increase in the number of items in its collections, the Museum moved its main exhibition to a three-storey building on Kydathinaion street in Plaka. This was consistent with the prevailing opinion of the time which reflected a change in public perception of the value of folk culture, also favoured by the social and political circumstances. For the first time, costumes were separated from embroidery and occupied an entire floor, where the museum proudly displayed the newly accumulated wealth of the collection. Although the display of folk art as artwork remained as the prevalent approach of the exhibition, the functional aspect of dress was emphasized for the first time, with costumes being grouped according to the geographical area of origin. Under Eleni Romaiou-Karastamati as director (1982-2007), in 1988, on the occasion of the Museum's 70th anniversary, the costume exhibition expanded and improved: more costumes were displayed; utilitarian objects (e.g. metal and wooden vessels) were added as an allusion to the context of use of the costumes; and extensive labeling provided information on the form and the function of each costume (fig.4). The geographical origin of the costumes was still the main criterion for classification, but their social differentiation was shown not only in their labeling but also through the juxtaposition of urban and pastoral costumes.

The main focus of the exhibition we are currently preparing is the theme of identity explored in many different ways. In this framework, the thematic display of the costume collection<sup>4</sup> presents clothes dating from the late 18th century to the 1970s.

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4. We extend our special thanks to Ms. Ioanna Papantoniou, costume designer, dress historian and President of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, for her invaluable help during the initial stage of the selection of the items for the exhibition.





Fig.4. A showcase in the permanent costume exhibition at the Kydathinaion street building. MMGC Photo Archive.

Using stories and ideas and in some cases the clothes themselves as a starting point for the narrative, the exhibition provides information on people and their communities, ideas and ideologies, aesthetics and taste, family and social structures, available technologies and technical means, opinions and beliefs, daily rituals and habits and much more. On the first level, visitors will be viewing the clothes. On the second level, they will be seeing the lifestyle and the structure of long-lost societies and their view of the world around them. On the third level, they will “meet” people with a first and last name whose personal stories compose the grand historical narrative.<sup>5</sup> Throughout all levels, visitors are confronted with questions about identity which they can easily relate to: What did our great-grandparents wear? What are *you* wearing today? Why? Who are you? Who were they? What do our clothes say about us? What did their clothes say about them?

When designing the dress exhibition, we took the following into account:

- Clothes are a significant expression of lifestyle, social structure, individuality and identity and convey ideas and information about the individuals and societies who use them (Petridou 2012).
- The “Grand Idea” and the main messages that the new Museum wishes to convey can be summarized as follows:
  - Identity is an ongoing individual or/and collective process of defining the self and/or being defined by others.
  - The boundaries and contents of historic space/time are flexible, varied and subjective.
  - The material testimonies of modern Greek civilization have been formed by specific elements such as influences from the East and West and the continuous movement of populations within or across geographical and political boundaries.

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5. For the way personal stories linked to museum dress objects have been used to illustrate bigger subjects, see Papathoma 2015 and Papathoma 2017.

- 24 | • The current state of the costume collection and in particular:
- The type of objects,
  - The condition they were in,
  - Available documentation regarding their authenticity and historical and anthropological information that could be derived from the objects themselves or about the objects.

Last but not least, the design of the exhibition was defined by our wish to appeal to new and broader audiences through what we may call prevalent trends in museology – what museums do worldwide in order to remain relevant to our societies in the present and future: we use the museum’s collections as a tool to encourage visitor engagement and apply multiple interpretation techniques and means that enhance visitor experience (Thomas 2016). These include emotional storytelling, museum gamification, interactive multimedia installations and physical activities (Roussou 2004; Bugejah & Grech 2020). The information provided through printed and other forms of text will be presented in a way that will welcome the opinions of visitors; when the museum opens, we wish to begin a dialogue with a diverse audience and build long-term relationships with our communities.

The introductory section of the exhibition gives visitors an insight into the use of traditional costumes by the Greek royalty in the 19th century as well as the 1970s fashion trends. Traditional costumes have been used many a time as the attire suitable for formal occasions either by state authorities and the military or by intellectual and social elites, who in many ways defined aesthetic and ideological standards. They were convenient for such use, as the most obvious and undeniably impressive allusion to the ideological construct about the value and significance of folk culture as well as an easy means of communication, recognition and distinction. In this section, visitors will see how Kings Otto and George I (fig.5) and their Queens Amalia and Olga adopted and adapted recognizable forms and symbols from traditional attire on their formal apparels (Macha-Bizoumi 2012; Politou 2014) in an effort to ingratiate themselves with the Greeks, demanding in return their endorsement as rulers of a foreign nation. Later, in the course of the 19th century and particularly after WWII, the State as well as the fashion and tourist industries rediscovered folk art as an inspiration source and used its patterns and



Fig.5. Formal *foustanela* outfit for army and State officials, 2nd half of 19th century. MMGC collection.

forms (Macha-Bizoumi 2010; Pantouvaki 2014; Vrelli-Zachou & Macha-Bizoumi 2016). The bourgeois in the cities adopted the use of traditional costume so as to restore contact with nature and the “purity” of rural life (Chanialaki 2012).

Then, visitors enter a corridor, where the first exhibit they see is... their own reflection. On a mirror unexpectedly placed in the passageway to the next hall, the constantly changing idols of passing visitors become a surprisingly suitable part of the exhibition, a suggestion to juxtapose today with yesterday and vice-versa, an unfinished “text” to be completed by the spontaneous reaction of the visitors, a playful interaction in the blink of the eye.

A parade, a “circle-dance” if you will, of traditional costumes arranged in smaller thematic groups will be presented next. The idea here is to display the main parameters that defined Greek traditional costumes: standardization and codification according to gender, geographical origin, social status and age.

On the first floor, individual items touching upon multiple themes will be exhibited: the



Fig.6. Two-piece outfit used as a wedding dress, ca. 1910. MMGC collection, donated by Anna Stamatopoulou.

transition from traditional wear to European-style garments (fig.6), clothes as works of handcraft, the use or non-use of underwear, children’s clothing, etc. Visitors will have the opportunity to touch and wear actual clothes, getting a hands-on experience of the feel, weight and volume of different fabrics, etc. An interactive digital exhibit close by will invite visitors to select garments corresponding to their real or adopted personal circumstances and see their digital reflection in traditional dress.

During their visit, they will be encouraged to interact with the exhibits in other ways too, like by opening and closing drawers and wardrobes which will be installed within some of the showcases. In this “natural habitat” of clothes and accessories, visitors will discover more collection items, other exhibition prompts and relevant

archival material. They will also listen to audio exhibits which will contribute to the emotional narrative of the exhibition. Engaging details of private stories will be revealed, music will pour out, voices reading fairy tales will be heard, radio commercials will be reproduced and more...

26 | Clothes have always been connected to body and movement, gender and age, aesthetics and function, social status and individual taste, necessity and luxury, fashion and tradition. Taking all this into account, the museum's permanent exhibition is organized around the idea that clothes have always been part of our identity; an idea that people can easily relate to and explore through the museum's costume collection and a variety of interpretative means.

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