(Re)Collections of childhood at the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume

Visual installations as a different approach to interpreting costume exhibits

1. Introduction

I come from my childhood (Saint-Exupéry 1942) is a temporary exhibition that first opened in late 2017 at the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume, Athens, Greece. The title is inspired by a quote from *Flight to Arras* (1942) written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.[1] Objects from the Museum's collection and loans from other institutions[2] have been selected for this exhibition to illustrate the way children in Greek society dressed during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries.

I come from my childhood was an ambitious attempt on behalf of the Museum to enter new territory and present an exhibition that would offer a refreshing alternative from the usual costume display of fixed and static garments worn by mannequins. In a museum titled "Museum of the History of the Greek Costume", a collection of historical costumes and perhaps ornaments and archives would immediately spring to mind. And for those interested in such objects, there are plenty. But for the first time the Museum showed keenness to escape from the cliché ideas of a "dusty old-fashioned" historical costume collection and an outmoded exhibition limited to demonstrating costume variants purely focusing on the "voyeuristic interest" of visitors (Crawley and Barbieri 2013: 45). Instead, the exhibit utilises alternative display modes and conceptual approaches, through contemporary moving-image-based works and art installations, aiming to fulfil the need for visual meaning-making within a museum.

2. Exhibition themes, narrative and structure

While the exhibition's central idea revolves around children's costumes from the 19th and the

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1.   At 40 years old, Saint-Exupéry reflecting on the nostalgia of youth writes: "[...] When I was a small boy [...] I speak of my early childhood, that is to say, of a vast region out of which all men emerge. Where do I come from? I come from my childhood. I come from my childhood as from a homeland [...]." Quoted in Saint-Exupéry 1942. Translated by Galantière 1986: 61.

2.   Numerous objects are acquired on temporary loan from the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation "V. Papantoniou", Ethnological and Folklore Museum of Chrisso & Elias E. Daradimos Collection, the Photographic Archive Collection of the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive (ELIA) and the National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation (MIET), the American School of Classical Studies and the Benaki Museum Photographic Archives.

first half of the 20th centuries, the proportion of objects on display directly related to them is far smaller than one would expect. Instead, the scope has been widened to include costumes of other relevant members of the society, such as the mothers and other women involved in childrearing, as well as collectible miniatures dressed in historic Greek costumes.

The exhibition stretches across three Rooms surrounding an Inner Core Display Area.

The **Inner Core Display Area** functions as an introduction where a *narrated stop-motion* animation gives visitors a thread to follow. The plot is a variance on the animated movie "Inside/Out", produced by Pixar Animation Studios in 2015, where the central character, *Mnemosyne* (the personification of a person's memory in Greek mythology), has all her childhood memories sucked out of her brain by *Oblivion*, *Time*, *Zipper*, *Moth* and *Spot*. A specialist doctor named *Iasis* (Greek goddess of cures) manages to recollect her memories, pack and send them alongside the memorabilia to the Museum which serves as a "maze-like storage area of long-term memory". There, a remembrance space is provided for them by a *Muse* (one of the nine divine beings, patrons of the arts in Greek mythology), who also serves as the story's narrator.

The animation is pieced together with a combination of objects from the Museum's collection associated with the essential needs in an infant's life (eating, sleeping, bathing and playing). (fig.1)

Fig.1. View of the installation in the Inner Core Display Area. A woman's chemise with spots caused by leaking breastmilk from Kiourka, Attica, a *sarmanitsa* (wooden baby's cradle from Epirus) and a collection of silver rattles. Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

Room 1 is dedicated to childbearing. A swaddle serves as a reminder of a newborn. However, the majority of the exhibits in this Room are women's garments and jewels that were at the time associated with a variety of rituals, popular beliefs and practices surrounding fertility, pregnancy, delivery and the puerperium. Furthermore, childbearing becomes a tool allowing visitors to explore stories about the adopter mother and the nanny.

Room 2 explores children's costume in Greek society from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. The display reveals the great extent to which children's clothes were a mini-sized reflection of adult's clothing (Bada-Tsomokou 1986: 182). The *fustanella* costume is

highlighted, a significant item, as Greece's national garment, for boys over the centuries.

Room 3 is the final segment of the exhibition and once again switches from children to adults. The exhibits featured here are collectible dolls and figures dressed in Greek costumes which were created by adults.

3. Exhibiting historical costume. Creating visual meaning

Since exhibiting the historical costumes is the central focus of the exhibition, several approaches and means have been employed to create visual meaning within the exhibition. This section deals with the visual elements of the exhibition and the way they produce meanings.

3.1 Moving-image-based works
3.1.1. Animation. Hanging in the balance between past and present, spatial and conceptual space, education and entertainment

Concerning the space syntax concepts applied in museum practice, perhaps one of the most demanding challenges for curators and designers is to interlink the spatial with the conceptual space of an exhibition through the idea of exhibitions as "texts" and "maps" (Tzortzi 2015: 2-3), and to intertwine the past with the present time (Windhager and Mayr 2012: 543). Within this framework, we considered presenting a solution to visually portray these connections while attracting the visitors' attention.

The Inner Core Display Area functions as an introduction to the exhibition, served primarily by the stop-motion animation. Audio-visuals are understood as instruments balancing between education and entertainment when embedded in museum displays (Mandelli 2015: 3). The animation was used − instead of a typical introductory panel − to offer a conceptual orientation, provide a storyline followed throughout and attract viewers' attention.

Mnemosyne, the heroine of the animation, appears to struggle to be set free from five fictitious characters who have sucked all her childhood memories out of her brain. Eventually, *Iasis* takes up the task of (re)collecting all those memories and memorabilia and sending them to the exhibition area, which serves as the "long-term memory" space.

As the plot unfolds, the fictitious characters continuously enter and leave the animation's frame. Occasionally exhibits and mock-ups, produced during the exhibition design stage, appear on screen, in an attempt to create continuity between the animated and the exhibition space while allowing for a coexistence of truth and imagination. The screenplay finishes with the mock-up of the Inner Core Display Area, linking the narration with the exhibition environment and inviting visitors to interact with the whole installation.

As the story is pieced together, the first memories to be collected are the earliest ones, going back to the period of infancy. A selection of objects related to infancy are also displayed in the Core Display Area, serving as *Mnemosyne's* "core memory" fragment. Here, various dissimilar objects are exhibited next to a woman's chemise from Kiourka (Attica), which has spots by leaking breastmilk. The exhibits are presented within a decorated cell-like frame that may bring to mind the setting of an escape room (fig.1).

The overlay of past and present time and the coexistence of truth and imagination are further developed in Room 3, where a clay animation is screening next to a display dedicated to the *fustanella* costume.

The display looks abstract, as only parts of the costume are on view. Meanwhile, a large number of archival commemorative photographs depicting children dressed in *fustanella* in different historical periods, across Greece as well as abroad, have been printed on a corridor-shaped paper hanging from the top of the wall all the way down to the floor to indicate visual links between different times, places and objects (fig.2).

"The perception of the dress/object as non-stable and everchanging" (Pantouvaki and Barbieri 2014: 86) is further extended through the clay-animation video. In the video, parading clay figures interact with still photographs where the old meets the new in a utopian reality, thus implying that the *fustanella* has been reinvented through the ages and still gives Greeks a sense of identity and continuity.

Fig.2. View of the display dedicated to the *fustanella* costume.
Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

3.1.2 The material, the textual and the visual

In the last decades, a wide variety of museums − including ethnographic museums − are filled with screenings, video loops and film installations bringing the "[...] life and movement of the world on to a few square feet in one little room [...]" (Anon 1930: 334).

In addition, the very nature of museums is being radically transformed, as they become "places of recollection, not so much driven by objects but by narratives" (Arnold-de 2013: 2) rather than repositories of collections.

The first part of the exhibition, on the theme of childbearing, serves an example of the use of moving-image-based works that bring exhibits to life and convey their meanings in a short space and time.

On display are women's garments and jewels that were, at the time, associated with fertility, pregnancy, delivery and the postpartum, split into five groups:

1. The bridal costume from the island of Lefkada known as *tzoubes.* The *tzoubes* was part of a ritual thought to encourage the generation of male descendants, whereby two boys would hold the garment during the wedding ceremony, increasing the bride's chances of giving birth to a baby-boy (Kontomiches 1989: 89).

2. Garments and accessories embellished with patterns thought to be "graphic spells" for fertility, such as the *full moons* on the newly-wed woman's *Sarakatsani*[3] apron (Philippide 1975: 266), the roosters on the *korona,* the bridal head ornament from Visani, Pogoni, and the pinecones on the bridal chemise from the island of Salamina (Weal-Badieritaki 1980: 128).

3. Objects believed to have apotropaic, protective and healing properties for the child-bearer such as a series of ex-votos depicting women's breasts and vulvae and a community jewel with magical-religious powers.[4]

4. Garments used in cases of difficult childbirth: the Thracian apron called *thimiati* (Romaiou-Karastamati 1976: 198-199) and a fringed girdle worn in the Greek provinces of Argolida and Corinthia. In the latter, both the sprang technique and the tie-dyed tassels were believed to have talismanic properties (Welters 1999: 65-66; Petridou 2013: 380), while the girdle itself served as a corset during the postpartum (Papantoniou 1978: 21).

5. A part of the women's costume of the Marides in Thrace, called *tsoukna,* with the holes at the chest area facilitating lactation (Melidou 1976: 279).

It was key to fit all the aforementioned objects in a single display cabinet and connect them with their meanings. Limited funds and space meant that a policy of mixed display methods had to be implemented. Most garments were simply hung flat and extended to their full width on flat paper stands, while others were put on headless dressmaker stands which were rescued from past exhibitions and gently covered in new cloth.

Collecting all these different hidden stories in a unique narrative presented a challenge. We opted against lengthy texts on panels filled with complicated terminology and captions.

So, five videos were produced to conjure the narratives, each one played alongside the five groups of objects. Each video consists of three frames: the first frame singles the object out of its context, the second one highlights the symbolic features in question, while the third one attempts to show the past use of the objects, before they "embarked upon their new life within the museum" (de la Haye 2006: 136). Each narrative is in writing and overlain onto the screen, as if subtitles to what *Mnemosyne* has to say, thus connecting the display to the central storyline.

The three components of this display – the material, the textual and the visual − are all bound to support each other. The display (fig.3) can be paralleled to Joseph Kosuth's first conceptual work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) where an actual chair sits alongside a photograph of a

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3.   Originally a nomadic group in Thrace, Northern Greece.

4.   The precise nature of this jewel is hard to establish, since there are no testimonials concerning its identity. According to collector George Goutis, where it was purchased from, *"it was a talisman of mercy and compassion, preserved in the church".* Interview with Tania Veliskou conducted at Antiques Goutis, 12 Demokritou Str., Athens, Greece, May 24, 2017.

chair and a dictionary definition of the word "chair". All three are codes for one: a visual code, a verbal code, and a code in the language of objects, that is, a chair made of wood (MOMA 2004: 257).

Fig.3. View of the display showcasing women's garments and jewels associated with fertility, pregnancy, delivery and the puerperium.
Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

3.2 Art installations: Exhibiting the intangible and the absent

The exhibition has kept a designated space in Room 1 to "commemorate" other women involved in childrearing, the adopter mother and the nanny.

Adoption often followed a ritualistic practice. In front of the icon of Virgin Mary, the adopter mother passed the child through her chemise, which served as a surrogate of her body, three times mimicking the act of natural childbirth (Weal-Badieritaki 1980: 131; Paradellis 1995: 65). The practice of child adoption, common at the time, was intended to be somehow highlighted since the exhibition's inception. Bringing a contemporary perspective to bear on the past, an art installation was created and exhibited to give context to ritual (fig.4). The artwork consists of a garment and a mechanism that repeatedly passes a

Fig.4. "Reciprocal Relationship" (2017). Art installation by visual artist Mary Thivaiou.
Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

cloth strip through the garment, mimicking the baby's exit during childbirth. Both the absent body and the embodied object acquire a presence through this artistic intervention and a new visual image is introduced, capturing the visitor's imagination. Sealed mouths are embroidered on the cloth strip, as a metaphor for the taboos around adoption at the time and an expression of the artist's statement.

A specially crafted lactating uniform shows once again how the Museum embraced Visual Arts in this exhibition, to serve its concept and to materialise cultural memories. The nanny was a central figure in the infant's early life, often acting as a wet nurse. The uniform was inspired by the milk-spotted chemise in the Inner Core Display Area, worn in Kiourka, Attica, a place famous for its wet nurses (Sciadas). It is complete with a zipper in the chest for lactating and a pocket that functioned as a storage bag for breastmilk.

3.3 Exhibited objects in the service of Visual Thinking

In all three Rooms, some of the exhibited objects provide the interpretive framework themselves and facilitate a personally meaningful experience (Piscitelli and Weier 2002: 117).

Fig.5. View of the installation in Room 2 where children's costumes presented on dressed mannequins.
Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

The swaddle, first object on display in Room 1 on the theme of childbearing, serves as the Room's "entrance icon". Visitors are left to observe it without any museum input, based on the "Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)" interpretive method within the exhibition (Simon 2010).

In Room 2, the children's ensembles are presented on petite versions of mannequins (fig.5), based on more conventional visions of what a mannequin for a historic costume should look like, similar to Langley Moore's opinion, that the viewer could not fully appreciate the context of the costume without the "total look" (Harden 2014: 130). Interspersed around the mannequins are archive photographs of children dressed as miniature adults, giving both a sense of size and replica. In addition, however, a life-size photograph of a girl wearing the "kanakara" (costume worn by the first-born daughter in Elympos, Karpathos),

is unconventionally exhibited leaning onto a naked female mannequin, visually inviting visitors to consider the difference in proportions.

Finally, the VTS approach is also utilized in Room 3 where the focus is again switched from children to adults. The featured exhibits are:
1. porcelain dolls that used to belong to Queen Olga of Greece,
2. part of the Fani Kazes collection of Barbie dolls dressed in Greek costumes that she created herself,
3. PlaymoGreeks (traditionally-dressed Playmobil figures) made by Petros Kaminiotis.

Adults will often put together their memories and imagination collecting toys or even making exquisite miniature pieces on a particular theme (Hyun-Jung 2008; Stewart 1993: 69) that is reminiscent of their childhood. Objects on display (fig.6) may be called toys but are not for playing. Each of them may be seen alone as a "conceptual toy", "[...] made as [...] concept or idea – as an art [...] object as well as a cultural signifier" (Nastasijevic: 2014).
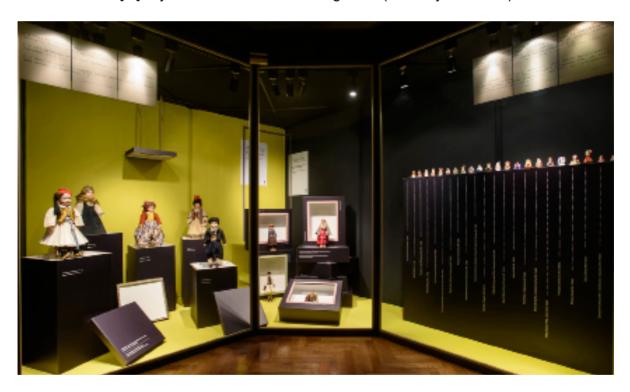

Fig.6. View of the display case with collectible dolls and figures dressed in Greek costumes.
Photo: Studio Kominis, courtesy of the Museum of the History of the Greek Costume.

Three questions, using the VTS approach, are written on the wall aiming to generate discussion:

But seriously, when does one stop being considered a child?

What are all these?

Children's toys or adults' "playthings"?

Finally, a quote by Saint-Exupéry (1943) deepens the viewers' visual thinking while serving as the exhibition epilogue:

> *All grownups were once children...*
> *but only a few of them remember it*

4. Conclusion

Museum practice has shifted through the ages from the "legislating" mode, where the exhibits speak for themselves, to the "interpreting" mode, where a caption and a narrative add contextual information, and to the current more "performative" mode, where meaning is strengthened through modes of display and "created in the interaction between the viewer, the message, and the museum" (Casey 2003: 16).

This exhibition has been the Museum's first one to contain alternative visual means furnished within a traditional museum context. The design strategy signals a change from previous practices. By using conceptual approaches and visual techniques, the exhibition follows non-conventional formats, similar to those of art-installation displays. However, the audiovisuals are not exhibited as works of art on their own but rather support the contextualization, interpretation and engagement by visitors. Considering current more "performative" museology, *I come from my childhood* marks an attempt to display historical costumes in a contemporary and conceptual context.

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Interview with Tania Veliskou conducted at Antiques Goutis, 12 Demokritou Str., Athens, Greece, May 24, 2017.

Tania Veliskou
Historian-Museologist
Museum of the History of the Greek Costume, Athens, Greece
tania_veliskou@hotmail.com

Mary Thivaiou
Visual artist & Conservator of works of art
marythivaiou@gmail.com