

A taste for all things Byzantine: Byzantium in the collections of Antonis Benakis

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‘His pockets were always full of treasures. What marvellous things you could find in them! Nails, marbles, pebbles, sponges, twine, maybe a chewed piece of gum, and always that crystal triangle piece from the church chandelier that would shine brilliantly when held up to the sun.’ With these words, Penelope Delta, the famous children’s writer and sister of Antonis Benakis, painted a portrait of her brother as a child in her much-loved book *Trelantonis* (*Crazy Antonis*). In this book, dedicated to the childhood adventures of the Benaki family siblings, and set in the cosmopolitan yet conservative colonial environment of the upper middle-class Greeks of late nineteenth-century Alexandria, Antonis was always the protagonist.¹ (Fig. 1)

This passage, often cited by those writing about the founder of the Benaki Museum, reveals his keen early interest in discovering and amassing a variety of objects that engaged his curiosity and inspired his imagination: a precocious expression of his predilection for collecting that would later become his life’s passion. However, I should like to use Delta’s lively descriptions of her brother’s escapades as a starting point for my paper for quite a different reason. Penelope Delta published *Trelantonis* in 1932, just one year after the inauguration of the Benaki Museum.² The timing was not coincidental. Dedicated to her adventurous brother, who is engagingly portrayed as a Greek, upper-class version of Tom Sawyer, the book that I loved as a child seems

To the memory of Ruth Macrides and our plans for an Arts and Crafts exhibition that never happened

1 M. W. Daly, ‘The British occupation, 1882–1922’ in idem (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol. 2, Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century* (Cambridge 2008) 239–51; E. R. Toledano, ‘Social and economic change in the ‘long nineteenth century’, *ibid.* 252–84; J. Beinin, ‘Egypt: society and economy, 1923–1952’, *ibid.* 309–33; R. Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800–1914* (2nd edn, London 2009) esp. 122–52 and 216–43; On nineteenth-century Alexandria, M. J. Reimer, ‘Colonial bridgehead: social and spatial change in Alexandria, 1850–1882’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20.4 (1988) 531–53; on the Greeks in Egypt specifically, A. Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt, 1919–1937: ethnicity and class* (London 1989) and more recently *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo 2019).

2 The Benaki Museum was inaugurated on 22 April 1931.

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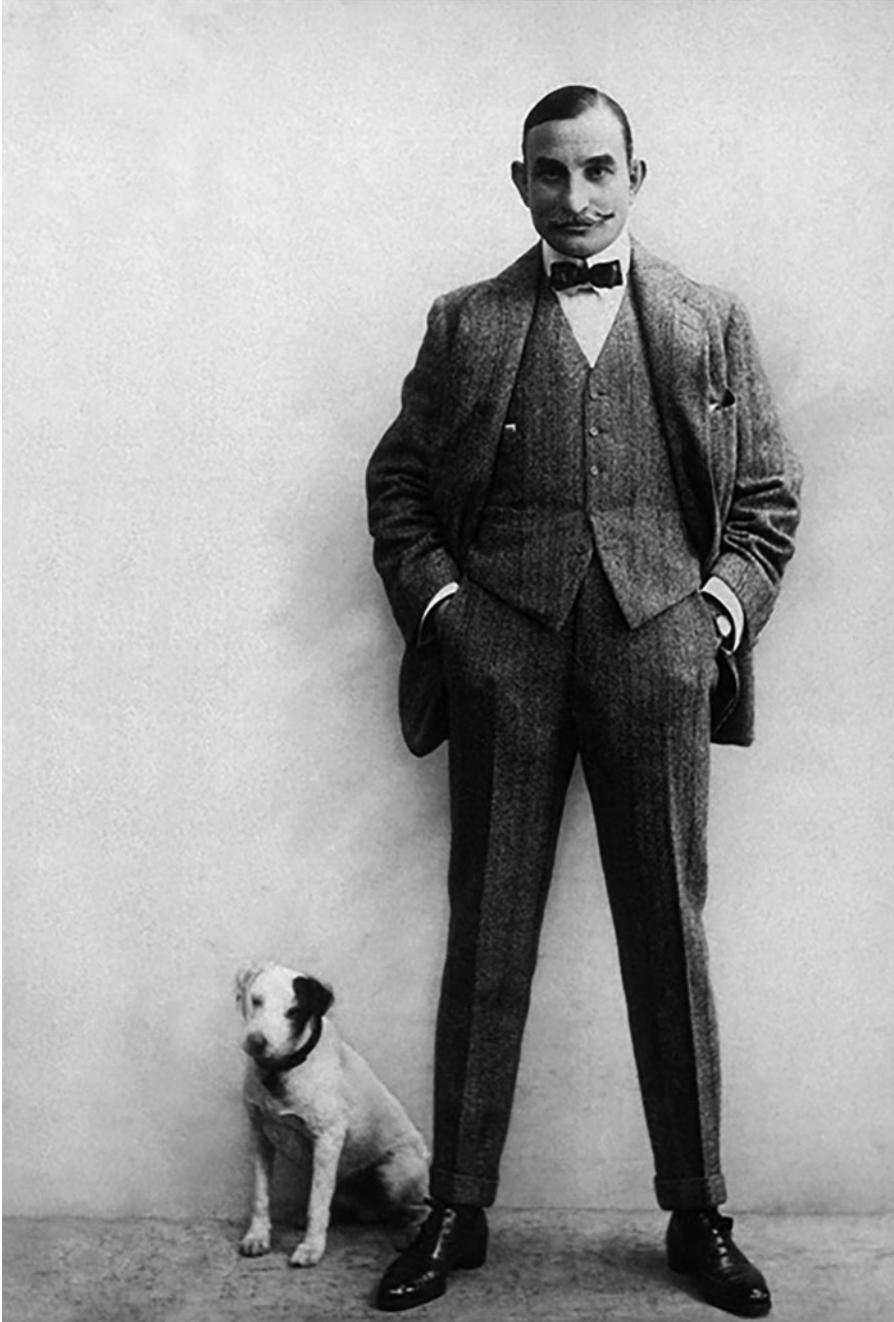


Fig. 1. Antonis Benakis (1873–1954). Benaki Museum archives. © Benaki Museum, Athens

to me now like a teasing yet loving sisterly comment on Antonis' new and most crazy adventure, the creation of a new museum, the first of its kind in Greece.

The Benaki Museum today is one of the largest museum institutions in Greece and the longest-established museum operating under private law. Its collections span the

Neolithic age, Greco-Roman antiquity and the Byzantine era, to the period of Frankish, Venetian and Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, and the formation of the Modern Greek state. Apart from the rich Greek collections, the Benaki possesses a world-famous collection of Islamic art – on display in a separate annex since 2004 – and a splendid collection of Chinese art donated to Antonis Benakis by the British businessman of Greek origin George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939). Considering Benakis' acknowledged contribution to the formation of the cultural identity of modern Greece and his active involvement in the politics of culture on an international level, the lack of systematic studies dedicated to his ideological orientation and museological strategy is striking. In the present article I will try to cover part of this lacuna by investigating one aspect of Benakis' collecting practices and museological career: his interest in and approach to the arts of Byzantium.

The history of the affluent and cosmopolitan Benakis family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is well known.³ Suffice it to say here that Emmanuel Benakis had made his fortune in the Egyptian cotton trade, running the largest firm of Greek cotton brokers in Egypt, Choremis, Benakis & Co. (founded in 1863) that traded mostly with England. To understand the significance and growth of that enterprise, it is worth noting that, at the turn of the century, as much as half the cotton crop and the cleaning, packing and exporting of cotton in Egypt were in Greek hands.⁴ Emmanuel Benakis and his son Antonis were leading figures in Alexandria, where Greeks were the largest expatriate community,⁵ and later in Athens, after their relocation to Greece. They were among the most celebrated exponents of *evergetismos*, philanthropy to the ancestral homeland that flourished in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Greece.⁶ Through their generous donations to targeted public benefit institutions – from the Technical University of Athens, to hospitals, orphanages and research institutes – wealthy Greeks of the diaspora supported the impoverished Greek state, compensating for its inadequacies, and at the same time reshaped its

3 E. Soulogiannis, *Αντώνης Εμμ. Μπενάκης 1873–1954. Ο ευπατριδής, ο διανοούμενος, ο ανθρωπιστής* (Athens 2004); M. Tomara-Sideri, *Αλεξανδρινές οικογένειες Χορέμη – Μπενάκη – Σαλβάγου* (Athens 2004).

4 A. G. Politis, *L'Hellénisme et l'Égypte moderne*, 2 vols (Paris 1929–1930); Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt*, 76–95; R. Tignor, 'The economic activities of foreigners in Egypt, 1920–1950: From millet to haute bourgeoisie', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22.3 (1980) 416–49. On cotton production in Egypt see R. Owen, *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914: a study in trade and development* (Oxford 1969) and *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London 2009²) 122–52. On the cotton industry in Greece during the same period see L. F. Kallivretakis, 'Ελληνικό βαμβάκι και αμερικανικός εμφύλιος πόλεμος', *Τα Ιστορικά* 4.7 (1987) 81–102. Following his relocation to Greece, Antonis Benakis became actively involved in the Hellenic Cotton Institute, of which he was the first president (1931): K. M. Souliotis, *Το Ινστιτούτον Βάμβακος και το διετές έργον αυτού, Σεπτέμβριος 1931 – Σεπτέμβριος 1933, with a preface by Antonios Benakis* (Athens 1933).

5 Kitroeff, *The Greeks in Egypt*; S. Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του* (Athens 1958) 41–92.

6 V. Theodorou, 'Ευεργετισμός και όψεις της κοινωνικής ενσωμάτωσης στις παροικίες (1870–1920)', *Τα Ιστορικά* 7 (1987) 119–54; D. Arvanitakis (ed.), *Το φαινόμενο του ευεργετισμού στη νεότερη Ελλάδα* (Athens 2006); M. Tomara-Sideri, *Ευεργετισμός και νεοελληνική πραγματικότητα* (Athens 2016).

economic and political course.⁷ This spirit of philanthropy, deep-rooted in the Benakis family, suggests one motivating factor, and perhaps the most obvious, behind Antonis' decision to turn his private collection into a museum.

However, Emmanuel and Antonis Benakis differed from the majority of Greek benefactors in also being actively involved in Greece's tumultuous politics. Staunch supporters of political modernization, they retained close ties with Eleftherios Venizelos, the charismatic liberal statesman who was repeatedly elected prime minister in the turbulent decades between 1914 and 1933. Both Antonis and his father served as ministers under Venizelos. Antonis Benakis' involvement in the political life of Greece in a critical period for the formation of national strategies and ideology no doubt helps to explain his collecting predilections and the visual narrative he articulated in the new museum. In this context, the choices of a learned and cosmopolitan individual can also be read as a reflection of the ideological orientations prevailing among the Greek elite of his time. However, it is precisely Antonis Benakis' cosmopolitanism that potentially sets him apart from his fellow collectors and intellectuals in the Athenian society of the early twentieth century and the interwar period. In other words, bearing in mind Benakis' family background and education— he had been a student in French Jesuit schools in Alexandria and later at Rossall, a boarding school in Lancashire with a solid reputation for classical studies⁸ – his international connections and his continuous travels, it is worth examining to what extent his approach to Byzantium constituted a paradigm for other contemporary Greek collectors and museums or if Benakis represents a special case, *un cas à part*. And, if so, in what way.

Antonis Benakis left no personal written testimony regarding the passion of his life. He did not document the lure or the process of collecting as a private enterprise or, later, his drive to translate the private into the public,⁹ when he turned the Benakis family mansion into a museum, which he donated, with its holdings, to the Greek nation. (Fig. 2) No grand declaration or heartfelt revelation is to be found in his archive and correspondence or in any published material.

Therefore we have to retrace his interests and motivation by shining a light on indirect information, always with an eye to understanding his approach to Byzantium: this involves looking at how Benakis was seen by his contemporaries, his network of correspondence and the strategies he employed as collector, and above all the modalities of display used in his collection in the new museum. The latter is perhaps

7 V. Theodorou, 'Εκσυγχρονιστικές απόπειρες των δωρητών της διασποράς, επιρροές, προοπτικές και όρια των νεωτερικών τους παρεμβάσεων στα τέλη του 19ου και τις αρχές του 20ού αιώνα', in Arvanitakis (ed.), *To φαινόμενο* (n. 6) 61–88.

8 See V. Tselika, *Πηνελόπη Δέλτα. Αφήγηση ζωής* (Athens 2004) 75; A. Orfanou, 'The upper bourgeoisie education of the Greek Diaspora in Egypt in the late 19th century through Penelope Delta's (1874–1941) literature', *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4.1 (2015) 13–26. See also E. J. Deane (ed.), *The Rossall Register, 1844–1905* (Liverpool 1905) 320, using the old spelling of the family name 'Benachi'.

9 J. Elsner, 'A collector's model of desire: The house and museum of Sir John Soane', in J. Elsner and R. Cardinal (eds), *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge, Mass. 1994) 155–76.



Fig. 2. The Benaki Museum (1931). Benaki Museum archives. © Benaki Museum, Athens

the most promising field of enquiry: it is well known that Benakis was wholeheartedly dedicated to the new museum and personally supervised every aspect of the enterprise, from the extensive refurbishment and expansion of the building in order to convert it from a residence into a museum, to the display cases, wallpapers, mounts, and minutiae of the decoration, furnishings and equipment.

It is not clear exactly when Benakis started collecting Byzantine artefacts, or for that matter any other category of objects. His archive in the Benaki Museum offers only scant and incidental information on his earlier collecting activities. Apparently, his first private collecting interests focused on paintings, armour and rare editions of books, conventional choices for male upper-class collectors of his time.¹⁰ However, by the early Twenties, when he co-founded and presided over *Les amis de l'art d'Alexandrie*, a cultural society that brought together the most enthusiastic art collectors of Alexandria, Benakis had already amassed a significant number of objects dating from the late antique and medieval periods.¹¹ He soon started to open his collections to the public, addressing a far wider audience than the select international visitors he received in his house. These first public displays of his collections, always arranged through the

10 A. Ballian, 'Alexandria, Antonis Benakis and Greek collectors of Islamic art', in A. Ballian and M. Moraitou, *Benaki Museum. A guide to the Museum of Islamic Art* (Athens 2006) 23–29.

11 See the article by M. Moraitou in *Μουσείο Μπενάκη* (forthcoming).

activities of *Les amis de l'art*, revolved around contemporary painting and Islamic art. In 1924 the society organized a solo exhibition of the Russian émigré artist Ivan Bilibin, whose art was inspired by Orthodox religious painting and Russian folk art, areas that would interest Benakis throughout his life. In 1925, one year before Benakis' relocation to Athens, *Les amis de l'art* held 'L'exposition d'art musulman', which Benakis co-organized with his friend and art consultant Christophoros Nomikos, an expert in Islamic art. In order to produce the exhibition Benakis had secured the collaboration of the prominent French scholar Gaston Migeon, who wrote the exhibition catalogue.¹² According to the enthusiastic reviews of the exhibition in *The Burlington Magazine* and in the annual publication *L'Égypte Nouvelle*, more than a quarter of the exhibits belonged to Benakis' own collection.¹³

His interest in Islamic art, discussed by Anna Ballian,¹⁴ evolved in parallel with his predilection for Late Roman, Coptic and Byzantine antiquities. By the time Benakis left Alexandria for Athens in 1926 he had already amassed the core of his collection in these fields. Apart from collecting Byzantine art, Benakis was interested in the promotion of Byzantine studies in general. To this end he invited eminent scholars from abroad, like Adamantios Adamantiou, the first Ephor of Byzantine and Christian antiquities in Greece (1908) and the first appointed Professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (1912), to lecture in Alexandria.¹⁵ Adamantiou had organized the XVIème Congrès International des Orientalistes in 1912 in Athens in conjunction with which he had curated the first exhibition in Greece dedicated exclusively to icons. In May 1920, while still in Alexandria, Benakis assigned Adamantiou to catalogue and organize his Byzantine collection. In the opening pages of the handwritten Catalogue, Adamantiou gives detailed information on the inventory system he applied, following contemporary museological good practice. He also evaluated the content of Benakis' 'Byzantine and Christian Collection', a designation that reflected current debates in Greece regarding the proper name for the academic field as a whole and in particular for the Byzantine (and Christian) Museum of Athens that was then under consideration.¹⁶ Moreover

12 G. Migeon, *Exposition d'art musulman. Les amis de l'art* (Alexandria 1925). See also Mina Moraitou *op.cit.*

13 R. L. Devonshire, 'Some Moslem Objects in the Benachi Collection', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 53.307 (1928) 189–208.

14 *Benaki Museum. A guide to the Museum of Islamic Art*

15 E. Chalkia, 'Βυζαντινόν Μουσείον: Ναός της Τέχνης και της Ιστορίας της Μεσαιωνικής Ελλάδος', in O. Graziou and A. Lazaridou (eds), *Από τη χριστιανική συλλογή στο Βυζαντινό Μουσείο, exh. cat., Byzantine and Christian Museum* (Athens 2006) 54–5; T. Kioussopoulou, 'Οι βυζαντινές σπουδές στην Ελλάδα (1850–1940), *ibid.*, 25–36; O. Gratziou, 'Βυζαντινά μνημεία: από τη θεσμική προστασία στην αναγωγή τους σε ψυχή του έθνους', in T. Sakellaropoulos and A. Vatsaki (eds), *Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος και πολιτιστική πολιτική, Πρακτικά συμποσίου Παρασκευή 21 & Σάββατο 22 Νοεμβρίου 2008* (Athens-Chania 2012) 81–91.

16 Gratziou, '...προς δόξαν της τε εκκλησίας και της πατρίδος'. Το Χριστιανικόν Αρχαιολογικόν Μουσείον και ο Γεώργιος Λαμπρακής', in Gratziou and Lazaridou, *Απο τη χριστιανική συλλογή* (n. 15 above) 46–9 and 444–6; Gratziou, 'Βυζαντινά μνημεία' 88.

Adamantiou did not fail to document the manner in which and the place where the various Byzantine objects were exhibited in Benakis' mansion. His opening remarks summarizing the content of the collection are worth quoting here:

This Collection – the special Byzantine and Christian Collection – as distinct from the others (collections of armour, medals etc) up until May 1920 comprised 201 objects, which can be divided into three large categories: A. Objects of the minor arts (Μικροτεχνήματα), nos 1–149 and no. 170, a total of 150. These include crosses in wood and metal, pendants, small plaques, and many pieces of jewellery. B. Textiles in general and sacred vestments in particular, nos 150–169, a total of 20, most of them with images or inscriptions. C. Icons (portable [painted] on wood), nos 181–201, a total of 21 (the important ones). The whole Collection has been assembled with superb eclecticism, with respect to the historical or artistic value of the objects. Each one of these works of art has something special. The whole Collection is exquisite. Some of these artworks are truly outstanding’.

Adamantiou's diligent work, with precise descriptions, detailed information, and astute observations in each entry, fully justifies Benakis' trust in his knowledge and method. At the same time, his Catalogue offers solid information on the collector's early interest in and choices as regards Byzantine and post-Byzantine art. Among the listed objects we can identify some of the most famous pieces in the Benaki Museum Byzantine Collection, such as two small copper-alloy icons, one with St Nicholas (no. 49)¹⁷ and one with the Virgin and Child framed by an epigram (no. 50);¹⁸ the unique inscribed brass compasses inlaid with silver (no. 63);¹⁹ and the well-known pair of gold bracelets (no. 78)²⁰.

It was Benakis' keen interest in Byzantium while still in Alexandria that inspired the cartoonist Kimon Marangos, better known as KEM, to present him with a satirical drawing in which the collector is shown as *primus inter pares* among *Les amis de l'art*,

17 Benaki Museum inv. no. 11420, acquired from Maurice Nahman in 1919: D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi (ed.), *Everyday Life in Byzantium*, exh. cat. Thessaloniki, White Tower (Athens 2002) 161–2, no. 182 (I. D. Varalis).

18 Benaki Museum inv. no. 11419, acquired from Maurice Nahman in 1919: A. Weyl Carr, 'The matter of the word in an icon in Houston', in D. Sullivan, E. Fisher and S. Papaioannou (eds), *Byzantine Religious Culture. Studies in honor of Alice-Mary Talbot* (Leiden 2012) 125–37, fig. 2; W. Hörandner, A. Rhoby and A. Paul (eds), *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung, 2: Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst* (Vienna 2010) 69.

19 Benaki Museum inv. no. 11431: A. Delivorrias and D. Fotopoulos, *Greece at the Benaki Museum* (Athens 1997) no. 350; A. Drandaki, *Late Antique Metalware. The production of copper-alloy vessels between the 4th and 8th centuries. The Benaki Museum Collection and related material* (Turnhout 2020) 275, 276, 282.

20 Benaki Museum inv. nos 1835–36, acquired from Ritsos, Thessaloniki, in 1920: A. Drandaki, D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi and A. Tourta (eds), *Heaven and Earth. Art of Byzantium from Greek collections*, exh. cat., Washington DC (Athens 2013) 257–8, no. 131 (A. Yeroulanou) with earlier bibliography.

dressed in Byzantine attire, decorated with his tennis rackets and other insignia of his sporting activities. Holding two golf clubs under one arm, Benakis is raising a tondo inscribed with his Byzantinizing monogram, which later became the logo of the Benaki Museum. The caption beneath his feet reads: ‘Mr Byzantoiné et son ex libris’. (Fig. 3)

Following his relocation to Athens, Benakis’ collecting activities intensified, while at the same time becoming more focused, particularly with a view to the opening of the new museum. He retained his close ties with antiquities dealers in Cairo who, familiar with his tastes and preferences, kept him abreast of any new and interesting items for sale. Most of the objects with an Egyptian provenance in the Byzantine collection come from four sources: Major Gayer Anderson,²¹ and three Cairo antiquities dealers: Maurice Nahman,²² Phocio and Nico Tanos and Dionysios Kyticas.²³ He also acquired Byzantine artefacts from other international centres like Paris, Munich, Zurich and Istanbul.²⁴ From researching Benakis’ correspondence, which has never been studied in a systematic fashion, we can understand his acquisition policies. He travelled frequently, personally examining those objects that attracted his interest, but at the same time used a wide network of correspondents, family and friends as his informants, apprising him of everything that happened in the international circle of collectors and the antiquities market. Some art dealers who had gained Benakis’ trust and had intimate knowledge of his preferences had been authorized to act as his representatives, like Dionysios Kyticas in Cairo, who was at liberty to make decisions on possible acquisitions and to negotiate prices as his proxy, constantly verifying his

21 Gayer-Anderson was an officer in the British army and an admirer of all things Egyptian who was also a collector; his home in Cairo has become a museum, L. Foxcroft, *Gayer-Anderson. The life and afterlife of the Irish Pasha* (Cairo 2016).

22 M. L. Bierbrier, *Who was Who in Egyptology* (London 1995) 305, s.v. NAHMAN, Maurice (1868–1948); I. R. Abdulfattah, ‘Maurice Nahman: antiquities collector, dealer and authority’ lecture organized by the American Research Center in Egypt, available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcIXZtWaFdM> (last retrieved 9/1/2021).

23 See F.N. Hagen and K. Ryholt, *The Antiquities Trade in Egypt 1880–1930. The H.O. Lange Papers* (Copenhagen 2016) and ‘The antiquities trade in Egypt during the time of Rudolf Mosse’, in *Mosse in Museum. Die Stiftungstätigkeit des Berliner Verlegers Rudolf Mosse (1843–1920) für das Ägyptische Museum Berlin* (Berlin 2017) 59–74.

24 See, for example, the correspondence between the Blisses, of Dumbarton Oaks, and their friend Royall Tyler (May 7, 1931), who advised them to proceed with haste with the acquisition of a miniature icon of the Forty Martyrs, then on sale in Paris, because Benakis had already sent his own representatives to the seller, Dumbarton Oaks Archives, <file:///C:/Users/adran/Dropbox/PAPERS/Paris%202017%20Collections/Acquiring%20the%20Miniature%20Mosaic%20Icon%20of%20the%20Forty%20Martyrs%20%E2%80%94%20Dumbarton%20Oaks.pdf> (last retrieved, January 2021). See also another of Tyler’s letters to the Blisses in which he urges them to buy a Byzantine ivory wing of a triptych ‘in the hope that Benaki will decide not to take it’. <https://www.doaks.org/resources/bliss-tyler-correspondence/letters/01dec1938> (last retrieved January 2021). The tenth-century ivory was acquired by Penelope and Stephanos Deltas, who donated it to the Benaki Museum (inv. no. 10399): A. Cutler, ‘An ivory triptych wing in the Benaki Museum’, in *Θυμίαμα στη μνήμη της Λασκαρίνας Μπούρα* (Athens 1994) 73–76.

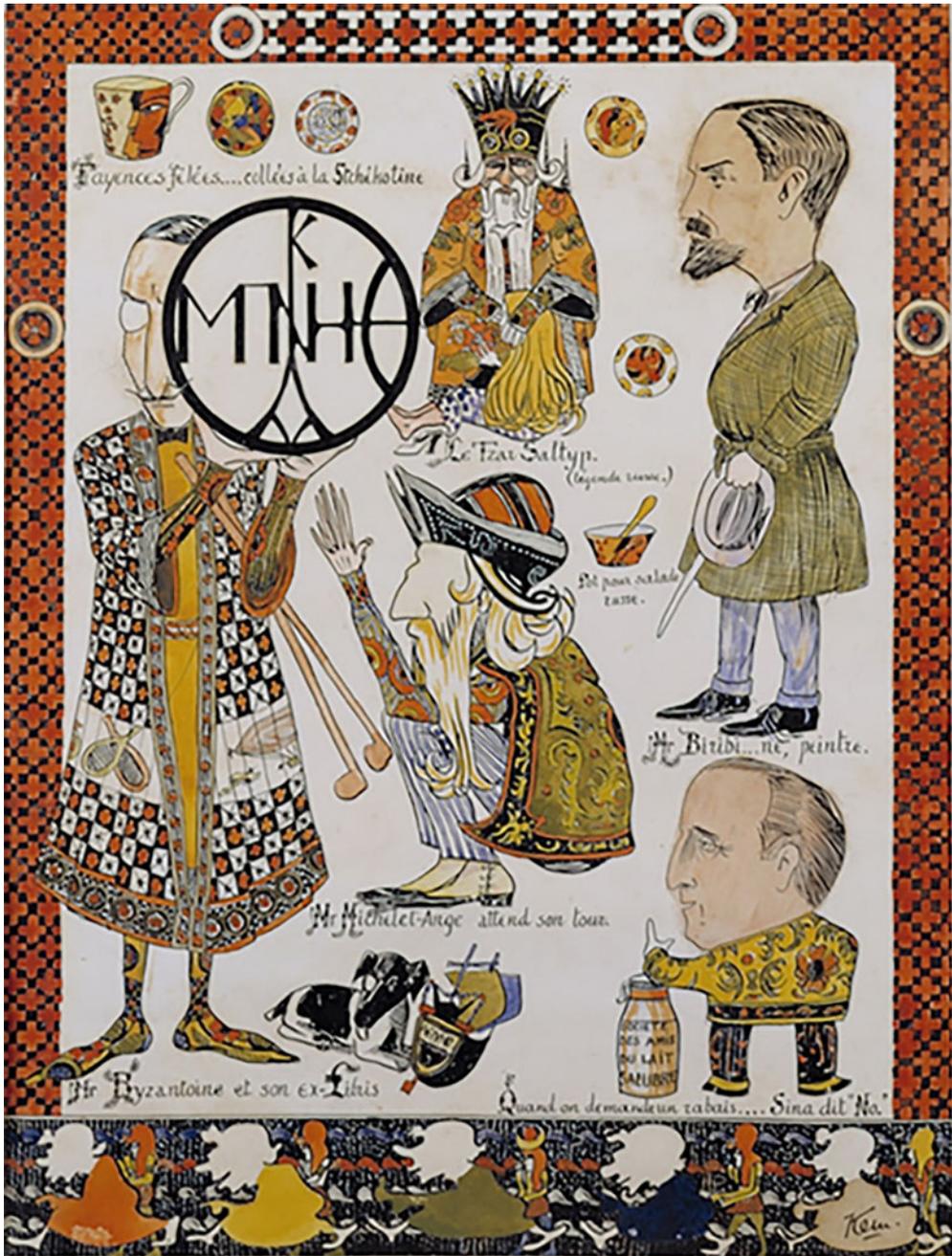


Fig. 3. *Les amis de l'art d'Alexandrie*. Drawing by KEM (Kimon Marangos). Athens, Private Collection

choices through the voluminous correspondence he kept up with his patron. It is worth remembering that at the time the boundaries between dealers, collectors and scholars were far from clear. Kyticas for example, was a dealer and a scholar, the author of

books dedicated to the history of Egypt.²⁵ Indeed, their correspondence reveals that Benakis thought so highly of Kyticas' academic standing that in 1929 he tried to persuade the archaeologist George Oikonomou, Dean of the University of Athens, to establish a new chair of Egyptology that he would sponsor, with the express purpose of appointing Kyticas.

From his archive we learn that Benakis corresponded systematically with scholars from overseas, seeking their informed opinion on objects already in his collection or, more rarely, before he made a decision on a new acquisition. Among these scholars were renowned Byzantinists, like Wolfgang Volbach, Richard Delbrück, Henri Grégoire, Paul Lemerle, and Theodore Macridy. Furthermore, he was an ardent proponent of Byzantine studies, participating in international committees for the organization of congresses and exhibitions that he systematically supported with object loans and funds. Indicative of the importance he gave to the representation of Byzantium in the new museum is the fact that he appointed two successive Byzantinists as directors of his establishment: first the veteran Theodore Macridy (director 1931–1940), who had served for several years as assistant director of the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, and then Manolis Chatzidakis (director 1941–1973). Even more revealing as to Benakis' very specific ideas on the academic training and qualifications he required of the museum personnel is that he personally sponsored Chatzidakis' studies, first in Paris with Gabriel Millet and then in Berlin, where he studied Islamic art under Ernst Kühnel.²⁶ Byzantium and Islam remained at the heart of Benakis' collecting interests as intertwined facets of the medieval culture of the Mediterranean, and at his instigation Chatzidakis' training combined the two curricula, in a fashion that sounds even today, almost ninety years later, surprisingly modern.

Despite the esteem in which he held experts and scholars and the close attention he paid to contemporary academic and artistic trends, Antonis Benakis primarily trusted his own instincts and personal taste and remained throughout his life surprisingly consistent in his collecting preferences. From his earliest known Byzantine acquisitions through the latest additions he made to the collection in the post-war period until his death in 1954, he meticulously collected very specific categories of objects: metalwork, ceramics, jewellery and small-scale relief sculpture, textiles and icons. Other categories of Byzantine artworks, such as illuminated manuscripts, which were at the time in vogue among collectors and highly appreciated by scholars, remained for the most part outside the scope of Benakis' collecting, an observation that has been made in regard to his Islamic collection as well. With few exceptions, the manuscripts presently in the Benaki Museum consist mostly of gifts or come from Greek Orthodox churches in Asia Minor and Pontos, brought to Greece by refugees after the compulsory exchange

25 D. Kytikas, *Η Αίγυπτος των Φαραώ: Ιστορία της Αιγύπτου. Θρησκεία και μυθολογία. Αι περί μελλούσης ζωής δοξασίαι. Οι αιγυπτιακοί τάφοι. Γλώσσα και γραφή. Αι τρεις πόλεις* (Cairo 1923).

26 M. Achaemastou-Potamianou, 'Η συμβολή του Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη στο Βυζαντινό Μουσείο και στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη', *Deltion tes Christianikes Arxaiologikes Etaireias* 22 (2001) 33–5.

of populations between Turkey and Greece in 1923.²⁷ For Benakis, the manuscripts and other liturgical furnishings the refugees brought to Greece after their displacement had the value of historical relics rather than Byzantine artworks. And they were displayed as such in the museum galleries, as we shall see presently.

The Preface to the first *Benaki Museum Guide*, published in 1936, five years after the museum opened, summarizes the content of the collections and singles out their highlights:

These collections, the result of thirty-five consecutive years of activity, include choice specimens of Greek art of all periods, particularly Byzantine, Post-Byzantine, and Modern; objects from every branch of Islamic art; and historical relics of the Greek War of Independence (1821–27). Especially notable are the jewellery, textiles and embroideries, Oriental arts, and the large collection of Greek national costumes and peasant art.²⁸

It is interesting to note that Greco-Roman antiquities –with the exception of jewellery – are not mentioned and indeed, their relatively limited role in Antonis Benakis’ collecting preferences is reflected in the arrangements of the galleries where, as we shall see, ancient classical art occupied just one small room on the ground floor.²⁹ The systematic acquisition of Greco-Roman antiquities by the Benaki Museum, either by way of gifts and long-term loans, or through purchases, began much later, after Angelos Delivorrias was appointed Director in 1973, and as a result of his museological vision for the renovated Benaki Museum that was inaugurated in 2000. The shift in the content and narrative of the refurbished old building is reflected in its renaming as the *Benaki Museum of Greek Culture* (2017). The new museological approach presents ‘an exhibition of Greek culture arranged diachronically from prehistory to the 20th century’.³⁰ The spectacular Islamic collections, originally integrated with the works of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine art, are now presented in an annexe, the *Benaki Museum of Islamic Art*, in a neoclassical building near the ancient cemetery of Kerameikos.³¹

27 T. Macridy, ‘Le Musée Benaki d’Athènes’, *Mouzeion* 39–40 (1937) 103–65, at 136. On the ecclesiastical furnishings brought to Greece by the refugees from Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace see P. Lazaridis (ed.), *Ειδική έκθεση κειμηλίων Προσφύγων*, exh. cat., Byzantine and Christian Museum (Athens 1982); A. Ballian, *Θησαυροί από τις ελληνικές κοινότητες της Μικράς Ασίας και Ανατολικής Θράκης. Συλλογές Μουσείου Μπενάκη*, exh. cat. Centre for Folk Art and Tradition-Municipality of Athens (Athens 1992) and, *Relics of the Past. Treasures of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Population Exchange. The Benaki Museum Collections*, exh. cat., Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Geneva (Athens 2011); A. Lazaridou et al. (eds), *People and Icons. Refugees’ Heirlooms*, exh. cat. Byzantine and Christian Museum (Athens 2009).

28 *Guide. Benaki Museum, Athens* (Athens 1936) 2.

29 *Op.cit.*, 94–99.

30 Source: <https://www.benaki.org/> last retrieved January 2021.

31 A. Delivorrias, *A Guide to the Benaki Museum*, Athens 2000; Ballian and Moraitou, *Benaki Museum* (n. 10 above).

Returning to Benakis' collecting strategies, from the categories of Byzantine objects he collected we may discern his fondness for small-scale artworks that offer the collector intimacy of touch and the fascinating details that can only be appreciated on close inspection. In this respect it is noteworthy that Benakis' collecting interests are quite similar to those of other collectors of his time and social class, like Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss, Royall Tyler, Martine de Béhague, Comtesse de Béarn, from whom Benakis had acquired two small steatite icons, or his compatriot and avid collector, Hélène Stathatos.³² Of the collecting preferences of the latter, Alexandra Bounia has observed that she collected 'embroideries, decorative objects, jewelry and icons',³³ the same broad categories as Benakis. Stathatos' collecting interests, focusing on intimate, small-scale objects, have been interpreted as typical of a female collector.³⁴ Without altogether dismissing the role of gender in constructing a collector's identity, the close similarities between the collecting interests of Antonis Benakis, his siblings, the Blisses, Stathatos, and other contemporary collectors suggest that it was above all their shared social class and education, as well as ideological trends prevailing in the period, that played the key role in shaping their collecting strategies.

Even after the opening of the Benaki Museum to the public, its founder continued to favour small-scale objects that offered private pleasure through the intimacy of touch. Some of them were true masterpieces of medieval craftsmanship, but the majority are less impressive everyday objects, made of humble raw materials like clay or copper alloys rather than silver; or wool and linen, not just silk.

Their intrinsic value notwithstanding, they all fall under the category of 'decorative arts', a much debated taxonomic status with blurred boundaries and fluctuating content, which was nevertheless regularly used, not without certain ideological connotations, in

32 See R. S. Nelson, 'Royall Tyler and the Bliss Collection of Byzantine Art', in J. N. Carder (ed.), *The Collecting and Patronage of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss* (Washington D.C. 2010), 27–50, and 'Private passions made public: The beginnings of the Bliss Collection', in Ased Kirin (ed.), *Sacred Art, Secular Context. Objects of Art from the Byzantine Collection of Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., Accompanied by American Paintings from the Collection of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss* (Washington DC 2005). W. Froehner, *Collection de la Comtesse R. de Béarn* (Paris 1905); L. Stasi, 'Le mécénat de Martine de Béhague, comtesse de Béarn (1870–1939): du symbolisme au théâtre d'avant-garde', *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français* 2000, 337–66. P. Amandry, *Collection Hélène Stathatos*, vols I–III (Strasbourg 1953, Limoges 1957, Strasbourg 1963); A. Xyngopoulos, *Συλλογή Ελένης Α. Σταθάτου. Κατάλογος περιγραφικός των εικόνων των ξυλογλύπτων και των μεταλλικών έργων των βυζαντινών και των μετά την Αλωσιν χρόνων* (Athens 1951).

33 A. Bounia, 'Female collectors in the early 20th century: collecting and displaying the Greek nation', in K. Poehls and S. Faust (eds), *Sammeln. Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart einer alltäglichen, musealen und wissenschaftlichen Praxis*, *Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie* 1 (2015) 53–66.

34 Stathatos collected in the 'expected gendered manner' as Bounia notes ('Female' *op.cit.*), following J. Verlaine, *Femmes collectionneuses d'art et mécènes* (Paris 2013). More generally on gendered material practices see the comprehensive review by Bounia, 'Gender and material culture Review article', *Museum and Society* 10.1 (2012) 60–5.

Benakis' time.³⁵ Since, as I have already mentioned, Benakis himself was not in the habit of documenting or theorizing his choices, it is worth citing here his close friend, fellow collector, and consultant on Islamic art, Christophoros Nomikos. In his introduction to a book 'The Kandiana pottery', Nomikos pays tribute to the decorative arts, eloquently showcasing their importance and collectability:

In times past, the decorative arts were developed among peoples who had artistry deep-rooted in their hearts. One of these arts, perhaps the most important is pottery. Pottery is useful in the artistic evolution of a people because its products are indispensable and necessary to everyone; while they don't cost a fortune, being made at a low cost and with cheap material, they may become, every single one of them, a work of art, on account of their shape, their decoration and colours, and generally thanks to the inspiration and skill of the artisan who gives them shape, paints and adorns them.³⁶

Nomikos' argument, though referring specifically to pottery, applies to all kinds of everyday objects, and in his words we may trace the true inspiration behind Benakis' own collecting preferences. His interest in such 'trifling' everyday objects – not just late Roman and Byzantine but also Islamic and modern Greek– can be understood in the international climate created by the ideological and aesthetic movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as the Arts and Crafts movement, which originated in Britain and spread (with variations) to America and the rest of Europe.³⁷ This movement, which highlighted the aesthetic value of painstakingly crafted objects intended for everyday use, defined to a large extent the character of significant collections in the Western world, most notably the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as that of the English-educated founder of the Benaki Museum.

Small-scale objects such as those favoured by Benakis inspire a closer intimacy between the collector and his or her acquisition, and their tactile nature plays an

35 M. Martin, 'Relics of another age: art history, the 'decorative arts' and the museum', *The Annual Journal of the National Gallery of Victoria* (2010) 7–21; D. L. Krohn, 'Beyond terminology, or, the limits of "decorative arts"', *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014) 1–13; A. Walker, ' "The art that does not think": Byzantine 'decorative arts' – history and limits of a concept', in C. Hourihane (ed.), *From Minor to Major. The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History, Studies in Iconography* 34 (2012) 169–93.

36 C. Nomikos, *Ta κεραμουργήματα της Κανδιάνας* (Alexandria 1924) 7.

37 From the extensive literature on the Arts and Crafts movement, see P. Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (Princeton 1985); G. Naylor, *Arts and Crafts Movements* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971); K. Livingstone and L. Parry, *International Arts and Crafts* (London 2005); M. Greensted, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain* (Oxford 2010); R. P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York 2006). For the connection between the Arts and Crafts movement and Byzantine Greece, D. Kotoula, 'Arts and Crafts and the "Byzantine": the Greek connection', in R. Betancourt and M. Taroutina (eds), *Byzantium/Modernism, The Byzantine as method in modernity* (Leiden 2015) 75–101.

important role.³⁸ Indeed, in a personal interview he gave me twenty five years ago, Manolis Chatzidakis related how Benakis had an almost infallible instinct for the quality and originality of the objects offered to him for sale, which was based not so much on visual perception as on his sense of touch. He used above all his tactile sensitivity to appraise the texture, weight and making of the items offered to him for sale; he appreciated their materiality before deciding to negotiate their acquisition. Tactility is an essential part of the intimate relationship between the collector and his or her objects of desire. Even more so in the case of Benakis, whose haptic abilities were uncommonly sharp: thanks to his family trade, he was accustomed to evaluating the quality of raw cotton and its products by touch and, according to Chatzidakis, this heightened sensitivity served him well when acquiring artefacts. It is a tribute to his knowledge and sensory instinct that so few fakes are to be found among his acquisitions, while far more forgeries ended up in the museum from donations made by other contemporary collectors (such as his sisters, Alexandra Choremi and Penelope Delta, Panayiotis Lidorikis and others).³⁹

For a better understanding of Benakis' interest in and approach to Byzantium it is necessary briefly to review the political and ideological climate of the period. In the late nineteenth century, under the influence of German Romanticism, which reappraised medieval culture and instigated a flourishing in medieval and Byzantine Studies in Europe, Byzantine art began to attract the interest of Greek collectors. For Greece, as for the other nation-states that were then emerging from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Byzantium became a highly contested temporal, spatial and cultural entity. It played a central role in the national historiographies of Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania and Romania, with each state constructing its own divergent or directly opposed Byzantine narrative that reflected the antagonisms and realities of the early twentieth-century Balkans. Through often ambivalent narratives of continuity, discontinuity, revival or disavowal, Byzantium was claimed as Greek or Slavic, in an effort to trace ancestry, pedigree and identity.⁴⁰

In mid- and late nineteenth-century Greece, historians like Paparrigopoulos and Zambelios incorporated Byzantium in the national historiography as the linchpin

38 See the same observations on the importance of the tactile made by Nelson, 'Royall Tyler and the Bliss Collection of Byzantine Art' 28–31.

39 A. Drandaki, 'The discreet charm of a brand: methodological considerations for attributing unsigned icons to Cretan painters of the 15th–17th centuries', *Deltion tes Christianikes Archaeologikes Etaireias* 41 (2020) 237–54.

40 A.D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford 1999) 60–70 and *passim*; D. Stamatopoulos, *To Βυζάντιο μετά το Έθνος. Το πρόβλημα της συνέχειας στις βαλκανικές ιστοριογραφίες* (Athens 2009); T. Kioussopoulou, 'La délégation grecque au IIe Congrès International des Études byzantines (Belgrade 1927)', in O. Delouis, A. Couderc and P. Guran (eds), *Héritages de Byzance en Europe du Sud-Est à l'époque moderne et contemporaine*, École française d'Athènes (Athens 2013) 403–11. On Serbia : A. Ignjatović. 'Byzantium's apt inheritors: Serbian historiography, nation-building and imperial imagination, 1882–1941' *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94. 1 (2016) 57–92.

safeguarding the unbroken continuity of Hellenic history from antiquity to the modern period. Byzantium was no longer viewed as the despotic and reactionary empire of the East that had been vehemently rejected by representatives of the Enlightenment. It was perceived instead –still under the influence of German Romanticism – as a glorious moment of ecumenization of the ancient Greek spirit through the Roman polity and Christianity.⁴¹ This national historiography of continuity gave new impetus to Byzantine studies in Greece, which brought it in line with the rapid development of the field in the rest of Europe, and at the same time kindled the interest of collectors and the Greek state in Byzantine antiquities. Moreover, this inspirational national historiography served the ‘Great Idea’ well, giving historical validity and ideological content to the irredentist vision of an expanded Greek state encompassing the large Greek populations still under Ottoman rule.⁴²

Byzantine and post-Byzantine antiquities had their own important role to play in these debates. In 1912, in conjunction with the International Congress of the Orientalists in Athens, Adamantios Adamantiou organized the first exhibition of icons in Greece, presenting the collection of the erudite Alexios Kolyvas, the first of its kind in Greece.⁴³ The choice of icons for an exhibition accompanying the international congress was anything but random. In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue Adamantiou clarifies the rationale behind the endeavour:

These icons, which are all later, dating mostly to the seventeenth century, nevertheless comprise a collection more valuable than those in the Grottaferrata exhibition (1905), which included icons from Slavic countries. Those in our collection, painted on Greek soil and being faithful reproductions of earlier works are, indisputably, of exceptional interest for the history of Byzantine art.⁴⁴

Responding to contemporary national rivalries, on the eve of the Balkan Wars (1912 – 13), Adamantiou recognizes Greek icons of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries as the only legitimate heirs to Byzantine art, as opposed to Slavic icons which were deemed to deviate from the Byzantine canon.

The Asia Minor Disaster in 1922, and the final collapse of the Great Idea, as well as the new social and political realities created under the influx of refugees needing to be settled in Greece, forced the Greek state and local elites into an ideological

41 Stamatopoulos, *To Βυζάντιο* 104.

42 E. Skopetea, *Το ‘πρότυπο βασίλειο’ και η Μεγάλη Ιδέα: όψεις του εθνικού προβλήματος στην Ελλάδα, 1830–1880* (Athens 1988), and more generally on the period C. Chatziiosif (ed.), *Ιστορία της Ελλάδας του 20ού αιώνα, 1900–1922. Οι Απαρχές*, vol. 1 (Athens 1999).

43 Kolyvas was the first known collector of icons in Greece. The bulk of his collection was later acquired by the banker Dionysios Loverdos: A.A. Papayiannopoulos-Palaios, ‘Εισαγωγή’, in *Μουσείον Διονυσίου Λοβέρδου* (Athens 1946) 5–12

44 *Exposition d’icônes byzantines. Catalogue des icônes, Congrès international des orientalistes, XVIe session – Athènes 1912* (Athens 1912) 3.

reorientation.⁴⁵ Irredentist nationalism was replaced by ‘intellectual nationalism’, to use the term aptly coined by Dimitris Tziouvas, a new national vision that sought to consolidate the intellectual and spiritual unity of Hellenism in lieu of its arrested territorial expansion.⁴⁶ Legislative reforms, aiming at the rapid modernization of the state and convergence with other European countries, evolved hand in hand with an intellectual quest for redefining *Greekness* as a distinct cultural identity and together affected all sectors of Greek society.⁴⁷

The political dimensions of culture and the important role of museums in shaping and visualizing ideology, both as part of domestic policy and as a diplomatic tool in international relations, were, apparently, fundamental aspects of Antonis Benakis’ exhibition programme. With his high-level international contacts and his leading role in the political and social affairs of Greece, Benakis was fully aware of and sensitive to the ideological and political implications of museum exhibitions. Thus, when in 1928 the connoisseur and collector of Islamic Art Dr Frederik R. Martin⁴⁸ suggested that Benakis plan an exhibition on Islamic culture for Athens, similar to the hugely successful one he had organized three years earlier in Alexandria under the aegis of the *amis de l’art*, Benakis responded negatively, explaining that such an exhibition could not take place in Athens at that time. Seeing the wisdom of Benakis’ reasoning regarding the unsuitability of exhibiting Islamic art in Athens under current circumstances, Martin returned with a new suggestion. He proposed instead organizing an international exhibition on Byzantine art in Athens, with Benakis as its moving force and ideal leading figure. Benakis’ response is quite revealing as to the importance he gave to the role of culture in politics:

As for your suggestion of holding a Byzantine Exhibition here [in Athens], I could of course wish for nothing better. It would be splendid, if it were possible. I fear, however, that such an idea could not be entertained, because you could not ask Russia to send the treasures she possesses without putting one or more Russians on the International Committee. This would mean that

45 K. Papari, *Ελληνικότητα και αστική διανόηση στον μεσοπόλεμο. Το πολιτικό πρόγραμμα των Π. Κανελλόπουλου, Ι. Θεοδωρακόπουλου και Κ. Τσάτσου* (Athens 2017).

46 D. Τζιουβας, *Οι μεταμορφώσεις του εθνισμού και το ιδεολόγημα της Ελληνικότητας στο μεσοπόλεμο* (Athens 1989) 55–71.

47 See G. Th. Mavrogordatos and C. Hadziioissif (eds), *Βενιζελισμός και αστικός εκσυγχρονισμός* (Herakleion 1992) and Sakellaropoulos and Vatsaki, *Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος. On perceptions of Greekness*, Papari, *Ελληνικότητα*; E. D. Matthiopoulos, *Η συμμετοχή της Ελλάδας στην Μπιεννάλε της Βενετίας 1934–1940*, Diss. PhD. 3 vols (Rethymno 1996) esp. vol. 1, 102–200 and idem, ‘Η θεωρία της “Ελληνικότητας” του Μαρίνου Καλλιγά’, *Τα Ιστορικά* 25.49 (2008) 331–56; K. Papari, ‘The plurality of Greekness in interwar Greece: a matter of culture or politics?’, *Historein* 17.2 (2018) <https://ejournals.e-publishing.ekt.gr/pfiles/journals/14/editor-uploads/issues/735/main735.html?1=735&2=10833> (last retrieved January 2021).

48 See D. J. Roxburgh, ‘Disorderly conduct?: F.R. Martin and the Bahram Mirza Album’, *Muqarnas* 15 (1998) 32–57 and ‘Au bonheur des amateurs: collecting and exhibiting Islamic Art, ca. 1880–1910’, in *Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art*, *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000) 9–38.

the Soviets would take advantage of such an occasion to send their best propagandists with a big staff to work up the Communist element here, and we would have no possible way to be less particular in allowing Russian visitors into the Country and an unprecedented flow of such visitors who would spread about the Country and work for their ideals without control would result. The Government here would certainly not accept to ask Russia to participate in such an exhibition and one without Russian art treasures would probably not be worth holding. I fear the idea is much too ambitious for this country just now and any attempt in that direction would I believe result in failure. (Letter of 12th March 1928)

The two phrases I have highlighted in italics in the above letter condense Benakis' views on the matter. On the one hand he considered international cultural exhibitions an ideal vehicle for political propaganda⁴⁹ and on the other, interestingly, he held in the highest esteem Russian art treasures of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine period, a view which I am not sure was shared by his contemporaries in Greece.⁵⁰

It was in this climate that Antonis Benakis, instead of organizing an international Byzantine exhibition, began feverish preparations in 1929 for the inauguration of the new museum, investing in this lifelong project all of his time and vast financial assets. It is indicative that, due to the hectic preparations for the opening of the new museum, Benakis could not participate with loans from his collections in the international exhibition of Byzantine Art that eventually took place in Paris, not Athens, in 1931, and this despite the fact he was a member of the exhibition's Greek Academic Committee.⁵¹

Almost simultaneously, in 1930, two other Byzantine museums opened their doors in Athens: the state-owned Byzantine and Christian Museum, which Benakis had

49 A few months later the government of Eleftherios Venizelos addressed the 'communist threat' with the *Idionymon* law (delictum sui generis) 4229/1929. Penalizing those 'who attempt to apply ideas that have as obvious target the violent overthrow of the current social system' the *Idionymon* law was directed against communists, anarchists, and the trade union movement. See K. Foundanopoulos, 'Εργασία και εργατικό κίνημα στην Ελλάδα', in Chatziiosif, *Ιστορία της Ελλάδας*, vol. B.1, 295–335 and A. Dangas, 'Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδος, ελληνικό τμήμα της κομμουνιστικής Διεθνούς', *ibid.*, vol. B.2, 155–201.

50 On the rediscovery of Byzantine art in Russia and the first Byzantine exhibitions organized in Moscow and St Petersburg in the second half of the nineteenth century: Y. Pyatnitsky, 'Enlighten my souls, my heart and my spirit and show me Thy ways...', in *Athos. Monastic Life on the Holy Mountain*, exh. cat., Helsinki City Art Museum (Helsinki 2006) 24–33, and 'An Imperial eye to the past: Byzantine exhibitions in the State Hermitage Museum 1861–2006', *Tyragetia* 5.2 (2011) 71–98.

51 R. Labrusse, 'Modernité byzantine: l'Exposition internationale d'art byzantin de 1931 à Paris', in L. Arnoux-Farnoux and P. Kosmadaki (eds), *Le double voyage: Paris-Athènes (1919–1939)* (Athens 2018) 221–42: Labrusse notes that Benakis did not lend objects to the Paris exhibition without mentioning that its opening (in May 1931) almost exactly coincided with the official opening of the Benaki Museum in Athens (April 1931). It would have been impossible for Benakis to extract objects from the galleries at the time of their first opening to the public. On the Paris exhibition, see also F. Lovino, 'Byzantium on display. Scholars, collectors and dealers at the Exposition Internationale d'Art Byzantin', *Journal of the History of Collections* 32.3 (2020) 523–36, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/fhz034>

supported with numerous donations from his own collection,⁵² and the Museum of Dionysios Loverdos, a private institution that housed the icon collection of this successful banker.⁵³ Both museums opened in October 1930 in conjunction with the 3rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies that took place that year in Athens.⁵⁴ In their visual narrative and textual declarations they focused exclusively on and, each in its own way, exalted the glory of medieval Greek culture.⁵⁵

How do Benakis' far more cosmopolitan and multifarious collections fit into this context? How can we reconstruct his perception of Byzantium in that time of heated debates and contested historical readings of the Byzantine past? The most reliable testimony is the representation and reception of Byzantium on the stage he personally set for the new museum.

The founder's motivation in creating the new museum is clearly, if concisely, stated in the second clause of the establishment act for the new museum (4599 of May 2, 1930) by which the Greek Parliament accepted Benakis' gift on behalf of the Greek nation and defined its legal status and administrative structure. The purpose of the new foundation was above all educational and academic: 'to advance and promote artistic sensitivities and historical knowledge 1) by collecting and displaying works of archaeological, artistic and folkloric value, or objects which are relevant to our national History...2) by compiling a special Library for the study of the history and art of the objects assembled in the Museum'.⁵⁶

The Benaki Museum was officially opened on 22 April 1931. The galleries were numbered in Greek letters prominently placed on the walls to facilitate the circulation of visitors in the rather maze-like neoclassical mansion. The first room, immediately after the museum entrance, was dedicated to 'Arms, historic relics and relics of the Greek War of Independence', the next 'Sacred relics brought from their homes by the Exchanged Populations of Asia Minor, Pontus and Thrace'.⁵⁷ By distinguishing between secular and religious relics and putting them in sequence Benakis set the stage for the new museum, defining its ideological orientation and claiming for it a prominent and distinctive place among the other major museums of Athens. The

52 Benakis' support for the Byzantine and Christian Museum was manifested early on, with donations from his collection that predate the first exhibition of the collections in the Academy of Athens in 1924. In the 1920 Catalogue of Benakis' Byzantine Collection, Adamantiou notes in entry no. 135 that a pair of slippers (Εμβάδες) made of red leather with decorative gold bands and crosses, had been donated to the Byzantine Museum, probably at the instigation of Adamantiou himself. See also G. Soteriou, *Οδηγός του Βυζαντινού Μουσείου* (Athens 1931) 36–7, 111–2, 147.

53 *Μουσείον Διονυσίου Λοβέρδου* (Athens 1946); E. D. Vatalas, 'Λοβέρδου, Μουσείον', in *Μεγάλη ελληνική εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, (ed. P. Drandakis) (Athens, 1956–65²) 16.184–7.

54 Gratziou and Lazaridou 'Από τη χριστιανική συλλογή'.

55 Gratziou and Lazaridou, *op.cit.*; K. Kourelis, 'Byzantine houses and modern fictions. Domesticating Mystras in 1930s Greece', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65–6 (2011–12) 297–331.

56 *Εφημερίς της Κυβερνήσεως*, Athens 2 May 1930, vol. 1.138, 1136.

57 The English translation of the content of the galleries is taken from the English edition of the *Benaki Museum Guide*, published in 1936.

objects of his earliest collecting interests, such as armour, as well as the religious artefacts of the Byzantine and Ottoman periods that had been entrusted to him after the exchange of populations were treated not as collectible works of art but as historic testimonies. They became sacralized in the visual and textual museological discourse, not for their liturgical function but for their contribution to the visualization of the national history. The bulk of the Byzantine material was divided between the next two rooms and a third smaller one, next to the staircase to the first floor. Rooms Γ and Δ, which followed immediately after the refugees' heirlooms, exhibited 'Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Christian Art', followed by 'Post-Hellenistic and Coptic textiles, and Islamic art'. (Fig. 4) Coptic and Nubian art were displayed in a small room (Room AA) next to the staircase, while another equally small room (BB) was the only museum space dedicated to 'Ancient Greek art (chiefly Archaic)'. It is worth noting at this point, that Greek antiquities were not among Benakis' primary collecting interests: they were not even mentioned among the main categories of artefacts.

On the first floor, Benakis' exquisite collection of jewellery was exhibited in a Treasury, next to his 'Collection of Byzantine (i.e. church embroideries), Coptic and Islamic textiles'. Interestingly, the famous *Adoration of the Magi* signed by Domenikos Theotokopoulos was exhibited on an easel amidst 'Italian and Spanish Velvets', not as a stage in the history of icon painting, but as part of a Mediterranean network of luxury commodities.

In the only room solely dedicated to Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art the central cases displayed objects organized by their materials (metalwork, ivories and steatites, painted triptychs, etc) while mounted textiles, icons and mosaics were hung on the walls. The icons merit some further commentary. The majority of the icons acquired by Benakis are, with very few exceptions, works of the late fifteenth to eighteenth centuries that can be securely ascribed to icon workshops from Crete and the Ionian Islands, and the same content is encountered in other contemporary collections of icons in Greece (Loverdos, Velimezis, etc).⁵⁸ When, at the beginning of the twentieth century scholars, collectors and museums began to show an interest in Byzantine painting – for reasons already mentioned – Cretan and Creto-Ionian icons of the fifteenth–eighteenth century became their first choice. Their classicizing character (or 'ethos' as it was often called) and mixed 'Italo-Byzantine' style suited the ideological orientations and prevailing bourgeois taste of the time. Collectors and intellectuals remained firmly Western-oriented and their inclination was towards medieval and early modern Greek painting that could be assimilated into the wider historiography of European art. Furthermore, the presence of painters' signatures on many of the Cretan icons that began to circulate in the market (Emmanuel Tzanes, Michael Damaskenos, Theodore Poulakis, to name but a few) presented collectors and scholars with the unique opportunity of creating a pantheon of 'Byzantine' Greek painters, a genealogy of great artistic personalities built after the fashion of the glorious lineage of

58 N. Chatzidakis, *Icons. The Velimezis Collection* (Athens 1998) 39–47; Drandaki, 'The discreet charm'.



Fig. 4. Benaki Museum (1931), Room Γ, 'Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Christian Art'. Benaki Museum archives. © Benaki Museum, Athens

Western painters that had formed the canon for the history of art since the time of Vasari.⁵⁹ Benakis' single-minded focus on signed Greek icons is clearly expressed in a letter to a Mrs Angela Whitfield, who had offered Russian icons for sale. The reply signed by the Museum's Director, Theodore Macridy, on 21 March 1936, stated: 'We are not interested in icons of Russian art. The only ones that are of interest to us are icons of the fifteenth–sixteenth century, of superior art and preservation, carrying the signatures of the hagiographers.'⁶⁰

The intense interest in works by named Cretan painters had an unexpected and quite unwelcome side effect. It whetted the appetite for profit of unscrupulous restorers, painters and self-appointed art historians, who seized the opportunity to flood the market with icons with forged signatures or even complete fakes, thus making a considerable profit from the eager and unsuspecting collectors. Benakis' collection includes a significant number of icons with forged signatures, most of them added by the painter and restorer Dimitrios Pelekasis. Pelekasis had also been appointed curator of the Loverdos Museum, which possesses an even higher number of icons with fake signatures.⁶¹

59 Drandaki, *op.cit.*

60 Benaki Museum Archives, carbon copy of typewritten letter dated 21 March 1936.

61 *Μουσείον Διονυσίου Λοβέρδου* (Athens 1946) 'Εισαγωγή' by A.A. Παπαγιαννούπουλος-Παλιός, 8–12.

Regardless of such misapprehensions, Benakis' approach to icons can be clearly discerned in the manner of their presentation in the museum. There was no effort to reconstruct for them any kind of religious or historical context, as was, for example, the case with the contemporary exhibitions in the Byzantine and Christian Museum and the Loverdos Museum. In the former, Soteriou reconstructed with scholarly precision three Byzantine church interiors each with a marble templon screen or wood-carved iconostasis (Fig. 5),⁶² while in the Loverdos Museum, a neoclassical building designed by the famous architect Ernst Ziller, whole rooms were transformed by Aristotelis Zachos, an exponent of Neo-Byzantine and vernacular architecture,⁶³ into 'Byzantine period' rooms, with mosaic decoration, templa, icon stands and a profusion of woodcarvings in order to create what was perceived to be the suitably spiritual approach for the display of Loverdos' sacred exhibits.⁶⁴ (Fig. 6) Loverdos's fanciful, pseudo-medieval space was not an isolated case. It was on a par with contemporary efforts in North America, where reconstructions of medieval religious surroundings were designed with equally dramatic flair.⁶⁵

By contrast Benakis treated icons as paintings, not cult objects, and opted for an elegant and dispassionate display that could appeal to every visitor, without the imposition of a religious atmosphere. Each panel was set in a custom-made, modern variation of a cassetta frame with elaborate wood-carved decoration specially designed for each piece.⁶⁶ (Fig. 7) Their Byzantine-inspired motifs evoke Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament* (London 1856) a book that Benakis had in his Library along with other publications in the same vein. By setting them in their elaborately decorated wooden mounts, against a wallpaper imitating precious Ottoman textiles, Benakis sought of visitors that they evaluate the icons as works of art, as valuable paintings, many of them bearing the signatures of important artists. This arrangement seems entirely consistent not only with the refined taste and sober viewpoint of a cosmopolitan

62 Soteriou, *Οδηγός*, 27–30, 50–4, 61–4. On Georgios Soteriou, see D. Konstantios, 'Γεώργιος Σωτηρίου: υπέρ ἔθνους, θρησκείας καὶ ἐπιστήμης', in Gratziou and Lazaridou, *Από τη χριστιανική συλλογή*, 64–76. The three rooms in the Byzantine and Christian Museum with reconstructed templa (rooms Α', Γ' and Δ') were also designed by Aristotelis Zachos, Gratziou and Lazaridou (*op.cit.*), 384–85.

63 See M. Adami-Kardamitsi, *Ερνστ Τσίλλερ 1837–1923. Η τέχνη του κλασικού* (Athens 2006) and E. Fessa-Emmanouel, 'Αριστοτέλης Ζάχος (Καστοριά 1871 [ή 1872] – Αθήνα 1939)', in eadem and E. B. Marmaras (eds), *Twelve Greek Architects of the Interwar Period* (Herakleion 2005).

64 Kourelis, 'Byzantine Houses' 321–2.

65 On the consumption of medieval artefacts and their replicas by the public and the blurred boundaries between public and private appropriation of medieval art in the late 19th c. see E. Emery and L. Morowitz, 'From the living room to the museum and back again. The collection and display of medieval art in the fin de siècle', *Journal of the History of Collections* 16 (2004) 285–309. On medieval 'follies' in North America see K. Kourelis, 'Byzantium and the Avant-Garde: Excavations at Corinth, 1920s–1930s', *Hesperia* 76.2 (2007) 391–442, esp. 404–9.

66 On cassetta frames, see T. J. Newbery, G. Bisacca and L. B. Kanter, *Renaissance Frames*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York 1990) 86–99; C. Powell and Z. Allen, *Italian Renaissance Frames at the V & A - A technical study* (London, 2010) 121–33. See also the Frame Blog, by the National Gallery of London in <https://theframeblog.com/> (last retrieved 8/12/2020).



Fig. 5. The Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, 1930, Room A, Reconstruction of an Early Christian Basilica. N. B. Drandakis archive.



Fig. 6. The Loverdos Museum (1930), Ground Floor (After Gratziou and Lazaridou, *Από τη χριστιανική συλλογή*, 371, fig. 697).



Fig. 7. Benaki Museum (1931), Display of icons in Room Γ. Benaki Museum archives. © Benaki Museum, Athens

collector, but also with the strategy of promoting icons, particularly Cretan icons, on equal terms in the historiography of European art. At the same time, by setting the icons in new frames Benakis, as a collector, completed the process of appropriation, setting on them his personal stamp. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the *Adoration of the Magi* by Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco), where the rare original frame was removed (and thankfully kept in storage), to be replaced by a new one, similar to the others. (Fig. 8a-b) The bold presence of the new frames Benakis used for the display of icons and textiles, with their individuality and artistry, almost create a counterpart to the works themselves. No longer simply a *parergon*—as defined in the philosophical dialogue on frames between Kant and Derrida⁶⁷—these frames make their own meaningful statement bridging the medieval and the modern, and eloquently express preoccupations and perceptions of Benakis' own day.⁶⁸ At the same time, by framing

67 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. C. Meredith, revised N. Walker (Oxford 2007) 57; J. Derrida, *La vérité en Peinture* (Paris 1978) 44–94 and for an English translation of this chapter, Derrida and C. Owens, 'The Parergon' *October* 9, 3–41, esp. 24–26 (doi:10.2307/778319G). On the role of frames see also Meyer Shapiro, 'On some problems in the semiotics of visual art: field and vehicle in image-signs', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 6.1 (1972–3) 9–19.

68 R. Labrusse, 'Modernité byzantine : l'Exposition internationale d'art byzantin de 1931 à Paris', in Arnoux-Farnoux and Kosmadaki, *Le double voyage*, 221–42.



Fig. 8a. The Adoration of the Magi by Domenikos Theotokopoulos, set in a frame designed by Antonis Benakis (1931). Fig 8b: The Adoration of the Magi by Domenikos Theotokopoulos in its original frame. Benaki Museum archives. © Benaki Museum, Athens

parts of mosaics and textiles or sections of larger panel compositions, Benakis highlighted them as autonomous, self-contained artistic units. He created entities out of snippets.

In 1937, the periodical *Mouseion, Revue internationale de muséographie*, published a lengthy article by Theodore Macridy, then director of the Benaki Museum, dedicated to the content and museological approach of the new museum.⁶⁹ *Mouseion* was the official periodical of the International Office of Museums (IMO), which was created by the League of Nations in 1926 and operated until 1946, when it was replaced by ICOM.⁷⁰ The publication of the article was an indisputable triumph for Antonis Benakis, granting international recognition to his museological enterprise in the most official manner. Macridy's article is prefaced by Euripide Foundoukidis, the Secretary General of the IMO, who sings the praises of the Benaki Museum and its founder, affirming that: 'Enfin, le Musée Benaki, tout en gardant son caractère personnel, son intimité, une certaine familiarité même dans la présentation des oeuvres, remplit aussi sa mission scientifique et son rôle éducatif vis-à-vis du public.'⁷¹ Foundoukidis' words directly evoke the reason the

69 T. Macridy, 'Le Musée Benaki'.

70 M. Caillot, *La revue Mouseion (1927–1946)*, Diss. PhD, Paris (2011), available online: <http://www.chartes.psl.eu/fr/positions-theses/revue-mouseion-1927-194> (last retrieved January 2021); <https://icom.museum/en/about-us/history-of-icom/> (last retrieved Jan. 2021).

71 E. Foundoukidis, 'Preface', *Mouseion* 39–40 (1937) 103–4. It is almost certain that this Greek Secretary General of IMO, had played a decisive role in the publication of the article on the Benaki Museum. On Foundoukidis: M. Passini, 'La Conférence d'Athènes sur la conservation des monuments d'art et d'histoire

founder had given for creating the new museum as declared in the Benaki establishment act mentioned above.

Macridy's article is particularly interesting and worthy of a separate study. Suffice it to mention here a few key points relevant to this discussion. Following a detailed description of the basic policies and museological solutions applied to the new museum (lighting, central heating, security, conservation and cleaning), Macridy proceeds to describe in similar detail the design and manufacture of the showcases and mounts used for the presentation of the artefacts. Metal and oak display cases of various types had been acquired from three different sources: London (Sage), Paris (Ravenel) and Athens (various manufacturers). Macridy also gives pertinent information on the frames made for icons and mosaics: 'Les mosaïques et les icônes sont exposées dans des cadres de chêne sculpté à motifs byzantins, empruntés pour la plupart aux sculptures de marbre du Musée Byzantin d'Athènes. La richesse de l'encadrement fait bien ressortir le sujet'⁷². Putting into practice the basic objective of the exponents of the arts and crafts movement, who wanted to give new impetus to contemporary artisanal production by drawing on medieval or folk art, Benakis sought inspiration in original Byzantine sculptures for the design of the frames that showcased his Byzantine paintings. The style and local manufacture of these elaborate frames served multiple purposes. On the one hand they created indisputable visual links between the Byzantine inspiration of their motifs and the post-Byzantine style of the icons they framed, thus enhancing the Byzantine pedigree of paintings dating as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, by commissioning them to local craftsmen Benakis supported local artisans, not only by giving them jobs, but also by expanding their repertoire with Byzantine sources of inspiration. At the same time Benakis participated in the contemporary fashion for medieval 'reconstructions', but in the most subtle way, avoiding reconstructions of historical spaces –which he incorporated in the folk art section only – in favour of a sober implementation of this aesthetic trend, restricting its application to the frames and the unobtrusive Ottoman-style wallpapers.

The total dislocation of the objects from their original context and function is at the heart of Benakis' museological approach, as indeed was the case with most museums and private-turned-public collections at the time. The objects were displayed for their aesthetic value, and in such a way as to allow them to be admired for their decorative qualities and craftsmanship.⁷³ Benakis reconfigured their identity by replacing their lost context with a new functionality defined by the coexistence of the objects in the

(1931) et l'élaboration croisée de la notion de patrimoine de l'humanité', in Arnoux-Farnoux and Kosmadaki, *Le double voyage* 243–52, with earlier bibliography.

72 Macridy, 'Le Musée Benaki' 127. On the locally produced woodworking and hand-woven silk textiles used for the presentation of the objects in the new museum: 115–17.

73 J. Baudrillard, 'The system of collecting', in Elsner and Cardinal (eds), *The Cultures of Collecting* 7–24.

newly minted context of the museum's visual storyline. In this storyline the centrality of Byzantium becomes apparent from the number and distribution of the exhibits. Yet only one room is dedicated exclusively to Byzantine art. For the most part icons, vessels, ceramics, or jewels that are nowadays studied as material evidence of Byzantine culture, were collected and displayed by Benakis as modules in the complex and fascinating story of the eastern Mediterranean. This approach is clearly expressed in the smooth juxtaposition of Byzantine and Islamic artefacts in the same room, even the same showcase, or in the way Theotokopoulos' *Adoration* was separated from the other icons in order to display it next to Italian and Spanish velvets.

To sum up: at a time when, as we have seen, Byzantium played a key role in the redefinition of the national identity in Greece, and the international recognition of Byzantium's Hellenic physiognomy was a declared goal for Greek historians, museums and collectors, Antonis Benakis paid tribute to Byzantium, but endorsed it not as a unique cultural phenomenon but as a vital contributor to the culture of the eastern Mediterranean. And it was this, I think, that remained his great passion and main focus. From this point of view, the fact that he chose very few classical antiquities, and mostly dating from the Hellenistic period onward, becomes more comprehensible. At first glance Benakis' approach to Byzantium, consistent with the cosmopolitan, colonial mentality of an English-educated, affluent Greek from Alexandria, seems at odds with the dominant ideological trend in Greece at that time. However, it is worth noting that his decision to open the museum postdates the collapse of the Great Idea. The Disaster and the thousands of refugees that arrived in Greece created new social realities and forced intellectuals and politicians to redefine the national narrative, creating one in which Byzantium held an even more prominent position. While in his museum Loverdos nostalgically recreated the mystical splendours of the Byzantine past and Soteriou, director of the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, fought in defence of its Greekness, Benakis made his own contribution to the promotion of Byzantium, by endorsing the image of a culture engaged in perpetual dialogue with others. At the same time, with the elegant narration of his new museum he showcased Byzantine objects as highly valued works of art that addressed contemporary taste and could inspire modern artists and artisans reflecting international appreciation of Byzantine art and the widespread recognition of its contribution to modernist art.⁷⁴

74 Betancourt and Taroutina, *Byzantium/Modernism* (n. 37 above); P. Marciniak and D. C. Smythe, *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture* (London 2016). It is well known that Benakis served repeatedly in the 1930s as President of the Greek Committee for the participation of Greek artists in the Biennale of Venice, see Matthiopoulos, *Η συμμετοχή* esp. 83–200 and 'Greek participation in the Venice Biennale and government intervention in art during the 1930s', in A. Kafetsi (ed.), *Metamorphoses of the Modern. The Greek Experience* (Athens 1992) 404–12; E. Hamalidi, 'Greek Antiquity and inter-war classicism in Greek art: Modernism and tradition in the works and writings of Michalis Tombros and Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika in the thirties', in D. Damaskos and D. Plantzos (eds), *A Singular Antiquity. Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in twentieth-century Greece*, *Μουσείο Μπενάκη*, supplement 1 (2008) 337–58.

Antonis Benakis' museum space, in which Byzantine antiquities and historical relics coexisted harmoniously with Spanish, Italian, Islamic and Chinese works of art, could also be seen as his boldest and most pertinent contribution to the new national goal of modernizing Greece and aligning it with other 'model' European countries, and their museums. Thus, in his own distinctive way Benakis wholeheartedly endorsed the political vision of Eleftherios Venizelos and of the bourgeois elite of his time. And he did this, not only through his personal engagement in political positions, such as ministerial posts and seats on committees, but also by shaping his lifelong collecting passion into a public good and donating to the state an eclectic modern museum in order 'to advance and promote artistic sensitivities and historical knowledge'.⁷⁵

75 Benaki Museum establishment act (n. 56 above).