

Original Paper

200 Years since the Greek Revolution: HUMANISTIC PHILHELLENISM and Its Main Characteristics in the Visual Arts (1821-2021)

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Abstract

Philhellenism was a movement, its origins dating back to ancient times, that played a key role in the 19th century and the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821. The contribution of military philhellenism to the liberation struggle of the Greeks is well known, but equally important was the humanitarian philhellenism, manifested in the arts, literature and science and influenced the public opinion of Europe and America, preparing the ground for the perception of this Struggle as a Sacred Struggle against oppression and barbarism. The images painted by famous and anonymous artists back then reflect the atmosphere of that time and the feeling that this uneven battle of the Greeks against the Ottoman Turks was a symbol of the fight against all barbaric behavior, such as oppression, lack of freedom, the rise of the slaveholders, and questioning religious faith. These are images that generally express the desire of European public opinion, in accordance with the teachings of the Enlightenment, to defend human rights with the necessary respect for secularism and ethnic origin. At the same time, the dominant spirit of the time highlights the connection between Greece and Antiquity, as classical culture had a great influence on the artists and intellectuals of the time. As a result, the images with reference to the Greek Revolution and its protagonists have many characteristics that take the form of symbols either of the conflict between different cultures with reference to religious differences or the connection of modern and classical Greece. Undoubtedly, the artistic movement of Romanticism played a key role to all this and Eugene Delacroix emerged as the embodiment of this perception.

Keywords

Greek Revolution, humanistic philhellenism, visual arts, 1821, clash of civilizations, romanticism,

enlightenment, Eugene Delacroix

1. Introduction

Philhellenism as an academic term has been used for centuries in order to describe the fondness of foreign leaders towards the Greeks, for example during the Renaissance the term was used to describe admirers of ancient Greek culture and art (Barth & Kehring-Körn, 1960). In the 19th century, philhellenism became a movement as the European intellect was influenced by the Enlightenment and its ideas, leading to poets and writers being inspired by the classics and using classical names when labeling their work. This movement extended to the visual arts and expanded with the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821, strengthening military philhellenism as expeditionary forces were formed in Europe and sent to Greece to fight on the side of the Greeks. Romanticism captured the imagination not only of artists, but also of the military forces (Papanikolaou, 1999).

The art of painting was the first art form to be inspired by and depict images of the Greek Revolution with themes that reflect, as a form of praise, the bravery of the few Greek warriors facing a large number of Turkish Ottomans. In those paintings we see a dominant presence of symbols that illustrate the artistic spirit and the atmosphere of that time and highlight the prevailing ideology that was in contrast to the political spirit of the “Holy Alliance” (1815) between the sovereign nations of Europe (Koliopoulos, 2002; 11 ff, Burns, 2006, 598ff).

The structure of these works of art was similar to those of Renaissance and icon paintings, but enriched by the romantic mentality that promoted the spirit of Revolution and the need to fight for justice and freedom. Imagination met reality and myths reflected history.

Many of the artists never visited rebellious Greece. They gathered information from the newspapers and from various publications that reported on the Struggle with testimonies describing scenes of bravery, but also accounts of barbarity and brutality by the Ottoman Turks that reinforced the feeling of solidarity towards Greeks in the whole of Europe. This led to a series of beliefs and interpretations with many viewing this war as a battle between Christianity and Islam, while commemorating the fact that the rebellious Greeks appeared to be legacies of the ancient Greeks, a perception that had a positive effect in favor of the Greeks.

The artists come from various European countries, mainly from France, Germany, England, and Italy, as well as from the USA. Their number is impressively large and has been extended to the applied arts (Mykoniatis, 1979).

It is true that “for the first time there is an international interest in a country that is small, distant, historical and exotic, which for the romantic artists of the 19th century was a true vision” (Papanikolaou, op. Cit., p. 205) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Karl Wilhelm von Heideck, *Men at the Temple of Apollo in Corinth*, Oil on Canvas, 46x60cm, National Gallery, Berlin

2. Method

2.1 The Greek Revolution in the Visual Arts. Main Representatives and the Main Features of Their Work

Humanistic philhellenism is present throughout all kinds of art, from theater and literature to the visual arts (painting, sculpture, engraving and applied arts) and flourished, as previously mentioned, during the period of Romanticism. Among the visual arts it was painting that stood out the most during the years of the Greek Revolution. The most famous painting that was inspired by the Greek Revolution is Eugene Delacroix's (1798-1863) "Scene from the massacres of Chios, Louvre Museum" created in 1824 and referring to a tragic event that occurred in 1822 (see *The Greek Revolution. Delacroix and the French painters. 1815-1848. Exhibition catalogue, 1997*) (Figure 2). This painting by the famous French painter greatly influenced other artists and had a huge impact on public opinion in France. It was not just the depiction of the raw violence of the event based on testimonies that caused a sensation, but also the fact that what you saw in the painting was the reality of what happened: the violent battle between two countries and their people that represented two different worlds, their basic difference being their religion, Christians versus Muslims, with their respective positive and negative attributes. This was the main concept behind all the representations of battles from the Greek-Turkish conflict. It is worth noting that even in the United States this was the most popular approach with links to slave trade in similar works of art inspired by the Greek Revolution. "Many US politicians and abolitionists viewed this conflict [The Greek War of Independence against the Turks] as one between the civilized,

heroic Greeks and the barbarous, heathen Turks, who often traded slaves” (Eisenman et al., 2020, p. 214).

But it was not just the historical events that inspired European artists. It was also the protagonists, such as Markos Botsaris, that intrigued them. Based on sources, images of distinguished painters and testimonies, the profile of the fighter from Souli can be compared to the ancient Leonid as well as Napoleon (See *Leonidas, Napoleon, Botzaris. Le langage des symbole*, 2021).



Figure 2. Eugene Delacroix, *The Massacre of Chios*, 1822, Oil on Canvas, 419x354cm, Louvre Museum, Paris

It is a fact that Markos Botsaris since the surprise attack against the Turks in Karpenisi in 1823, where he fought bravely and lost his life, was glorified and was buried with the honours of a modern saint of the Christian faith. European intellectuality and art made him out to be one of the bravest warriors, comparing him to the ancient Leonidas. The journalistic reports of the events unfolding in rebellious Greece, that were reaching Europe through Trieste, were in sync with this notion. The death of Markos Botsaris was mentioned in German newspapers, like, for example, the *Augsbureger Allgemeine Zeitung* (13/10/1823) describing him as the “young Leonidas” and as a “Saint of Faith” (Papanikolaou, 1999/2005, p. 210).

Since then, the great hero has been portrayed in numerous paintings by both European and Greek artists. As an example, we can look at Ludovico Lipparini’s (1800-1856) “The death of Marcos Botsaris” (1841, Museum of the City of Trieste) (Figure 3), a fiber example that summarizes the general opinion regarding the fair fight of the Greeks and the direct relation of Modern to Ancient Greece. (See also 1821. Before and After. Greeks and Greece. Revolution and State, 2021).



Figure 3. Ludovico Liparini, *The Death of Markos Botsaris*, 1841, Oil on Canvas, 57x80cm, Trieste City Museum, Trieste

It is worth mentioning that these artists and the recipients of their art saw the Greek Revolution as the fight between Christian West against an enemy of a different faith. This notion is expressed with the use of symbols in a number of paintings regarding the Struggle, for example, the painting by Carl Wilhelm von Heideck (1788-1861), a soldier and amateur painter, “Lads at the Temple of Apollo in Corinth” (Berlin, National Gallery), where the timelessness of Greek culture is outlined and appears to be defining the new status quo.

The Greek artist Theodoros Vryzakis (1814-1878) did the same in his painting “The Exodus of Messolonghi” (Athens, National Gallery), a work of art that uses many elements of Byzantine art, making the heroes look like saints while praising their Holy Fight (see Lydakis, 1978) (Figure 4).

The English poet and celebrated philhellene Lord Byron (1788-1824) lost his life in Messolonghi. His contribution and participation in the Greek Revolution is depicted by Theodoros Vryzakis in his painting “The reception of Lord Byron in Messolonghi” (Athens, National Library) (Figure 5).

3. Discussion

The Greek Revolution never ceased to inspire artists in Europe and worldwide throughout the 19th century. Humanitarian education in Europe, as a result of the Enlightenment, was becoming more and more popular, while artists, influenced by the Romantic movement were inspired by the Struggle of the Greek people, seeking answers to important issues, such as individual freedom and respect of human rights. At the same time, Europe on a political level was faced with a void left behind by the demise of the Ottoman Empire and therefore the Struggle of the Greeks was seen as a clash between two civilizations with vast differences in matters of government and religion. The reception and popularity

of the works of art that were inspired by the Greek Revolution was not coincidental. The culmination of this period was the relevant paintings by Eugene Delacroix and many others. Greek artists, led by Theodoros Vryzakis, followed and managed to depict in their work the Greek Revolution as perceived by the Europeans.



Figure 4. Theodoros Vryzakis, *The Exit of Messolonghi*, 1853, Oil on Canvas, 169x127cm, National Gallery, Athens



Figure 5. Peter von Hess, *Otto enters Nafplio on January 25, 1833*, Color Lithography, 85x53cm, National Gallery, Athens

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