

Representing “Greek” Prehistory: Some Remarks

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This paper aspires to briefly examine the prehistoric Collection in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. It also focuses on this Collection’s particularities and on the reasons behind their existence: these are preliminary remarks, which will be extensively elaborated in the context of a research program.

In contrast to the respective European national museums, which evolved from private collections, the National Archaeological Museum of Athens was created from the outset as a national ark. The approach of archaeology as ancient art history concerns primarily the classical period, but it will be shown that it also influences in a certain degree the interpretation of prehistory.

Although belonging to one Collection, the three prehistoric periods (Neolithic, Cycladic, Mycenaean) are exhibited in a manner suggesting different approaches on behalf of the Museum’s curators.

Introduction

The national museums of Europe were founded at the end of the 19th century, that is, during the time of the creation of national identities. These museums display a clear ideological orientation: they aimed to declare the national identity and to strengthen the bond between the state and its civilians (Ambrose-Paine 1993, 84). In contrast to the respective European national museums, which evolved from private collections, the National Archaeological Museum of Athens was created from the outset as a national ark, when the Neohellenic state and the Greek national identity was formed and defined by the Neohellenic enlightenment and built upon the relationship and the allegedly unbreakable continuation between the ancient and modern Greeks (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1977). The Museum was gradually transformed into a «treasury» of the history of ancient Greek art (Voudouri 2003, 365). At this point, let us note that the identification of archaeology with art history is deeply rooted in Greece and could be emanating mainly from the love for antiquities displayed by Germans: this was also the main direction that the Germans propagated and imposed on the young Hellenic state at the time of its establishment, after the end of the Greek Revolution, along with their presence in the Hellenic institutions (Tzaxili 2006, 16). It has been noted that the approach of archaeology as ancient art history concerns primarily the classical period (Tzaxili 2006, 16), but it will be shown that it also influences in a certain degree the interpretation of prehistory.

The Prehistoric Collection of the National Archaeological Museum

The Prehistoric Collection belongs to the Collections constituting the National Archaeological Museum [Collections of Sculpture, Vases, Terra-Cotta and Bronze Figurines, Egyptian Art (Egyptian Collection)]. The framework for the collection's creation dates back at 1891, when the creation of a «collection of antiquities of the so called pre-Hellenic art» was stipulated by a royal decree (Government Gazette n. 329, November 21st, 1891, RD of November 19th, 1891). The very next year, 1892, finds from Mycenae, Spata, Menidi, Nauplio, Vapheio and from the other prehistoric sites began being transferred from the Polytechnic School, where they were temporarily sheltered, into the Museum (Acts of the Archaeological Society, 1892, 61-62 and Κόκκου 1977, 248). After the Second World War, Christos Karouzos, Director of the Museum, directed the project of the whole Museum's exhibition. In 2004, on the occasion of the Museum's reopening for the Olympic Games, the Prehistoric Collection of the National Archaeological Museum was once again made available to the public.

The Prehistoric Collection can be divided in three distinct collections:

A) The Neolithic Collection.

The objects belonging to this Collection come from the excavations of Christos Tsountas at Dimini and Sesklo, which brought to light the Neolithic Helladic civilization. The results of his research were published in the work titled «The prehistoric acropolis of Dimini and Sesklo», proceeding to a preliminary description and synthesis of the Neolithic Civilization (Τσοῦντας 1908), which Tsountas interpreted on the basis of the Homeric epics (Preziosi-Hitchcock 1999, 34).

The collection is enriched by finds resulting from seizures, such as the Neolithic Treasure (Δημακοπούλου 1998), which came from a successful fight against the illicit trafficking of antiquities. These objects are displayed as works of art: this fact is enforced not only by their form but also by the rarity of their material, given the period in which they created.

Today, as one enters the room of the Neolithic collection, he sees a showcase functioning as an abstract restoration of a Neolithic house. In the background one can discern the designed representation of the Dimini acropolis, while the foreground presents objects which would

have composed the house's household effects (mainly pottery but also tools, carbonized fruit, pieces of clay with stamps of reeds etc.).

The other showcases are dedicated to various art forms. Apart from the showcase containing the abstract representation of a Neolithic house, where objects belong in a way to a context (Hodder 1992) within their period, the Neolithic Collection exhibition presents the objects themselves and their authenticity on the basis of their archaeological typological classification. This is an exhibition practice common to the National Archaeological Museum: in a characteristic example of this room, the objects in one showcase are presented on the basis of their enumeration in the grave in which they were found; this alludes to the care displayed by the curators not to perturb the excavation's ensembles, and the same concern was also apparent in the previous exhibition of the Neolithic civilization (1958-2002).

B) The Cycladic Collection comprises objects which are the fruit of the excavations of Chr. Tsountas, who has excavated in the Cyclades and proceeded to the first comprehensive consideration of the Early Cycladic Civilization (Τσούντας 1898, Τσούντας 1899), of the anthropologist Cl. Stephanos, of the British School at Athens from Phylakopi (Atkinson 1904, Renfrew 1985) as well as recent finds coming from the efforts against illicit excavations.

The objects are mainly displayed according to their place of discovery, while some showcases are thematic (one has Cycladic figurines, another is dedicated to metal working and another to the working of stone). The fact that the presentation of the objects has been conducted on the basis of their place of discovery indicates the curators' effort not to disrupt the unity of the excavation ensembles. This choice however does not permit other forms of correlations between the objects.

C) The Mycenaean Collection, occupying the large central room on the museum's ground floor, consists of finds dating to the Late Bronze Age, the period when the Mycenaean civilization flourished. The exhibition presents objects coming mainly from the great centres of the Argolid and particularly from Mycenae, Messinia, Laconia, Attica and other regions of Greece.

The exhibits are presented chronologically as well as by place of provenance. The exhibition comprises the following units:

i) grave Circle A, excavated by Heinrich Schliemann at the end of the 19th century, and grave Circle B of Mycenae, excavated mainly by I. Papadimitriou and G. Mylonas. The exhibition of the finds begins with the grave stelae crowning the graves, while the grave gifts constitute the gallery's most impressive element: gold masks, bronze and elaborate weapons, rhyta from ostrich eggs, ivory and stone objects, clay and metal vases and vessels, jewels from precious stones and metals.

ii) Finds from the mycenaean acropolis of Mycenae, Tiryntha and Pylos.

iii) Finds from the vaulted and chamber tombs of the Argolid and Laconia, mainly jewels of gold, glass and semiprecious stones, glass paste and faience, bronze weaponry, silver vessels, clay vases and figurines.

iv) Finds from the Mycenaean graves of Attica, Thessaly, Skopelos and Cythera.

Discussion

Although the absence of written sources in prehistoric times would plausibly justify the imperative need for a theoretical framework and for eventual experimentations (Wood-Cotton 1999, 30, 36), the archaeological and museological practice in the Prehistoric Collection of the National Museum appears riveted in its conservative character, and the representation of modern tendencies (Post-Procedural Archaeology, Cognitive Archaeology, etc., cf. indicatively Hodder 1997) is completely absent.

Although belonging to one Collection, these three prehistoric periods are exhibited in a manner suggesting different approaches on behalf of the Museum's curators: the Neolithic and Early Bronze Period (where most of the Cycladic collection objects are dated) are very distant, chronologically speaking, from the «body» of Greek history, beginning conventionally with the Mycenaean civilization, which is considered – on the basis of Linear B – as the first «Greek» civilization, and therefore has the place of a prelude for classical art: this is why the objects in the Mycenaean room are exhibited as works of art, and the grave gifts of the Mycenae Grave Circle A are particularly displayed, as they are sumptuous and elaborate objects.

On the contrary, the interpretation of the Neolithic civilization has been marked by the proposal of G. Hourmouziadis for the Museum of Volos (1975). This suggestion has henceforth constituted a landmark for the curators of Neolithic collections, be it consciously or subconsciously. Since then, the presentation of the Neolithic Civilization on the basis of the Systems Theory, which was unquestionably pioneering in its time and for the Greek reality then, has had a huge impact and constitutes the dominating point of view to this day: it seems to be the only adapted way, it constitutes a kind of 'beaten track', an image which is reproduced and followed, even by very 'young' Museums, created within the last five years or even more recently. The attention brought to this model is not unjustified: its contribution lies in the fact that today, there is not one single Neolithic Collection presenting the objects of the Neolithic Civilization exclusively as «works of art»: even in exhibitions with a conservative background and a particular role, such as the National Archaeological Museum exhibition, an effort is being made to integrate the object in the civilization that created it. Therefore, the exhibition serves its highly educational character, which stands out as a main aspiration for curators.

The Cycladic Collection is seen under a different light: since the modernism movement – and even abusively - figurines are compared to modern sculptures, and this perception has also influenced the interpretation in the National Museum. However, one should note that in no case does this situation reach the degree in which these figurines are considered as sculpture in the –private- Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens; this situation can also be deduced from the fact that the objects in the Museum of Cycladic Art are deprived of their particular context, as they come from illicit excavations. The remaining objects are presented as burial groups, which is a popular practice for this particular Museum. Vital issues are silenced – such as the matter of illicit excavations, which infested the Cyclades particularly in the '50s and '60s and have had determinatively negative repercussions in the study of the Cycladic civilization (indicatively cf. Davis 1984, 20). Moreover, issues pertaining to questions on prehistoric religion are completely concealed: the finds from the Phylakopi sanctuary, presented in the Cycladic room, are befitting for the presentation of this thorny issue, as the excavation of the Phylakopi sanctuary has also constituted the basis for an attempt to decipher the religion of the Bronze Age (Renfrew 1985).

Figure 1. Athens, National Museum. A view of a showcase of the Neolithic Collection.



Figure 2. Volos, Archaeological Museum. A view of the G. Xourmouziadis gallery.



Figure 3. Athens, National Museum. A view of a showcase of the Cycladic Collection.



Figure 4. Athens, Museum of Cycladic Art. A view of showcases with cycladic figurines.



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