

The Benaki museum in Athens

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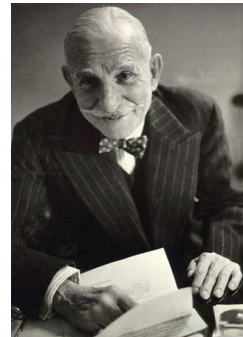
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To my dear friend Paraskevi Kritsiligkou

This year, the annual EGOS conference took place in Athens, right before the vote on whether or not Greece should accept the financial plan proposed by the EU and other international institutions. The atmosphere there was much less tense and agitated than it seemed on TV, and the protests remained well organized and non violent—and that was a bit of a surprise for us French people, used to long-lasting and vehement demonstrations! Beside the conference, we then felt free to enjoy Athens' magnificent remains of Ancient Greece and its outstanding museums. Close to the now famous Syntagma square and the Greek Parliament, and adjacent to the French Embassy, the Benaki collection nestles in one of the few neoclassical buildings that were not destroyed after the Second World War.

The Benaki museum, founded by Antonis Benakis, belongs to that particular type of museum that is mostly found in cultural capitals. The Nissim de Camondo¹, Jacquemart-André and Cognacq-Jay museums in Paris; the Poldi Pezzoli museum in Milan or the Wallace collection in London; the Frick collection in New York City, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston are some of the most famous museums of this kind. These passionate art collectors—who all lived in the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century—have built splendid houses explicitly designed to preserve and display their collections and then, at some point, open them to the public.

If Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli, Sir Richard Wallace or Isabella Stewart Gardner inherited money from their families that they used to collect art objects and create the house museum, the four others are industrial, bankers, merchants that devoted their personal fortune to art. The Camondo family was an old Jewish family that left Spain for Venice and then Constantinople where they were bankers for the Ottomans during the 18th century. The family arrived in France in the mid-19th century. Besides their banking activities, two cousins of the family, Isaac and Moïse, were also well known for their passion for art. They built eclectic collections that they donated to French museums. Moïse destroyed and rebuilt the family house next to the parc Monceau in 1912 so as to create a private house designed to host his collections of furniture, art objects and paintings, and designed to become after his death a museum, dedicated to his son, engaged as an aviator in the French army and killed during the First World War.



1. See, in French, Assouline (1997).

*Antonis Benakis (1873-1954)
at his office in the museum.
©Benaki museum*

Located Boulevard Haussmann in Paris, the Jacquemart-André museum is the result of the shared passion of a couple, Nélie Jacquemart and Édouard André. André, first engaged in the Army and then in politics, was the heir of a Protestant banking family. Passionate about art, he began his collection in the 1860s and married Nélie Jacquemart, a young painter sharing his passion. Together, they built a mansion Boulevard Haussmann designed to host their collections. It was then donated to the Institut de France to be transformed into a museum. In the Marais, the Cognac-Jay museum is also the result of a shared passion: Théodore-Ernest Cognacq et Marie-Louise Jaÿ are the founders of the famous La Samaritaine, one of the first Parisian department stores (les *Grands magasins*), founded in 1870. Both came from very modest families from the Atlantic coast—Théodore-Ernest Cognacq was born on the island of Ré—and the Alps, Marie-Louise Jaÿ being born and raised in Samoëns, a Savoyard village where she also created a beautiful botanical garden. In Manhattan, Henry Clay Frick, an American industrialist who founded one of the major coke and steel manufacturing companies and signed a partnership with Andrew Carnegie. The H. C. Frick & Company was providing coke for Carnegie's steel mills. The partnership between H. C. Frick & Company and Carnegie Steel Company was the predecessor of U.S. Steel that is still today the 15th largest steel producer.

Antonis Benakis was born in 1873 in Alexandria in a wealthy family of the Greek community of Egypt. His father, Emmanuel Benakis, was a cotton merchant born in the small cycladic island of Syros who moved to Egypt with his wife Virginia. Antonis had five brothers and sisters. One of his sisters, Penelope Delta, is known to be the first Greek author of children's books. She immortalized the Tom Sawyer-like mischiefs of her brother Antonis in her book *Trelantonis* ("Crazy Anthony"). Not much is known about him, though, as no biography was ever written about his life (at least, not translated in English or French). Consequently, the available information was gathered from the *Guide to the Benaki Museum*, written by the curator Angelos Delivorrias (2000). The young Antonis spent his childhood within the intellectual milieu of the Greek diaspora, and soon became well aware of the challenges of modern Greece. The country won its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832 after a decade of war. Nonetheless, a number of issues remained, one being the status of Crete still under Ottoman domination. Antonis Benakis enlisted as a volunteer during the conflict opposing Greece to Turkey in 1897 and then again in 1912-1913 during the first Balkan war. After the First World War he continued living between Greece and Egypt for a while before settling permanently in Athens in 1926. His passion for art began during his youngest years, as he gathered objects and art of the Islamic culture. From 1926 onwards, he focused on Greek artistic production from the earliest days of prehistorical periods to postbyzantine and Folk art. The idea of presenting his collections in a museum that would allow the Greek people and more generally the public to benefit from them soon became more and more pressing. He thought about the paternal home, a vast neoclassical mansion in Vassilis Sophia Avenue, just behind the Greek Parliament and Syntagma Square, to be the museum. Antonis's brothers and sisters were enthusiastic about the project too and they offered their shares into the family house to contribute to the project. Built in 1895, the house had to be adapted to be converted into a museum. Once the works done, the museum opened on April, 22nd 1931.



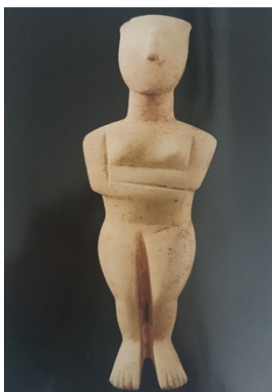
Antonis Benakis as a child, hero of Penelope Delta's book *Trelantonis* (*Crazy Anthony*)
©Benaki museum

Since then, the museum preserved its independency (it is a public-benefit cultural foundation in private law) and developed its activities and collection thanks to many contributors and benefactors. When Antonis Benakis died in 1954, the museum recorded 26 666 objects, 10 400 books and manuscripts, 146 historical documents. In 2000, the collections have increased by 13 000 objects, 30 000 books, 400 historical archival documents, and also 16 500 photographs, 220 000 negatives, and almost 20 000 objects for the new department of Childhood, Toys and Games. Combined with a continuously increasing number of visitors, the museum had to adapt its premises and its organization. Works of enlargement of the exhibition areas were made during the 1960s and 1970s, and a new wing was built in 1989. But the major works occurred between 1997 and 2000 when the usable museum space was doubled and storage basements added to the new wing.

In addition to this “organic growth”, a fascinating dynamic of external extension and diversification also took place during the 1990s and 2000s. As a matter of fact, the Benaki museum now comprises a series of satellite museums and sites to display thematic collections or to honour some particularly important donations. The newest building, opened in 2004 138 Pireos Street, focuses on neohellenic Greek architecture from the establishment of the Greek independent State in 1831, and also presents the works of Greek architects. In the 1990s, two thematic collections were organized in three independent buildings. One presents the Islamic art collections (Kerameikos building), another one gathers the collection of children’s toys and games (Kouloura house). The house of the Delta family, home of Antonis’ sister Penelope—a writer who died in this house committing suicide when the Nazi army entered Athens in April 1941—was also transformed into a museum. The museum network also comprises now three artists homes and studios that were donated by their families to the Benaki foundation.

In the main building, Vassilis Sophia avenue, the collections trace back the long history of Greek civilization and people from the remote Neolithic age, with expressive figurines and amulets going back to 6500 years BC, to the period of independence in the 18th century and the formation of the Greek modern state.

Art objects from the Bronze age, sculptures from the Classical period of the Golden Age and from Alexander the Great conquest period, jewellery and daily life objects show us the great diversity of cultural centres in the islands and the continent.



Early Cycladic female figurine, 2600-2500 BC. During the Bronze age, the Aegean islands were an intense and flourishing Art centre, ©Benaki museum



Attic marble grave stele, from Keratea, 4th century BC (JB)



Saint Anne with the Virgin, attributed to the workshop of Angelos Akotantos, Mid-15th century (JB)



Wood-carved reception room from a mansion in Kozani, mid-18th century (JB)

Icons, paintings, textiles and objects from the Byzantine and the Ottoman periods remind us that Greece has always been at the heart of the Mediterranean roads of commercial and cultural exchanges. Christian traditions diverged from the Western Roman Christian Church and culture, with the founding of the Eastern Roman Empire, which extension covered the territories all around the Mediterranean sea including Egypt and North-East Africa, and later the establishment of the Byzantine Church. Greek byzantine art was then also influenced by Islamic art and traditions, with the Persian, Arabs and Ottoman attacks that slowly dismantled the Eastern Roman Empire between the 7th century and the final fall of Constantinople in 1453.

During the Ottoman period, the Orthodox Church of Greece remained the most powerful unifying element for the Greek culture, and most of the Greek art—icons, embroideries,, goldwork, silverwork—from the 15th to the 19th centuries is ecclesiastical.

The museum finally displays an impressive collection of paintings, objects and historical testimony of the Greek Enlightenment and the wars of independence throughout the 19th century.

The Benaki museum is a remarkable institution for several reasons. Founded by one man, Antonis Benakis, an Art collector passionate about his country and willing to show the world its wonders all along the historical vicissitudes and cultural metamorphosis, it has become a network of museums displaying all aspects of Greek culture, from toys to contemporary architecture, acknowledging the links and contributions of all the influences and cultures that were part of the country's history and cultural development from the most remote prehistoric times. The cooperation of other private public-benefit foundations, regular donations and the reputation of the institution resulted in a continuous increase of the collections and of the number of visitors. It certainly is one of the most important museum worth discovering in Athens ■



Gilded wood-carved head of anthropomorphic monster. Element of church decoration. Zakynthos, Ionian islands, 19th century (JB)

References

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