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Exhibition Review

Victoria G. Karelias Collection of Traditional Greek Costumes
Lyceum Club of Greek Women of Kalamata
64 Stadiou, Kalamata, Greece

Reviewed by Linda Welters

Take one passionate collector, one derelict building, add a visionary team of collaborators, and the result is a remarkable museum of traditional Greek dress. It opened its doors on October 11, 2016 in the city of Kalamata in the southwestern Peloponnese.

The collector, Victoria Karelias, assembled her trove of Greek dress and jewelry over a period of forty-five years. She bought from reputable dealers, notably Stavros Goutis, and Zoumas antique shop in Athens, as well as from private parties. She bought whole ensembles, single garments, and jewelry, most of which dates from the mid-eighteenth century to approximately 1940. For years some of the costumes were used for traditional dance events put on by the Lyceum Club of Greek Women of Kalamata, a cultural organization of which she is President. Eventually she donated her collection to the Lyceum Club. The goal of displaying this extensive assemblage became a reality when the municipality of Kalamata bestowed a nineteenth-century neoclassical-style building near the town's historic center that had been damaged in a 1986 earthquake. The Lyceum Club, along with the George and Victoria Karelias Foundation, provided funds for the renovation.

And what a renovation! The Lyceum assembled a team of Greek experts – architects, designers, lighting specialists, folklorists and museum specialists – to craft both a space and an exhibition that is garnering international accolades. The museum has three floors. Architect Thanasis Kyratsous took advantage of the damaged building's missing middle floor by creating a unique exhibition space with an open area that allows for multi-story displays. A central staircase leads to the upper floors, which are also accessible by elevator. The ground floor opens up to a rear courtyard with a multi-purpose hall at the opposite end where the museum holds cultural events such as lectures and concerts.

Visitors must ring a bell and be buzzed into a narrow hallway that displays sixteen drawings by set designer/scenographer Yiannis Metziko. His black-and-white images represent women in the local dress of the Greek islands. Each includes a single detail in color such as a pillow or a decorative plate.

The hallway leads into the museum proper where the visitor is greeted by a host who explains the organization of the displays and introduces the signage. All text is in Greek and English on easy-to-use interactive touch screens. For more detailed information on the history of the collection and on individual displays, the visitor can request a hand-held tablet provided by the museum. The digital labels for each ensemble, written by the Benaki Museum's Xenia Politou, incorporate recent scholarship on Greek dress. For example, the descriptions of apron styles with floral embroidery from Boeotia and

Euboea acknowledge the influence of European fashion on Greek regional dress, at one time presented as static.

The exhibition space is dark and dramatic with walls, floors, and ceilings in soft black. Clothing and jewelry are displayed as complete outfits on dressed mannequins behind glass as well as single artifacts in stand-alone cases. The mannequins are off-white in color, and their faces have no features; thus, each one functions as a “blank” so that viewers may focus on the ensemble. Simple shoes complete most outfits. The lighting design, by Eleftheria Deko, incorporates spotlights inside cases. Low lights concealed below display platforms illuminate the floor.

Greece has a long and tumultuous political history, and as a result the country’s dress history is complex. Over the last century, researchers have grouped Greek folk dress into categories, organizing them by region, garment type, historical development, ethnicity, social organization (e.g., urban/rural), and occasion (e.g., festive/everyday). Several of these categories, or themes, are elicited in the arrangement of the displays of the Karelias collection. The organization of the display, and possibly of Karelias’ collecting, reflects the scholarship of Angeliki Hatzimichali in the two volumes she published on Greek women’s folk dress.ⁱⁱ The interpretations by Ioanna Papantoniou on the historical development of Greek dress are also in evidence.ⁱⁱⁱ Ioanna Papantoniou is the founder of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation and a former theatrical costume designer; she curated the exhibits themselves with the assistance of Stamatis Zannos. Folklorist Nadia Macha-Bizoumi facilitated the overall organization.

The ground floor cases feature three different themes: over-garments with gold thread embroidery, the historical development of Greek dress, and regional costumes from the mainland that include a *sigouni* (sleeveless white jacket). Visitors first encounter a large wall case of men’s garments—jackets, vests, coats—with gold thread embroidery. In an adjacent room, five women’s gold embroidered coats called *pirpiri* are displayed in a case that goes up three stories. These garments are arranged on small round platforms that move: two rotate and three ascend and descend. A spectacular cherry red *pirpiri* from the Epirus region is the centerpiece. The beautiful gold work on these pieces reveals the artistry of the *terzides*, itinerant craftsmen who plied their trade during the Ottoman era. Parts of northern Greece, such as Epirus, remained in Ottoman hands until 1922. Thus, such garments were still worn in the early twentieth century and soon after became available in antique markets.^{iv}

The case on the ground floor that shows the historical development of regional Greek folk dress references four influences. The oldest comes from the Byzantine period as seen in an embroidered chemise from Arachova. The second influence derives from Middle Eastern countries, particularly Syria, as illustrated by a patterned silk coat. The rural population who wore wool over-garments constitutes the third influence, which is visualized through a *sigouni* from the town of Voha in the province of Corinthia. Renaissance Europe was a fourth influence as seen in a pleated dress from Skopelos, an island in the Sporades group. The remaining cases on the ground floor display ensembles from the mainland regions of Attica, Argolida, Corinthia, Boeotia, Euboea, and

Macedonia. A dress from the town of Menidi in Attica exemplifies the intricate silk embroidery on the hems of bridal chemises worn by brides in this region.

The first floor (which Americans would refer to as the second floor) displays dress worn by the Vlachs and Sarakatsani. These two ethnic groups were nomadic shepherds who moved seasonally with their flocks on the Greek mainland. Sarakatsani men's, women's, and children's ensembles feature dense black geometric motifs along with heavy knitted socks. Prominent silver clasps on belts complete the outfits. Other cases on this floor display Eastern-inspired coats known as *kavadi* or *anteri*. Jewelry items, including the large silver buckles, are shown in stand-alone cases.

Several cases on the top floor exhibit women's outfits whose dominant feature is an overdress (*foustani*), which is often pleated. These dresses are common to the islands once dominated by Western powers including the Sporades and Dodecanese. The Northern Aegean islands are also included in this section. Oddly, the English text refers to these dresses as "frocks," which is a term that has fallen out of everyday use. In fashion history, the word "frock" generally refers to the loose, unfitted dresses of the 1920s.

The last two cases on the uppermost floor exhibit court dress dating from the mid- to late-nineteenth century when Greece was governed by monarchs from Germany. Queen Amalia, who reigned from 1836 to 1862, introduced a Biedermeier-style woman's outfit consisting of a fitted velvet jacket and silk skirt worn over a loose cotton or silk shirt. A tasseled fez cap or small toque completed the look. This outfit became known as the *Amalia*, and women in cities and towns throughout Greece adopted it as their festive dress. It ultimately functioned as a national dress. Four of these Amalia outfits dating from the 1860s and 1870s are on display; these are among the best examples of Amalia outfits I have seen.

The final exhibition case displays late nineteenth-century elite dress. After the Russian-born Olga became queen in 1867, she adapted the village dress of Attica as court costume. This outfit, which had an elaborate train, dates from the 1880s. The final mannequin is dressed in a fashionable 1890s satin wedding dress, signaling that Parisian fashion began to dominate the wardrobes of wealthy urbanites at the turn of the century.

Although more mannequins feature women's dress than men's, the sartorial history of the Greek male is not neglected. Prior to the advance of the Western suit, men living on the islands and in coastal communities wore baggy breeches known as *vraka*. Meanwhile, in some mainland regions men wore white pleated skirts known as *foustanella*, which became popular after Greece won their independence from the Ottoman Turks with the help of Albanian warriors who wore such garb. The *foustanella* can be seen in cases throughout the exhibition. One unique outfit worn in the medieval village of Pyrgi on the island of Chios has two distinctive features: embroidery on the white shirt and a pleated apron worn over white trousers. It is known as *podhia*, "apron."

The text in the tablets is very useful to those unfamiliar with the panoply of Greek dress with its multiple, localized responses to social and cultural influences. For many visitors, this exhibition will evoke simple appreciation of the beauty of traditional dress. I offer only one suggestion to the museum: for international visitors who are not cognizant of Greece's geography, maps of regions from which each outfit came would be helpful. Not everyone knows the location of Epirus or Thrace in relationship to Crete or Corfu.

This new museum at Kalamata is well worth a visit. A modest entrance fee is charged. Hours of operation are Tuesday–Saturday 9:00–2:00, Wednesday and Saturday 5:30–8:30, and Sunday 10–1. It is closed on Mondays. A catalog is in production for late 2017. Future plans include a gift shop.

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i Interview, Victoria Karelias, Kalamata, 3 August 2017.

ii Angeliki Hatzimichali, *The Greek Folk Costume: Costumes with the Sigouni* (Athens: Melissa, 1979), and *The Greek Folk Costume: Costumes with the Kavadi* (Athens: Melissa, 1984).

iii Ioanna Papantoniou, *Greek Dress from Ancient Times to the Early Twentieth Century* (Athens: Commercial Bank of Greece, 2000).

iv Embroidered coats were also included in a series of exhibitions organized in 2017 by the Benaki Museum, Costa Navarino, and Athens International Airport's "Art and Culture" Division. Contemporary artists and designers created garments inspired by historic originals. The inspiration and the creation were displayed side by side at several venues.