

Ideological and Aesthetic Standards of Greek Open-Air Sculpture: Three Emblematic Statues of Thessaloniki

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Abstract: *Open-Air Sculpture Has Been A Relatively Recent Phenomenon In Thessaloniki. The First Public Monument Erected In The City Is Dated From 1915. It Is The Bust Of King George I, Assassinated In Thessaloniki Two Years Before. Since Then Most Monuments Have Had Historical Contents. They Refer, For The Most Part, To Persons Who Have Played A Particular Role In The City's History. Thessaloniki Was Liberated 90 Years After Athens And Its History Is Directly Associated With National And International Events, Which, Because Of Its Location, Have Influenced The Ideology, The Aesthetics, As Well As The Reception By Its Inhabitants Of All Forms Of Art. National Struggles Involving Its Northern Neighbours Have Been Constant, But They Intensified, On The Ideological Level, During The Cold War Period, When All Neighbouring Countries Had Fallen Within The Sphere Of Influence Of The Then Soviet Union. The City's Streets And Squares Are Adorned With Sculptures (Statues And Busts), Referring To Historical Persons, Who, For Its Inhabitants, Have Marked Its Trajectory Through Time. Therefore, Statues Like Those Of Alexander The Great, King Philip II Of Macedon, And Aristotle Dominate The City As Reminders Of A Glorious Past. Ideological Reflexes Are Oriented Towards A Type Of Nationalistic Art Which Is Neither Susceptible To Aesthetic Exaggeration Nor Willing To Compromise With Avant-Garde Endeavours. Any Attempts To Deviate From These Principles Have Been Met With Strong Reactions. The Language Of Realism, Including All Its Shades And Idealistic Trends, Was The Only One That Could Be Tolerated.*

Keywords: *Open-Air Sculpture, Cold War, Nationalistic Art, Alexander The Great, King Philip II Of Macedon, Aristotle.*

I. Introduction

In Greece, Open-Air Sculpture Has, As A Rule, Followed Conservative Trends, Especially During The First Decades After The Country's Liberation, Complying, For Obvious Reasons, With Political, Ideological, And Social Conveniences. Themes Satisfied The Quest For Promoting The Heroism Of The Leading Figures Of The Revolution Of 1821 And The Nation's National Struggles. The Development Of This Sculpture Followed, Rather Belatedly, The Morphological And Conceptual Achievements Of Avant-Garde Art, Opting For Realism As A Manner Of Expression. This Sculpture Revealed The Creators' Tendency "To Express Themselves Through Simpler Forms And By Less Complex Works, Given That They Are Intended For The General Public Which Does Not Include The Regular Visitors Of Art Galleries" (Papanikolaou 1985, p. 12). It Is, Nevertheless,

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A “Live” Art, Because It Has A Broader Destination, It Performs A Different Function Focusing On Social Surroundings, It Conforms To Collective Will, And It Is The Carrier Of A People’s Historical And National Memory.

In Thessaloniki, Matters Have Evolved Differently In This Area, Due To Its Geopolitical Importance, Given That It Had Been For Decades (Until The Dissolution Of The Soviet Union And The Creation Of New States In The Balkans In The 1990s) At The Centre Of The Conflicts Between East And West And At The Heart Of The Cold War Climate Prevailing In This Period. Nationalisms Were Intense, Geographical Boundaries Were Challenged By Neighbouring Countries, The Peoples’ National Identities Were Emerging, Claims Over Territories Were Endless, Social Cohesion Was Often Put To The Test, Ideological Conflicts Were Part Of Everyday Life, Local Authorities Were “Obeying” International Political Conveniences, And Peace Was A Fragile Value Which Had Been Put On Hold (*History Of The Greek Nation*, V. Ist’, 2000, p.158 ff).

Preserving Historical Memory Has Been One Of The Main Pursuits Of Greek Governments And Part And Parcel Of Their Strategy. It Is, Therefore, Not Fortuitous That The First Public Monuments In The City Of Thessaloniki, A City That Constitutes The Political And Economic Centre Of Greek Macedonia, Would Be Destined To Support Pursuits Having A Nationalistic Connotation. Consequently, They Referred To Heroes From The Past, Such As King Philip II Of Macedon And Alexander The Great, Important Historical Personalities, Such As The Philosopher Aristotle, Together With More Recent Political Figures, Such As King Constantine I Of Greece And Eleftherios Venizelos, Among The Principal Contributors Of The Liberation Of The City In 1912, As Well As Well-Known Fighters In The Macedonian Struggle Who Distinguished Themselves During The 1904-1908 Period, As Part Of The Eastern Question And The Macedonian Question.

Furthermore, The Language Chosen By The Artists Involved In Works Of This Type Had To Correspond To The “Horizon Of Expectation” Of A People In The Throes Of Challenges Relating Either To Their Geographic Area Or Their National Identity. Thus, The Artists’ Only Choice Was The Aesthetics Of Realism Together With An Idealistic Attitude Which Gave The Average Citizen The Possibility To Recognise The Figures Represented And Understand With Relative Ease The General Meaning And The Deeper Sense Of The Works. Any Deviation From This Principle Would Cause Strong Reactions. Abstraction Or Any Other Modern Expressive Or Morphological Choice Would Not Be Acceptable.

However, The Issue Was Not Only A Matter Of Aesthetics But Also A Matter Of Ideology. The Dominant Ideology Was Present Everywhere. It Determined The Timing For Producing The Works And The Location Where They Would Be Erected (For Example, In Periods Of Dictatorship Or National Passion Outbreaks), As Well As The Semantics Of The Sculptures Themselves. Here It Is Not The Visual Result *Per Se* Or The Aesthetics Of The Works That Is Under Discussion; On The Contrary, A Determinant Role Is Attributed To The Historical Context And The Ideological Environment In Which They Were Produced.

II. Open-Air Sculpture And Its Reception By The Public

According To Reception Theory, The Beholder Is Part Of The Artistic Creation, To The Extent That They Try To Understand The Internal Data Of A Work Of Art And Perceive The Atmosphere Surrounding Both Them And The Work (Kemp 1996, p. 203). The Object Of Aesthetic Perception Is To Study The Manner In Which A Work Of Art Is Represented In Space, Time, And Society. The Beholder’s Social Condition And Biases Play An Important Role In Perception And, Within Such Context, “Revival Of The Notion Of *Wholeness*, i.e. The Unity Of Historical Phenomena” Is A Necessary Condition (Kemp, *Ibid.*, p. 297).

A Public Sculpture Is By Definition A “Monument”, In The Sense That It Is Destined To Perpetuate An Idea, To Honour The Memory Of A Person, Or To Immortalise An Event, And, Therefore, It Has Both Historical And Artistic Value. These Two “Aspects” Of The Open-Air Sculpture Play A Determinant Role In Its Acceptance Or Rejection, Although It Is Not Certain Which “Aspect” Prevails Over The Other. Setting Aside Cases Where, For Reasons Of Aesthetics, Works Of Art Have Been Rejected By The Public, We Shall Consider Historical Monuments, Together With The Factual Data, The Historical And Societal Context, At The Initial Conditions Of Reception, In Terms Of Time, As Well As The “Reconfiguration Of All Those Forces That Affect, In A Substantive Manner, Certain Traits Of The Sculptural Form” (Papanikolaou 2005, p. 328).

Evidently, Public Sculptures Have A Distinct Function, Given That Access To Them Is Easy, And, Therefore, Those Works Which Are Destined To Serve As Memory Instruments Should Follow Unwritten Rules Relating To Political Equilibrium, Societal And Ideological Configurations, Geographical And National Objectives. All Over The World, There Have Been Many Instances Where, For Political Reasons, Famous Statues Have Been Entirely Destroyed Or Removed Or Have Suffered Acts Of Vandalism. In Greek Institutional History Of Art There Have Also Been Instances Where Statues, Made In A Modern Style By Acclaimed Sculptors, Were Not Accepted By Local Communities, Not Due To Their Aesthetics, But Because Of The Inability To Establish A “Communication Code” Between The Work And The Beholder (For Example, *Capetan Kottas* By Dimitris Kalamaras).

The Three “Emblematic” Sculptures Of Thessaloniki (*Alexander The Great, King Philip II Of Macedon, Aristotle*) Should Have Been Ready In 1965, But They Were Completed 25 Years Later (1990). They Refer To Three Historical Personalities Related To Ancient Macedonia, And Their Historical Importance Outweighs Any Other Value. The Artists Had To Find The Communication Codes, i.e. The Public’s Horizon Of Expectation, Through Time, Given That The Region Of Thessaloniki And The Broader Geographical Area Had Lived Through Various Phases Of Escalation Of The Cold War Which Had Had A Direct Impact On The Citizens’ Emotions.

III. The Trilogy: Alexander The Great, King Philip II Of Macedon, Aristotle

Preparations, The Relevant Tenders, And Adjudication Of The Making Of The Statue Of Alexander The Great (Fig.1) To The Artist Had Taken Place During The Period Of Dictatorship (1967-1974). This Enormous Work Of Art, Representing The Young Alexander Riding His Horse, Voukefalas, Is The Biggest In Greece And It Was Made Of Bronze By Sculptor Evangelos Moustakas (1930) And Placed On The Seafront In Thessaloniki In 1974 (Panagiotakis 2014, p. 357). It Is One Of The Most Remarkable Statues Ever Erected In Greece. It Brings To Mind The Plastic Sculptural Compositions Of The Ancient Roman Period And The European Baroque. However, Its Influences Are Less Remote, Actually Originating From Socialist Realism, An Artistic Movement Launched In Soviet Russia In 1932. Socialist Realism Was An Anti-Modernistic Movement Aimed At Promoting The “Values” Of The Soviet Regime. Heroification Of Persons Could Not Be Achieved By Conventional Artistic Means, But Through Morphological Choices Which Would Suggest That The Figures/Models Will Remain Unaltered Through Time (Bown 1998). This Sculptural Composition Is A Carrier Of Historical Memory, Mostly Due To The Strength Of Its Public Nature, So That Any Deviation From Standards Would Constitute A Violation Of Unwritten Rules, Which, For The Most Part, Are Related To The Ideological And Societal Context Of A Particular Era. The Sad Fate Of Monuments Which, Upon The Change Of Political And Ideological Regimes, Have Been Either Destroyed Or Vandalised, Is Well Known.

Socialist Realism Had Found Fertile Ground In Greece In The 1950s, Due To The Influence Exerted By The Left On Part Of The Country’s Artists (Kyriazopoulos 1977). In Any Event, It Is Certain That The Ideological Purposes Of The Dominant Authority Were Served In The Best Possible Manner Through This Particular Work. The Beholder Is Impressed By The Grandeur Of The Sculptural Composition And Its Dominance In Space, Given That Both Horse And Rider Appear Like Supernatural Presences. This Language Of Realism With Tendencies To Idealistic Elevation Was The One That Corresponded To The Horizon Of Expectation Of The General Public.

At This Point, It Is Worth Noting The Effort Of Another Sculptor, Dimitris Kalamaras (1924-1997), To Make In 1993 The Equestrian Statue Of Alexander The Great And Take Part In International Exhibitions (Fig.2). The Sculptor Made The Work’s Cast In View Of Having It Moulded In Bronze. However, The Work Was Not Accepted By The Municipality Of Florina, Which Was To Be The Recipient Of The Work. The Main Reason For Its Rejection Was The Artist’s Stylistic Choices, Which Were Not Deemed To Be The Most Appropriate To Render The Personality Of The Man. Kalamaras Had Rendered The Composition (Horse And Rider) In A Cubistic Manner, Almost Anonymously, Not Allowing The Beholder To Recognise The Person Represented, Who Had Been Elevated To The Sphere Of Legend By Popular Imagination.

The Work Was Never Moulded According To The Artist’s Original Specifications (Tsiehla 2019, pp. 298-300).

In A Period Of International Agitation Surrounding The Creation Of New States In The Balkans And The Name Of The Fyrom (Currently North Macedonia), And In The Aftermath Of The Findings In The Royal Tombs Of The Macedonian Kings In Vergina (In Greek Macedonia), The Greek Government Decided To Task Sculptor Giorgos Nikolaidis (1924-2001) With Making The Brass Statue Of King Philip II Of Macedon (Fig.3), Whose Royal Tomb Had Been Discovered By Archaeologist Professor Manolis Andronikos In 1977. The Statue Was Erected In Thessaloniki In 1994 Close To The Seafront (On A Side Street) And, In Any Event, Not Far From The Statue Of Alexander The Great. King Philip II Of Macedon Had Been The Undefeated Head Of A State. Historians Describe Him As One Of The Most Courageous Army Leaders (He Had Succeeded In Expanding His Kingdom In An Impressive Manner), And He Can Be Recognised By The Wounds He Bore. He Was One-Eyed And Lame. Sculptor Nikolaidis Represented Him Like A Veteran Solder, Without His Helmet And His Weapons, The Wound In Its Right Eye Being Obvious. The Pedestal Of The Statue Is Rather Low For An Army Leader And The Height Of Figure Represented Is Normal, Not Attracting The Attention Of The Passer-By/Beholder. The Sculpture Has Received A Lot Of Negative Reviews, Because Of The Lack Of Majesty And Impressiveness That Would Befit The Last King Of Ancient Macedonia. The Work Has Also Been Criticised For Historical Inaccuracies, But Mostly For Portraying A “Miserable Warrior”, Although It Is Well Known That King Philip Always Fought On Horseback (Faklaris 2000). Mayor Of Thessaloniki, Giannis Boutaris, Was Among Those Who Publicly Expressed Their Disagreement Towards The Statue Of King Philip By Making Reference To A “Tasteless Work” Which Should Be Removed From Its Location (Boutaris, Cited In *Lifo.gr* 2014). The Public Has Never Had A Friendly Attitude Towards This Statue And This Is Why No Unveiling Ceremony Was Ever Held And The Location Where It Was Placed Is Not The One Originally Envisaged (Panagiotakis 2014, p. 45 ff).

In 1990, The Bronze Statue Of Aristotle Was Completed And Placed In The Square Bearing His Name, In The Centre Of The City, On A Side Street And Not At A Central Sport, For Reasons That Will Be Explained Below. Aristotle, The Great Philosopher Of Antiquity, Originated From An Adjacent Region, Stagira, In Chalkidiki, And Had Been The Teacher Of Alexander The Great. Therefore, Associations Were Strong And They Related To Both The Macedonian Royal Family And The City Of Thessaloniki As Capital Of Modern-Day Greek Macedonia.

The Crafting Of The Greek Philosopher’s Statue Was Entrusted To Sculptor Giorgos Georgiadis, Who Made A Monument Representing An Ordinary Teacher Showing An Everyday School-Like Behaviour (Fig.4). Indeed, Due To The Expressionistic Language Habitually Used By The Artist In His Sculptures, He Deformed The Lower Limbs Of The Sculpture And Assembled Together The Other Parts Of The Body In A Disharmonious Manner. The Only Part Of The Statue That Brings To Mind The Stagirite Philosopher Is The Head, For Which The Artist Used As A Model The Portrait Bust Of Aristotle In The Kunsthistorisches Museum, In Vienna. This Is A Roman Copy, Which, According To Archaeologists, Is The Most Faithful Representation Of The Philosopher, Probably Based On An Original Statue By Sculptor Lysippos (370-305 Ad) (Voutyras 1987, P.P. 179-185; Mylona 1987, p. 373). The Figurative Likeliness Of The Vienna Portrait To Aristotle Has Also Been Confirmed Following The Discovery Of A Marble Portrait, The Only Existing Portrait Of The Ancient Philosopher, During The Construction Works For The New Acropolis Museum In Athens. According To Alkistis Horemi, Curator Of Antiquities At The Acropolis, “This Portrait Is The Only One Representing Its Nose With The Curvature Mentioned In Sources, Whereas The Rendering, In Relief, Of The Individual Traits Of His Face, As Well As The Curls Of His Hair And His Beard, Is Unique, As Is The Degree Of Preservation Thereof” (Horemi Cited In *Kathimerini* 2006).

The Philosopher Is Represented Holding A Parchment And Seated On A Low Marble Pedestal, On The Edge Of A Pedestrian Street, In The Most Bustling Square Of The City. In This Sculpture, In Both Aesthetic And Concept Terms, The Philosopher Does Not Maintain Any Of The Attributes Of His Great And Intertemporal Teaching; Instead, He Is Represented As An Ordinary Teacher, In A Familiar And Friendly Manner. Nevertheless, In Conformity With The Artist’s Expressionistic Style, The Work’s Morphological Features Have Been Deformed To A Certain Degree, So That The Whole Sculpture Appears To Be Bizarre And Weird.

Aristotle’s Head Is The Only Realistic Part Of The Sculpture And, Therefore, It Appears To Be At Odds With The Rest Of His Body. Evidently, These Characteristics Of The Work Were Part Of The Sculptor’s Aesthetic

Choices, Aimed At Enhancing The Expressiveness Of The Person Represented, But They Do Not Correspond To The Horizon Of Expectation Of The Public Who Wanted To See The Ancient Philosopher As An Imposing Figure, With Strong Intellectual Features, Inspiring Absolute Respect. The Sculpture Had Received Negative Treatment By The Press At The Time Of Its Erection, And Sentiments Have Not Changed Since In Today's Social Media (Maragkou 1989; Ioannou 1989).

IV. Conclusion

For The Reasons Explained Above, The Three Open-Air Sculptures Of Thessaloniki Have Been Points Of Reference For Political Change, Societal Transformation, As Well As The National Characteristics Of A Period Characterised By The Multitude Of Changes It Went Through. Public Reception Of These Works Has Been Linked To The Historical Context, Which Played A Considerable Part In Their Acceptance Or Rejection. It Is Now Well-Known That Works Of Art Of This Type Are Cultural Testimonies Of An Era, And The Manner In Which Historical And Artistic Values Are Appreciated Is A Parameter Determining The Function They Serve In Space And Time. National Objectives Vis-À-Vis The Neighbouring Former Communist Countries Had To Be Decisively Reflected In Works Of Art With Great Historical Weight That Undoubtedly Were Considered, At Least By Part Of The Public, To Be Expressions And Determining Factors Of National Identity. This Is Why It Was Necessary For The Visual Language Of The Sculptures To Be Understood By The General Public, While Also Expressing Values Linked To Its Perception About The Persons Represented And Reflecting The Glorious Ancient Past. In This Regard, The Local Community Has Shown A Very Favourable Interest In The Statue Of Alexander The Great, But It Has Entirely Scorned The Statues Representing Philip Ii And Aristotle. Indeed, Discussions About Removal Of The Latter Are On-Going To This Day.

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Figures



Fig. 1 E. Moustakas, *Equestrian Statue Of Alexander The Great*, 1973, Bronze, H. 6m, Thessaloniki



Fig. 2 D. Kalamaras, *Equestrian Statue Of Alexander The Great*, 1993, Gilded Copper And Enamel, Florina



Fig. 3 G. Nikolaidis, *King Philip II Of Macedon*, 1994, Bronze, Thessaloniki



Fig. 4 G. Georgiadis, *Aristotle*, 1990, Thessaloniki