Efthimia Mavromichali

In this article I shall examine the history of representation of Athens as a capital of the modern Greek state during the first decades of the 20th century in order to show the ideological priorities of society at the time, the aesthetic preferences of the public as well as the artistic idiom of painters as manifested in the paintings themselves. It will also be revealed that due to the general political climate in Greek society, its delayed urbanisation and the need for strengthening and elevating national pride and identity after the Asia Minor catastrophe in 1922, Athens as an urban landscape is not to be found in the artists’ purposes and priorities.

It is well known that in recent times landscape has been understood more as a cultural instrument and less as an entity of concrete visible objects.1 This conception presupposes the principle that landscape is a means of exchange between man and his natural environment; that perceptions of landscape are formed through the mediation of the culture of a specific social group at a specific time.2 In this sense, a continuous transmission of procedures and messages from the culture of a community to its landscape can be observed.3

Within this framework, as open and collective places of communication and social activity, urban areas are of considerable interest to the researcher because they rearrange the network of social relations, economic functions, the political system and cultural practices. Thus within the urban web, landscape can be examined from various aspects and most certainly through its depiction in art.4

In this article we shall look into the history of the representation of Athens in art as an urban landscape at the start of the 20th century. Moreover, we shall examine

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1 Andrews, 1999:15.
2 Mitcel, 1994:5.
3 For the concept of cultural landscape see the pioneering work of Carl Sauer, 1925:19–54.
4 See Terkenli, 1996:59.
the important issues of identity and national orientation which are connected with the pictorial representation of Athens and which are an integral part of all the various meanings hidden in it. Thus we are provided with the potential to detect the ideological priorities of the contemporary society or the preferences of art-lovers. At the same time, the paintings themselves testify to the representational research of their creators and, in general to their artistic will.

In the brief historical course of Athens as a capital of the newly established Greek state in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, its urban landscape took shape especially after 1880 when the rhythms of urbanisation were intensified by Kharilaos Trikoupis’ government. The urban accumulation expanded, the city’s population almost doubled, from 65,000 in 1879 to 150,000 in 1907, whereas the influx and establishment of rich Greeks of the Diaspora produced social changes and, by extension, distinctive social differences. The upper middle class Greeks, along with the catalytic presence of the Diaspora Greeks created a social elite which was conscious of its social difference from the middle class strata of Greek society, although they were connected by the same model of progress and modernisation, that is “Europeanism”.

In that same period, the social differentiation of the suburbs of the city was stabilised. Using the palace as a point of reference, private mansions were constructed around Constitution (Syntagma) Square and generally, in the central parts of Athens. Furthermore, according to the city plan there was an effort to secure the city’s European colour following its central axis: a grand avenue in the style of a European boulevard. It was to start from Omonoia Square and reach the columns of Olympian Zeus, crossing along the avenues of Panepistemioi and Amalias. The avenue of Stadiou

For the long tradition in art of representing cities or segmented parts of urban areas, either as separate works or as a framework for the subject, see Kotides, 2000a:337–342.

Although a dusty village with 4000 inhabitants in the early 1830’s, Athens was chosen as a capital in 1834 because of her glorious past during the Periclean age and the emblematic presence of the dominating ruins of Akropolis. See Clogg, 1992:47, 50.

Kharilaos Trikoupis’ leading political figure in the second half of the 19th century initiated a period of modernisation in political life. See ibid.: 67.

For the national ideology of Europeanism which is identified with progress, see Skopetea, 1988:27, 44, 54. See also Agriantoni, 2000:186–87.

The first urban planning of Athens was designed in 1834 by the Greek architect Stamatios Kleanthis and the German Edouard Schaubert, having as its point of reference the area around the historical centre, that is of the ancient city, without a prospective for further expansion. One year later, the German architect Leo Von Klenze was asked to modify the original plan. His changes were critised as anachronistic and uninspired. He reduced the excavation area around the Akropolis, and curtailed the green areas and the wide boulevards. See Biris, 1966:23–34.

The most important buildings were constructed on the central axis of the city: the Palace with the National Park, the British Embassy, the building of the Archaeological Society, the Catholic Church, and, last but not least, the complex of three monuments, known as the Trilogy, the National Library, the university and the Academy of Athens. All three were designed in the Neoclassical style, which was the choice for the official architecture of the new state, thus making manifest, at this point, its cultural orientation towards the heritage of ancient Greece. See Politis, 1993:80–81.
was already called “The Boulevard”. Thus, a part of the urban web of the city which had a privileged relation with the palace was designated — with a deliberate perspective toward the western way of life and a growing air of cosmopolitanism, since many of its inhabitants had already lived in European centres.

The painter Pavlos Mathiopoulos (1876–1956) met the expectations of this upper middle class population. He was a student of Nikephoros Lytras. Following his basic studies in the School of Fine Arts in Athens, he continued his studies in the Académie Julian in Paris with B. Constant, J. P. Laurens and J. Lefebvre.

Mathiopoulos initiated the depiction of urban landscape with two characteristic works. In 1896, he painted the work Panepistimiou Avenue (pl. 1). The painting, composed of the huge road which looks like a square by the way it is framed with the pavement on the left, the trees on the right, the tram in the background, the lonely figures which move in opposite directions along the pavement, and especially the woman in the foreground, lost in her coat and hat, give the image of a unique and evanescent snapshot in a big city. As mentioned in Mathiopoulos’ time, the work reminds us more of a Parisian boulevard. The only motifs that give a hint of the urban centre of Athens are the university and the neobyzantine style Eye Hospital on the right. The light grey-blue gradations which predominate and cast a thin mist in the


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11 Nikephoros Lytras (1832–1904) appointed Professor in the School of Fine Arts from 1866 until his death, represents the maturity of 19th century Greek painting. His artistic idiom, based on the Academic principles of the Munich School, exerted a great influence in the development of Greek painting at the time. See Kotidis, 1995:263.
Mathiopoulos’ next work maintains this atmosphere and has a similar subject matter. *Queen Sophia Avenue after the rain* (pl. 2) provides us with a representation of the metropolis of Athens. However, the depiction of the city loses any statement of locality. The grand avenue with the ethereal female figure coming toward the viewer, the carriage which moves in the opposite direction toward the background, and even the section of the mansion on the right refer to a cosmopolitan urban centre, not necessarily specific to Athens. The impact of the work is clear in the periodical *Pinakothiki*: “The Athenian walk after the rain is all but Athenian. It is Parisian, no doubt. If someone, unfamiliar to Athens, looks at this picture, he will think Athens is more beautiful than Paris”.  

From a morphological point of view the work serves the purposes of the artist, to set an atmospheric moment more effectively. He incorporates colour with form, unifies the pictorial surface through the subtle use of tonal gradations – yellow – brown to orange along with dark green to light grey – blue. Thus, he succeeds in rendering the overall artistic effect through a more mature, impressionistic concept.

It is interesting to note that these works of Mathiopoulos, which borrowed the appearance and atmosphere of a Parisian boulevard for the upper middle class centre of Athens, were not well received by the wider public of art-lovers. The conservative periodical *Pinakothiki* stresses that the artist’s style “is intended to live only in high society”. Mathiopoulos himself was accused of being “the Parisian portraitist of the female Athenian aristocracy”. The critics of the day identified the artist’s style — which introduced the pursuits of impressionism into the Greek pictorial world — with the social elite to which it was addressed. It is obvious that there was an awareness of differentiation in the consciousness of the wider public from a compartmentalised social area with a different horizon of expectations. The urban landscape in Mathiopoulos’
works functions as a means of social self-awareness at least for a part of the Athenian population.\textsuperscript{15}

In Paris Mathiopoulos experienced the new momentum that landscape acquired from the mid 19th century. This was signaled by painting \textit{en plein air}, by the detailed observation of nature on the part of the painter under various atmospheric conditions and from different perspectives, thus initiating a new way of seeing things and nature.\textsuperscript{16}

This new impetus can and must be related to the urbanisation and industrialisation which created new cultural conditions and shaped the life of the metropolis.\textsuperscript{17} Paris, specifically, during the second half of 19th century, was transformed after the extended urban planning changes that Napoleon III brought about, and were materialised by Baron Haussmann in an era of great industrial and financial growth: the destruction of old buildings created new space for elegant neighborhoods and a network of grand avenues and wide roads.\textsuperscript{18} Numerous spacious parks decorated the city, providing green areas for public recreation as is appropriate for an urban metropolis. It was exactly this view of modernised Paris that Manet and the Impressionists represented in their works: Manet, by painting scenes from everyday life of Parisians in cafes, restaurants and theatres; Degas, by depicting scenes from men’s activities at the racecourses and the stock exchange; Monet, by providing views of the grand boulevards which show the renewed, elegant Paris in prosperous days. Many artists personally belonged to the upper middle class, whereas others introduced a new type of artist, the flaneur, who, as a well-dressed stroller, indulged in the observation of contemporary life.\textsuperscript{19}

Mathiopoulos introduced this atmosphere of urban metropolis in Greece in the way it was represented in the views of Paris at the time. His two paintings obviously depended upon works like \textit{The Viscount Lepic and his daughters} by Edgar Degas (pl. 3)


\textsuperscript{16} Dabrowski, 2000:11–12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.: 23.
\textsuperscript{18} For the rapid development of the capitalist metropolis urban web, see Hobsbawn, 1997:317–320.


Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
or *A Parisian road, A rainy day* (pl. 4) by Gustave Caillebotte.\(^\text{20}\) Mathiopoulos’ selection of the viewpoint from which to depict his scenes, reminds us of the viewpoints of Paris taken by famous photographers, like Eugene Atget, (pl. 5) and Charles Marville (pl. 6) who, in their turn, influenced Impressionists.\(^\text{21}\)

The historical context in Greece however was not the same as that of Paris. Urbanisation followed slow rhythms in Greece which did not have the same infrastructure with other European countries.\(^\text{22}\) That is why Mathiopoulos’ two paintings appear to be one of a kind. They are not received by and do not exert any influence on other painters and moreover they do not correspond to the expectations of the wider public. Mathiopoulos was accused of “being dedicated to an artificial reality”. In the next year (1902) displeasure was expressed in a plain sentence: “Mr Mathiopoulos insists on painting Athens in the form of Paris.”\(^\text{23}\)

In the beginning of the 20th century, Greek society faced serious problems. The war of 1897 against Turkey revealed the weaknesses and deficiencies of the state in the most painful way. The unrealistic choices of the government within the framework of the ideology of the Great Idea (Megali Idea) proved a utopia.\(^\text{24}\)

Then a period of prolific introversion began. Intellectuals and scholars researched, studied and recorded the characteristics of Greek identity from both the distant as well as the more recent past, including research into the history of the middle ages, byzantine art and archaeology in their effort to strengthen national self-identity. Along with this, the demand for political reforms through the Goudi coup of the Military League in 1909, led to the most concrete effort ever undertaken in Greece for urban modernisation in all domains. This effort was undertaken by the government of Eleftherios Venizelos and created a climate of elevation of national consciousness which cultivated new expectations.\(^\text{25}\)

It was within these circumstances that modernism in painting was introduced in Greece. A group of artists, having Paris as their artistic point of reference, tried to find an outlet from the impasse that academism had created in Greece.\(^\text{26}\) They assimilated elements from symbolist art and post impressionistic tendencies in a fruitful fermentation, and received influences from Nabis, Cezanne and Fauvism.\(^\text{27}\)

These artists and their followers were neither interested in urban landscape nor in

\(^\text{20}\) Ibid.: 46, 191.  
\(^\text{22}\) Kokkinos, 2000:601.  
\(^\text{24}\) See Clogg, ibid.: 66, 70–71.  
\(^\text{25}\) Venizelos’ dynamic enterprise for the urban modernisation of the country according to the western model within the framework of capitalism and the liberal urban democracy. During the period 1910–1920 Venizelos’ political background was the ideology of the Great Idea (Megali Idea). See Mavrogordatos – Chatzieossif, (ed.) 1988:9–19.  
\(^\text{27}\) Ibid.
urban life of public places. Their predominant choice in subject matter was landscape, as was the case in the European currents they followed.

Thus, landscape, which represented the Greek landscape to a great extent, was identified with the avant garde. Athens, which was the biggest urban centre of the country, was also included into the wider landscape of Attica. It is notable that in the exhibition of the Greek Artists Association (24 May – 30 June 1915) 88 landscapes were displayed: 26 represented Attic landscapes and only two paintings depicted urban sections of the city and one of Piraeus.28

In one of his early works, entitled View of Athens from the Southwest, (pl. 7) Konstantinos Parthenis (1878–1967)29 expressed the new spirit in landscape. He rendered the physical subject area without details, devoid of any reference to the urban environment, presenting only the general topographic structure. He employed a fast and free brushstroke which enables the viewer to follow the procedure into the outcome. Parthenis used colour as a structural element and depicted the hills of Athens with soft curves. Only hints from his palette indicate the identity of the place and it is thus that he projected it to the viewer’s imagination. The predominant tonal gradations of blue manifest the artist’s purpose to be liberated from any element of realistic description, thus giving priority to a subjective vision of reality.

What is noteworthy is the fact that the artists who introduced modernism into Greek painting — and they found support and protection by the government of Venizelos, as innovators of Greek art — did not go far beyond the choices of the artists of the previous century when they represented Athens.30 They were not interested in the modern aspect of the city. They proffered views of the city, using its landscapes as a point of reference, most of the time in combination with its ancient monuments, specifically the Akropolis, and less commonly its Byzantine monuments.

Venizelos’ attempt, in 1923, for the replanning and rationalistic development of the urban area of Athens, as an indispensable part of urban modernisation, was

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28 See Exhibition Catalogue, Athens 1915:5, 6, 8.
29 See Mathiopoulou, 2009:216.
undermined under the pressure of the problem of refugees from Asia Minor\textsuperscript{31} who needed settlement, as well as the financially weak middle class. The solution embodied in implementation of the General Building Law, 1929, paved the way for the construction of big blocks of flats and caused a tremendous change to the city’s morphology. Thus, an air of nostalgia on the part of the artists can be easily detected in their choices to depict sections of the city which either remained picturesque or referred to past images of it, and, consequently, to such relations within the urban web of the city which were threatening to, or had already disappeared.

From this point of view the work The atelier (pl. 8) of Perikles Vyzantios (1893–1972) is very characteristic.\textsuperscript{32} He represents a neighbourhood of Plaka, the historical area under the Akropolis, where his studio was. Despite his fidelity to external reality, his treatment of colour and the composition show that the painting moves into the world of post-impressionistic tendencies.

Another work titled, Old Athens, (pl. 9) of Michael Axelos (1877–1965)\textsuperscript{33} expresses the same atmosphere. Since there was no intention for a realistic depiction, the subject is transformed into a series of simplified geometric forms which are softened by the pink pastel tonal gradations. The surface is unified and sends forth an intensely poetic atmosphere by combining an impressionistic concept of colour with a Cezannesque vision of external reality.

\textsuperscript{31} Cogg, ibid.: 95–98.
\textsuperscript{32} Vyzantios studied in the Julian Academy in Paris and assimilated the post-impressionistic artistic idiom. When he returned to Greece he occupied himself with landscape painting. See Mentzaphou, 2008:142–43.
\textsuperscript{33} Axelos studied in the School of Fine Arts in Athens and continued in Paris. He painted mainly landscapes, portraits and everyday life scenes. Stylistically he moved within the atmosphere both of impressionism and realism. See Missirli, 1993:137, 201.
The picturesque atmosphere of Athens is also represented in the drawings and wood-engravings of Likourgos Kojievinas (1897–1910),\textsuperscript{34} which are included in the book \textit{The Athens that goes away} published in 1933 in cooperation with Dimitrios Kambouroglou. Narrow streets in Plaka, the Anafiotika area and small picturesque houses at the foot of the Akropolis are depicted with an excellent technique and delicacy of line. The mass production of these works reveals an increased demand for these kinds of images and possibly an inclination to avoid the pressures of urban life.

This brief examination shows that, apart from Mathiopoulos, who was a unique case on the cusp of the two centuries, during the first three decades of the 20th century Athens, as an urban landscape, is not found to be one of the purposes and priorities of the artists. This is due, on the one hand, to purely artistic reasons. Greek painting was mature enough to pursue its disentanglement from realistic representation no earlier than at the end of 19th century. By that time, Impressionism had lost its first avant garde fervour. Besides, it seems that the materiality of the purely painterly nature of Impressionism did not attract Greek painters so much as Symbolist art whose idealistic elements corresponded more to their artistic background, heavily indebted to their classical heritage. Thus, Symbolist art became the predominant artistic tendency among the Greek artists during the first fifteen years of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{35} Along with it, the new landscape painting, as formulated by the post-impressionists, invaded the Greek artistic world and was assimilated by the innovators of Greek painting in the 1920’s and 1930’s. On the other hand, Greek artists’ priorities were not focused on urban landscape because of the general political climate in Greek society: its urbanisation progressed in slow and unstable rhythms and it was received by the intellectuals with a wavering attitude.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, the representation of cities more effectively manifests the artists’ interest in projecting their Greek identity through the depiction of emblematic monuments from all phases of Greek history, rather than focusing on everyday, contemporary life, in an effort to strengthen national confidence and pride after the tragic events which followed the 1922 rout of the Greek army in Asia Minor.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} Kojievinas was specialised in chalcography and book illustration in Paris. His work in engraving is distinguished for its unaffected compositions and the delicacy of its line. See ibid.: 211.


\textsuperscript{36} See Kokkinos, 2000:603–614, where he analyses the position of E. Roides, D. Vikelas, A. Oikonomos and N. Kazazis concerning the phenomenon of urban development.

\textsuperscript{37} The painter K. Maleas painted a series of landscapes from byzantine Salonika in order to promote its Greek identity after its liberation from the Turks, in 1914. See Kotidis, 2000b:88–91.
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