

## The “Generation of the 1930s” in Art: Cold War Cultural Politics and Modern Painting in Greece

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The myth of “greekness” served both as a formal and a conceptual frame for Greek modern art. From the initial references to the country’s landscape and the Athenian light to formal elements and subjects excerpted from Greek cultural history later, the quest for “greekness” had a decisive role in the formation of a local version of European modern art. Although modern Greek artists who opted for more cosmopolitan styles do exist (e.g., Yiorgos Bouzianis and Yannis Spyropoulos), particularly discussed and certainly more famous are those who belong to the so-called “Generation of the 1930s”.

This label primarily designates a group of modern Greek writers and poets, several of them of international reputation. Its use with reference to art describes not a group, but loosely associated modern artists (mainly painters), whose works share various features, such as anthropocentric subjects, references to byzantine and folk art, inspiration from Western European movements, and so on. But have they been equivalent to the celebrated literary “generation” and in which ways? Did they even belong to one “generation”? And if not, what was so appealing in appearing as one?

These artists never claimed the title “generation of the 1930s” for themselves, neither in the 1930s–40s nor later. They flourished mainly after 1945 and did not have a clearly stated or implied common mission, although some of them were closely associated to their literary peers (e.g., Fotis Kontoglou). Evgenios Matthiopoulos rejects altogether this taxonomic categorization. He points out that the collocation first appeared in the *Metapolitefsi* (i.e. after 1974) and that its construction does not follow the standards applied in literature. Further, even art historians and curators who use this labelling, have difficulties in deciding whom to include. Their choices range from Konstantinos Parthenis (1878–1967) to Yannis Moralis (1916–2009) or even younger. It seems reasonable to assume that they refer to a traceable trend in modern Greek art and not to a “generation”. This trend is described by Eleni Vakalo in the 1980s as the quest for “greekness”. For Antonis Kotidis, these artists elaborated on a peripheral version of modern art, drawing heavily on Greek “tradition.” Certainly, all researchers

agree that in the post-war period “greekness” and “tradition” acquired a new content, and it was then that this type of modern art became the canon, and actually branded modern Greek production.

Which were the special post-war conditions that favored for a modern art with references to local cultural elements? In this paper I discuss the conditions that made the existence of a “generation of the 1930s” in painting appealing and indeed compelling after World War II, when national identity was revisited. Stylistic choices in the early Cold War environment had to be attractive, both in Greece and abroad, as culture was growing in an antagonistic and media saturated environment. A local modernism with many references to “tradition” was celebrated as the long-awaited “synchronization” to the European standards, as a renewal of the contemporary production.