

A London locale for Hellenism

The privately run Hellenic Centre, a platform for Greek culture, celebrates its 15th anniversary

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At a time when culture is seen as playing a prominent role in global politics, a country's cultural policy becomes a compelling issue. Although the main responsibility for drawing up and implementing a strategy aimed at promoting and "exporting" culture lies with the state, it is often the case that private initiatives voluntarily accept the burden and fill in the gaps left by the often insufficient state-driven efforts.

London's Hellenic Centre, an institution that recently celebrated its 15th anniversary, is one of those examples of a privately run establishment that has helped to promote Hellenic culture (the culture of Greece and Cyprus) abroad. Nonprofit, nonpolitical, non-governmental and not funded by the state, the Hellenic Centre belongs to the Hellenic Community Trust and was established by a group of Greeks and Cypriots who wished to create a platform for Greek culture in the UK. The Hellenic Centre was founded as a charity in 1994.

Housed in an elegant four-story building in the heart of London's West End, the Hellenic Centre has a double purpose: It is a point of reference for the Greek and Cypriot community in London and also helps to promote an awareness of Greek culture to the non-Greek-speaking population. The focus is on culture and the arts, tradition, history and language (educational programs are part of its activity) yet the Hellenic Centre also extends its activities into other domains by hosting lectures or events on such diverse fields such as science, politics or finance. Historians Mark Mazower and Konstantinos Svolopoulos, professor of political history



Agatha Kalisperas, director of the Hellenic Centre in London since 1997.

Thanos Veremis, writer Panos Karnezis and scholar Roderick Beaton are among the numerous personalities who have been invited to lecture at the Hellenic Centre.

Although active for 15 years, the Hellenic Centre, which is currently the only active privately run institution on Hellenic culture – maintains a low profile. So does its director Agatha Kalisperas, a Cypriot expatriate with a background in psychology and director of the Hellenic Centre since 1997.

"The fact that we are independent of state funding gives us a freedom and autonomy in matters of decision," Kalisperas told Kathimerini English Edition.

Its funds come from donations, subsidies, renting out the space to conferences (only during the short breaks that the center does not hold its own events) and the Hellenic Cen-

tre's educational programs. "The language courses have been very successful. In the beginning, we had low attendance but now the interest has grown to the extent that we will also begin Ancient Greek language courses."

One of the objectives of the Hellenic Centre is to preserve and make known aspects of the Hellenic tradition not as folklore but as living aspects of a culture. An example are the events that will be organized on the occasion of the Greek Carnival season.

Cultural exchanges and collaborations with various museums and reputable institutions (for example, Kings College London, Cambridge, the Benaki Museum, the Leventis Municipal Museum in Nicosia and the Vories Museum) are another aspect of the Hellenic Centre's profile and an indication of its prestige. As is the fact that the Hellenic Cen-

tre has built up a network of 18 member societies (among them the Hellenic Foundation, the Hellenic Medical Society, the Lyceum of Greek Women and the Anglo-Hellenic League) whose activities are hosted at the Hellenic Centre's premises.

Examples of collaborations with well-known institutions include "Greek Embroidery, 17th to 19th Century," an exhibition on the collections of the Benaki Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. That exhibition was held in 2006.

Another joint exhibition is scheduled for 2012 on the occasion of the London Olympic Games. It is planned as a large presentation drawing from the Benaki Museum's photographic archives.

Other exhibitions on a smaller scale give young artists – Greek and Cypriot artists as well as artists whose work is somehow related to Hellenism – the opportunity to show their work in the culturally chic city of London. Thirty young artists have shown their work at the center over the past two years.

Plans for the near future include a host of events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Cyprus's independence.

Varied in its program, the Hellenic Centre is a place for exchanging ideas and delving into the culture of Greece and Cyprus. It helps to define the distinctive aspects of a specific culture against the background of a multicultural world while also creating cross-cultural dialogue. Acting somewhat like an "ambassador" for Greek culture abroad, it sets itself noteworthy objectives which it reaches with a sense of purpose and strong will.

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