Q&A: NATASHA LEMOS

The co-curator of The Hellenic Centre's new exhibition on a famous collection of paintings from the Greek War of Independence, part of a wider celebration of the bicentenary of the revolution

In 1821, a series of revolts broke out around Greece, aimed at ending the Ottoman Empire's 400-year rule. After years of insurgency, and some messy internal fighting between opposing rebel groups, the tide was turned by the intervention of Britain, France and Russia, whose collective muscle led to the declaration in 1830 of an independent Greek state under their protection. Two years later, this was recognised by the Turkish sultan.

To mark the bicentenary of the start of the War of Independence, The Hellenic Centre is exhibiting 12 iconic lithographs of scenes from the conflict, which were commissioned and vividly captioned by one of its heroes, General Yannis Makriyannis.

Q: What was the origin of these paintings?
A: During the war, they were lots of disputes between different warlords and the provisional government. After the war, Makriyannis decided to write his own version of events. What is interesting is that he was illiterate. He taught himself to write phonetically, ignoring proper spelling, enough that he could record his story in his own words. Later, he decided to also depict this in images.

Q: Who created them?
A: Initially Makriyannis wanted a western painter to produce scenes from the war, but he was not happy with the results. Instead, he commissioned a man from Sparta, an icon painter called Demetrios Zographos. Other than some wall paintings in Laconia that bear his signature, we don't know much about him. His style was very naïve and distinctly Greek, based on the Byzantine technique, which has no perspective. The materials he used, wood and tempera, were very traditional for icon painters. But Zographos was also a warrior, which is probably what appealed to Makriyannis. In the captions, Makriyannis points out once or twice that the painter is fighting in the scene. Between 1836 and 1839, Zographos created 25 paintings. With help from his two sons, he made four copies of the full set, which Makriyannis presented to the king of the new Greek state, King Otto, and to diplomats from the three protecting powers, Britain, France and Russia as gifts to their sovereign.

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Q: What happened to the paintings presented to Britain?
A: Queen Victoria's set is in the Royal Collection at Windsor. There is a letter written by the British minister in Athens, Sir Edward Lyons, to Lord Palmerston. He referred to Makriyannis as a "rough, uneducated but gallant soldier, and a good patriot" and told him that he was sending the paintings back to England on a war ship. Makriyannis wanted to "lay them at the feet of the respective sovereigns as offerings of his devotion and gratitude". Lyons warned: "They may be required to be looked over for there are some descriptions of impaling and other scenes which may not be desirable to bring under Her Majesty's view."

Q: Do we know what happened to the other sets?
A: We know nothing about the Russian and French ones. The set which was given to King Otto was taken back by Makriyannis because he wanted to follow the practice of the time by having it lithographed. He entrusted it to an artist, who took the paintings and disappeared. Everybody soon forgot about them, and about Makriyannis's writings. We hear nothing about his memoirs until 1901 when they were rediscovered in a terrible state. They were published for the first time in 1907, but didn't attract much attention.

Then in 1909, Joannes Gennadius, a Greek diplomat in London and a collector of Greek literature and art, saw that some pictures of the war of independence were being auctioned in Rome. They were almost certainly the set stolen from Makriyannis. He acquired them, and they are now in the Gennadius Library in Athens. In 1921, on the centenary of the war, Gennadius commissioned a photographer, Frédéric Boissonnas, to create 140 hand-coloured collotypes of the paintings. The collection we are showing is one of these.

Q: How are they considered now?
A: The Boissonnas copies sparked the interest of Greek modernists, who discovered Makriyannis's writings. The poet Giorgos Seferis announced that, along with Papadiamantis, Makriyannis was the best Greek prose writer, which is quite a statement, particularly about a man who was illiterate until late in his life. People started looking differently at Makriyannis's use of natural spoken Greek language. It is now considered of great importance. The paintings too began to be admired. Now, they are an important part of Greek culture. I was born and brought up in Greece, and they were something we all knew.

1821 VISIONS OF FREEDOM
UNTIL 30TH MARCH
The Helenic Centre
16-18 Paddington Street, W1U 5AS
helleniccentre.org

1. Siege of the Acropolis by Demetrios Zographos, The Hellenic Centre
2. Solomon's Knot, Wigmore Hall
3. Hurry Up, We are Dreaming by Rui Matsunaga, Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation

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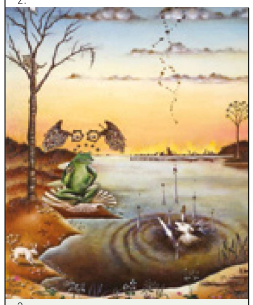

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EXHIBITION

Rui Matsunaga's colourful etchings of mythic scenes bring to life the belief system known as animism, which contends that animals, plants and objects all possess their own distinct spiritual essence.

UNTIL 26th NOVEMBER
RUI MATSUNAGA: THE MYTH OF SURVIVAL
Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation
13-14 Cornwall Terrace, NW1 4QP
dajf.org.uk

EXHIBITION
UNTIL 17 DECEMBER
TREASURES OF THE RSM
The Royal Society of Medicine Library
1 Wimpole Street, W1G 0AE
rsm.ac.uk/the-library

A free exhibition of medical treasures, including the earliest printed textbook for midwives, William Harvey's exceptionally rare De Motu Cordis (1628), and items signed by Charles Darwin, Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale.

MUSIC
20 DECEMBER, 7.30pm
SOLOMON'S KNOT
Wigmore Hall
36 Wigmore Street, W1U 2BP
wigmore-hall.org.uk

Four cantatas from Bach's Christmas Oratorio, performed by the adventurous Solomon's Knot, a London-based collective who've made a name for their powerful interpretations of pre-1800 repertoire, played without a conductor and mainly from memory.