

THE NUMISMATIC MUSEUM OF ATHENS

The Numismatic Museum of Athens has both a glorious past and a dynamic present. As the new millennium approaches, the Museum is also eager for change and novelty on top of its traditional roles of preserving the heritage and promoting research in numismatics, sigillography, etc. Following the resolution of certain matters it has recently been able to celebrate the official opening of its new installation. At long last it now has a suitable place of its own, where it can meet the needs of the present and fulfil the dreams of the future for many years to come.

On 11th December 1998 this new era was inaugurated with the opening of the new exhibition of the Numismatic Museum in the illustrious building, in the “Iliou Melathron” (the so-called “Trojan Mansion”), one of the most eminent buildings in the centre of Athens, the famous Schliemann Residence.

The Numismatic Museum of Athens possesses about 600,000 coins which come from the ancient Hellenic world, the Roman period, Byzantium, the medieval European West and the modern world, as well as a large number of hoards, excavation finds, lead seals, medals and gems (acquired by purchases, donations, confiscations, etc.). This makes the Museum one of the very few of its kind all over the world and the only one in Greece (its history beginning in 1829⁽¹⁾) and the Balkans. Like another Ark of the Covenant, the keepers and curators of the Athens Numismatic Museum carried and preserved in other places the cultural heritage entrusted to them for almost seventeen decades until today, when the promised land has finally been reached.

The construction of the “Iliou Melathron” begun in 1870, a few years after Heinrich Schliemann – zealous dilettante, self-taught scholar and archaeologist, but most of all restless adventurer and person extraordinaire – had settled in Athens. The building was designed by his German compatriot Ernst Ziller, who chose an architectural style of the Italian Renaissance, which he adapted to the mature neoclassical spirit of the times. The principal feature of the mansion is probably the façade onto the El. Venizelou (Panepistimiou) Street with the two roofed verandas whose columns and arcades add grace to the structure and relieve its bulk. The tessellated floors of the ground level and of the upper storeys, which depict geometric motifs and representations of artefacts coming from the excavations of Mycenae and Troy, were executed by Italian mosaicists. The wall- and ceiling-paintings, works of the Slovenian artist Yuri Subic, are either exact copies of Pompeian themes or illustrations of Schliemann’s excavations and finds in the same style. The terracotta statues which once embellished the parapet of the roof and the garden were chosen by Schliemann himself, as was the furniture of the mansion, for which orders had been placed with firms in London, Vienna and other European cities. The inauguration of

the Schliemann Residence on 30th January 1881 was celebrated with a brilliant reception. By that time its construction had cost 439,650 Greek drachmas.

The new exhibition of the Athens Numismatic Museum was specifically designed to be in tune with the building, consciously paying respect to its unique inner arrangement and decoration. Great care was taken to use the proper showcases for the coins, artefacts and other objects, alongside transparent plexiglass boards for the explanatory texts, so that the mansion's aesthetic is not affected. The exhibition area is supported with a number of touchscreens on which there is a digital presentation of the exhibition, while the public can also have access to a special Multimedia Room where similar events are presented. For the moment the exhibition runs only through the first floor of the "Iliou Melathron".

The first room of the exhibition – properly called the "Schliemann Hall" – is right after the Museum Shop, and is dedicated to the former owner of the mansion, mainly highlighting his coin collection, while at the same time paying homage to the architect of the "Iliou Melathron" and to the building itself. The next exhibition room deals generally with the development and use of currency from pre-coinage money and the invention of coinage to Modern-Age money. Several topics are presented, such as coinage as historical source, metals, techniques and coin production, names of ancient Hellenic coins, the extent of ancient Greek coinage, etc. Characteristic examples of coin hoards are also displayed, with appropriate documentation for understanding them. In the next room the thematic approach is focussed on coin production and circulation: the coinage of Athens, the coinage of Alexander the Great, coin circulation in an ancient Greek sanctuary, the coinages of the Hellenic colonies (in Magna Graecia, Asia Minor, etc.), as well as coinages of the ancient Hellenic leagues and alliances. Coin iconography is the subject of the next room, with an emphasis on portraits, sculptures, mythological themes, buildings and architectural complexes, fauna and flora. Finally, in the last two rooms visitors can view a number of documents and objects associated with the history of the Athens Numismatic Museum, and a selection of the most significant coin collections and donations acquired in the Museum, consisting of ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine coins, medieval and modern medals, as well as ancient gems. It is expected that in the near future the exhibition will be expanded into the second floor too, where it is intended to focus on the thematic presentation of the Roman, Byzantine (or Medieval) and Modern periods of coinage.

The Numismatic Museum of Athens is actively engaged both in research and information technology. This task is greatly assisted by a very rich library of about 12,000 volumes (mainly covering numismatics, history and sigillography) and by a well-equipped laboratory for the conservation of metallic objects. The Museum also has a very interesting archive of documents, which dates from the time of its

foundation and which, if properly exploited, can constitute a valuable source for approaching the history of Hellenism, as well as the phenomenon of benefaction, during the modern period.

One of the major goals of the Museum is, of course, to enrich constantly its collections with new acquisitions, rare coins and coin hoards. Notable progress can be observed in this field during the last years, mainly as a result of purchases of coins in foreign auctions (facilitated by funds provided by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, as well as by donors and organizations). A series of benefactors and donors contributed decisively to the formation of the Museum's collections, already from the early 19th century, when the Greeks sought through the memories of a glorious past to achieve self-consciousness and eventually throw off the Ottoman yoke of slavery. The same trend (*i.e.* the creation of significant coin collections, which later were donated to our Museum) was continued throughout the 19th and the 20th century, usually in association of their owners' expectations of the fate of the newly-founded Greek state. We should at least mention some of these benefactors, such as the Zosimas Brothers from Epirus, A. Soutzos from Constantinople, I. Demetriou from Lemnos, the Zarifis Brothers, the Countess Louise Riancourt, C. Carapanos, D. Tzivanopoulos, G. Empedocles, the Kantas Family. Generous offers of this kind continued today, with the most remarkable example of an anonymous donor who recently purchased for the Athens Numismatic Museum a very rare and expensive Athenian decadrachm.

The activities and the aims of the Museum include the promotion of both conventional and multimedia publications⁽²⁾, the production of collectibles (copies) and the organization of lectures and congresses, together of course with the continuation and implementation of the thorough recording in digitized form of all the Museum's possessions (library books, coin hoards, groups of coins from excavations and confiscations, groups of conserved coins, groups of coins by year of acquisition, etc.), as well as its analytical presentation to the public with the use of modern methods and media.

The Numismatic Museum has a considerable experience in undertaking major research- or information-orientated projects funded by national or international organizations. Such projects, conducted during the last years, are listed below:

1. *"Presveis" Project (Raphael Programme)*

A three-year cooperative project (1996-1998) between the Athens Numismatic Museum (project leader) and the Department of Coins and Medals of the British Museum (UK), funded by the European Commission (DG-X) and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. The project led to the eventual development of a web site, a virtual exhibition on the Internet (URL: <http://www.culture.gr/nm/presveis/>), in which

several attempts of using common coinage from Antiquity to the Modern Age are presented to the public both in texts and images.

2. *“Dracma” Project (Raphael Programme)*

A two-year cooperative project (1997-1998) between the Department of Sciences of Antiquity of the University of Messina (Italy; project leader), the Athens Numismatic Museum and the Archaeological Service of Cyprus, funded by the European Commission (DG-X) and, partly, by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. The ultimate aim of the project is the development of a CD-Rom, in which appears an extensive presentation of ancient Hellenic coinage. This project is currently at the final stage.

3. *“Balkan Numismatic Crossroads: The Hoard Evidence” I*

A cooperative project (1996-1998) between the Athens Numismatic Museum (project leader) and the Archaeological Institute of Albania, funded by UNESCO and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. The principal aim of the project was to prompt the exchange of scientific information on an international level, concerning the coin circulation during Antiquity and the Middle Ages and based on the hoard evidence from the present-day areas of SW Greece and Albania. The whole project was realized with the creation of a specifically-designed database. Furthermore, it is anticipated that, in the near future, a conventional or multimedia publication will be released following a partial or overall revision of the project's object.

4. *“Composition and Origin of ancient silver coins of the era of Alexander the Great”*

A two-year cooperative project (1996-1997) between the Laboratory of Analytical and Environmental Chemistry of the Technical University of Crete (Greece; project leader), the ‘Democritus’ National Research Centre of Sciences (Greece) and the Athens Numismatic Museum, funded by the Hellenic General Secretariat of Research and Technology (P.E.N.E.D. Programme). A previous, analogous project had been funded by UNESCO (1984-1985). The 1996-1997 project was intended to study the elemental composition of a sample of silver coins which were issued in the name of the Macedonian kings Philip II and Alexander the Great and, hopefully, trace the origin of the metal used in the Macedonian mints of the early Hellenistic period. The processing of the project's collected data is still continued; the first results were presented recently in a scientific colloquium (Thessalonica, May 1998; forthcoming publication).

All in all it should be clear that the Numismatic Museum of Athens is greatly interested in the continuing to participate in projects which aim to strengthen the cooperation between foundations dealing with scientific research, trying at the same time to raise certain public awareness towards cultural heritage with the use of new

methods and ideas, mainly through the attractive medium of modern technology. Faithful to its own proud tradition and, hopefully, ready to exploit the possibilities presented in the bold, new era, the Athens Numismatic Museum wishes to maintain its multiple role during the next century.

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Notes

(1) For a previous, concise history - presentation of the Numismatic Museum of Athens see: Mando Oeconomides-Caramessini, "Musée Numismatique d' Athènes", Commission Internationale de Numismatique, *Compte rendu*, 29 (1982), p. 28-30.

(2) See, for instance, the recent publication: I. Touratsoglou *et al.*, *Coins and Numismatics*, Athens 1996 (Greek; English), which consists a neat guide to the exhibition of the Athens Numismatic Museum.