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May 27

AICA 83

TITLE:

IN THE RIVER OF HERACLEITUS, A ULYSSES IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY IN ART.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The title of my speech today is "In the river of Heracleitus, a Ulysses in search of a national and international identity in art".

Poetic symbolism put aside, this is an analysis of the parallel and often interwoven development of Greek national and international art.

"Panta rei" - everything flows, everything is perpetual change - was the universal motto of Greek philosopher Heracleitus in the 6th century B.C. The flow of centuries have proved him more than right in the history of human creativity. Yet within this ceaseless flow, this relentless change, which, Heracleitus contends, does not even permit one to step into the same river twice, there are, nevertheless, certain clearly discernible patterns that repeat themselves and which constitute the continuing thread of human history, linking the past with the living yet ever changing present.

One of the most persistent and recurrent patterns in the history of art and human creativity, you will agree, ladies and gentlemen, is the 'Ulysses Syndrome', the return of humanity and the Western world in particular back to Greece for spiritual and artistic guidance, inspiration and rejuvenation. Nobody can refute this irrefutable fact which is an endemic phenomenon of all ages in the history of art and western art in particular.

I am not, ladies and gentlemen, going to enter into the usual hair-splitting over the exact meaning of what is art, what is national versus international art, the role of art critics and art historians etc. Thousands of volumes have been and will be written on these subjects without a hope for a general agreement. If anything, everybody agrees to disagree. I do not have to refer you to the innumerable examples in the history of art when the greatest art critics and connoisseurs not only totally misunderstood the artistic merits of their own age but the excellence of some of the greatest artists of all times. Suffice the example of the French impressionists at the turn of our century. Even the sophisticated Athenians of the 5th century nearly ostracized the great Pericles and his architect Ictinus for building the Parthenon which they considered an expensive extravaganza. It is indeed fortunate that the artistic currents of the great river of Heracleitus are too powerful and irrepressible to be confined or directed by the whims of humanity or by the barriers of human oppinion and political pressures.

"Art is proof for freedom" it has been said. Let art flow forth untrampled and unchecked. It is the greatest crown of liberty and human dignity there is.

Returning now back to Greece and the Ulysses Syndrome, one of the most persistent questions asked is why and for what reason has Greece and its artistic achievements remained the permanent magnet for most art. No convincing answer has ever really been given and the Ulysses Syndrome is thus destined to remain one of the great mysteries in the history of human creativity. Both national and international art, it seems, are solidly

tied to the charriot of Greece, to varying degrees, as long as both national and international art live and flourish.

It really dazzles the human mind and confounds the imagination if you conceive, even for an instance, the splendor of the great panorama of human creativity, replenishing itself within the flow of time in the sacred springs of Greek mythology and culture. What luminous ages in art, what spectacular individual creations have not emerged from this repetitive pattern of the Ulysses Syndrome in the course of history!

The first sparkle of classical and Hellenistic art is already apparent as early as 800 A.D. in the great court of Charlemagne who was inspired by antiquity. Even during the so called Dark Ages of the 12th to the 14th centuries the flame of Greece flickered weakly yet steadily through the vaulted halls of Gothic and Romanesque Europe. This flicker of course burst forth eventually into the classical brilliance that enveloped the 15th and 16th centuries, the age of the Renaissance that continues to dazzle us even today. A cluster of radiant stars, outshining each other, filled our artistic firmament with immortality. Botticelli, Dürer, Raphael, Michelangelo, Dominico Theotokopoulo, Palladio, the Fontainebleau School, Primaticcio and so many others immortalized in their art the general nostalgia for the mythology, culture and art of Greece.

Unchecked, the classical spirit sweeps the 17th and 18th centuries as well, the ages of the Baroque and the Rococo respectively, and this despite the claim of both movements to originality and historical independence. Their special mannerism, however, is deeply rooted in the mythology, landscape and mood of classical Greece. The Ulysses Syndrome is carried to new

romantic heights by Caravaggio, Caracci, Bernini and Tieppolo in Italy, Ribera and Velasquez in Spain, while Rubens and Rembrandt carry the torch of Greece with monumental pathos and drama to the Lower Countries to the North. In France, Poussin, Watteau, Boucher and Frangonard languish dreamily in idyllic Arcadia, in the company of muses and cupids reliving the sweet sins of the ancient gods.

And as if, ladies and gentlemen, the conquests of the gods of Olympus were not sufficient up to the 18th century, surprisingly enough the 19th too, with hardly a fight, fell equally prey to their irresistible charm and authority. No wonder the 19th century has been called "Das Klassizistische Jahrhundert" (the classicist century), immortalized by Canova in Italy, Thorvaldsen in Denmark, Klenze in Germany, the Palladian architecture in England, to mention only a few examples.

Coming now to the 20th century, its true face is still not fully revealed. Who knows, we might still have surprises. Its early roots, however, in the great works of such giant originators and pace setters like Gericault, de Chirico, Maillol, Cezanne, Kokoschka, Picasso, despite their trend for abstraction, are fed by the Grecian spirit, as far as simplicity of forms and compositions is concerned.

The Ulysses Syndrome, ladies and gentlemen, appears thus to have survived up to our days as the most permanent pattern in the great flow of human artistic creativity. True enough, part of the same pattern is the recurrent reaction and opposition by national and international art to the Syndrome itself.

"Greece and always ancient Greece, never France! Never the 19th century! What a peculiar blindness!", wrote an exasperated French critic in the magazine 'L'Artiste' in 1831.

Yet bitter experience, throughout the ages, has shown that all efforts to break free from the Ulysses Syndrome, to liberalize and nationalize so to speak national and international art, ultimately proved catastrophic, especially in the history of Western art. Inevitably degeneration and decline set in. Whenever the ancient gods were removed from their pedestal they brought down with them the age or times that dared perform the sacrilege. Our times, alas, serve as a conclusive and tragic example. For it is generally agreed that on the eve of the 21st century and in our own fin du siècle, national and international art, with few exceptions, are steeped in one of the greatest crisis in their history. In its frantic search for a new identity, totally severed from the past, contemporary art from Drip Painting, Op Art, Geometric Abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, Hard Edge, Neo-Dada to Décollage, Hyperrealismus, Magic Realism, Socialist Realism, Personal Mythologies, Computer Art and much else appears to be dissipating itself in a maze of shallow and ephemeral experimentations which have led to a total impass. I will not be surprised if our own fin du siècle or the beginning of the 21st century will not be seeking the road back to Greece.

And why, ladies and gentlemen, worry or have a complex about it? The great Picasso is the most uninhibited of all when he admitted at the close of his sensational career that if one would jot down on paper all the roads he had traversed in art and connect them with an outline, the form would represent a Greek Minotaur. Picasso was obviously not afraid of the Minotaur nor did he require an Ariadne to lead him out of the labyrinth. He was content to

remain rooted in Greek soil. He had no worries over his Ulysses Syndrome. If anything it was this Syndrome that helped him reach the universal hall of fame.

Because of the unique role of Greek art in the destinies of international art (and with Greek art I do not mean strictly classical, as I shall point out very soon) contemporary Greek art is more closely interwoven with international art than any other national art I know. And this because most international art, as we have seen, is still sharing with national Greek art the same source for reference and inspiration. The great Ulysses Syndrome unites them both today as it has yesterday.

If international art has failed so far to cut its long ties with the Greek past, Greek national art has obviously no reason for doing so at all. Up to this very day it is tied to its own past with body and soul. Like Prometheus, who gave fire and light to humanity, Greek national art is inescapably bound to the granite foundations of Greece's shining history.

I think it is time, ladies and gentlemen, to examine closer and more historically this magic source of international inspiration.

Most people unfortunately are under the erroneous impression that the main and only contribution of Greece to international culture and art is the classical period. This constitutes, however, a great historical fallacy. They overlook the fact that Athens of the 5th century B.C., the so called classical age that still captivates us with its brilliance, is only a fleeting moment in the panorama of Greek art and culture, a mere 50 years

between the end of the Persian Wars in 480 B.C. and the start of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C. which spelled the end of the Greek city-state and the predominance of Athens.

The 'Greek miracle', as it has been called, is not just limited to the 'Golden Age' of the 5th century B.C. There are enormous cultural eras that have preceded and succeeded it. There is, for example, the brilliant pre--classical art and culture of the 6th century B.C., and before it the colourful Mycenean, Aegean and Minoan civilizations extending back to about 3000 B.C. All have in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, left their mark on international art of today.

Following the classical age, on the other hand, is the long period of Macedonian, Greek-Roman and Hellenistic cultures that did much in shaping the mood and spirit of contemporary man.

Christianity, influenced and influencing, reshaped and rekindled the Greek spirit into the artistic, religious and cultural brilliance of the Byzantine empire, which spreading eastwards and to the North shaped the artistic, religious and to a great extent cultural destinies of Russia and of Eastern Europe, and even reaching out to this beautiful country in the artistic tradition of the Finnish Orthodox Church.

The great beacon of Byzantium also illuminated for centuries Southern Italy, the Balkans and the whole Near East penetrating as far South as Ethiopia in Africa.

All the while however, through the flow of the milleniums, following a relatively independent and parallel course, the all embracing spirit of Greek folk art evolved, drawing colourful and substantial ingredients from ancient art and lore and from Byzantium, creating thus its own versatile character and artistic tradition. It is this folk art and culture which sustained Greece's national identity through the terrible burden of 400 years of Turkish occupation that started with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and ended with the Greek Revolution in 1821 that established modern Greece.

It is a total distortion of history, ladies and gentlemen, to believe that during the 400 years of Turkish rule the artistic spirit of Greece was stifled or choked. On the contrary it took up the banner of resistance and self-assertion creating a plethora of decorative and architectural arts that constitute today a mainstream in the artistic history of modern Greece. Some of the most beautiful and representative examples of this folk art are scattered like jewels all over Greece, churches, monasteries, Aegean island architecture, pottery, wood carvings, ceramics, mosaics, icons, paintings, handicrafts, all of which millions of visitors admire on their pilgrimage to Greece today.

Greek folk art, through the centuries, proved a major artistic influence throughout the Balkan peninsula, the Near East and the Mediterranean basin in general. It also serves today as the main source of inspiration not only to numerous Greek contemporary artists, but to many leading European and American artists as well, most of whom work or have worked in Greece.

We see thus, how through 400 years of Ottoman rule the Greek creative spirit survived, bloomed and conquered. By the 19th century the entire Turkish empire, administratively and culturally, was to a great extent in the hands of the Greeks, to the point in fact that Greece's leading historian at the time, Paparrigopoulos, seriously doubted the advisability and usefulness of the Greek revolution itself.

Greek folk art, in its spectacular spread and growth through diverse civilizations, seems to confirm the modern theory that folk art is ultimately the only art which is truly international and there is really no other art that can be defined as being national.

From our quick retrospective journey, ladies and gentlemen, with Ulysses and the Ulysses Syndrome as our guide through the Heracleitan flow of time, we see how national Greek art draws its inspiration and its raison d'être from three distinct historic sources and which give it, so to speak, its special "Greekness". They are, Classical and Hellenistic antiquity, the Byzantine era and folk art as it evolved through the centuries.

This special "Greekness", however, is not easy to define, because of the length and complexity of Greek history and the variety of styles emanating from these three artistic sources. All three vary radically from each other in form and content. While preclassical, classical and hellenistic art, for example, stressed a balance of form and content, in Byzantine art content was only important while folk art stressed a naive approach to reality. Contemporary Greek art and its artists cope dextrously and successfully with all three sources in a variety of personal styles and expressions.

True enough Greek artists of today have a certain difficulty in assimilating and unifying into a single characteristic art the stylistic diversions of these three sources. What fortunately has come to the rescue of many is the all pervasive light and landscape of Greece. It is the exceptional clarity of this light and the stark landscapes it illuminates that captivates us today as it has captivated friends and conquerors of Greece alike throughout the ages. To many it is this light also that holds the key to why so many brilliant civilizations sprang from the parched soil of Greece. Today it serves as the fourth source of inspiration to Greek art, the source that unites and permeates contemporary Greek art, giving it its special "Greekness".

We have thus seen how strong and multiple the bonds of national Greek art are with its national heritage. The Ulysses Syndrome serves as both the cross and the salvation on which contemporary Greek art is bound. The Syndrome has served contemporary Greek art very well. While many national arts are going through a phase of crisis or decline, Greek national art, especially painting and sculpture, are flourishing to an unprecedented degree. As a leading collector of contemporary Greek art, I can assure you I find it difficult, if not impossible, to follow all the new promising artists that appear every year. Neither has their Ulysses Syndrome in any way stifled their imagination, their individual styles or prevented them from exploring new directions in the international world of the avant-garde. Fortunately for Greek art the Ulysses Syndrome serves them well as a multiple source of inspiration, of rejuvenation and of national identity.

It is exactly this question of national identity which in younger countries with short histories becomes particularly vexing and disconcerting. I recall when working in Canada as a writer and art critic how this question seemed to haunt the artistic and literary circles of this dynamic country. Robertson Davies, one of Canada's leading literary figures, wrote about this problem recently thus: "Our national attitude towards literature and art is ambiguous. We ask gloomy questions about it: where is our great poet? when will our writers reveal our national identity? But when a book which is unmistakably about Canadians appears, it is greeted with some embarrassment. Our demand for a national literature is like an outcry for portrait painters in a country where nobody wants to be a sitter".

Of course in younger countries the near total freedom from the burden of the past and the continuous search for a national identity is in itself a refreshing source of creativity and experimentation. But the question is, as we have seen, where does this search ultimately lead to?

In Greece too, as with international art, contemporary artists try to break the bonds with the past and fully assimilate themselves with the various international schools. This is particularly understandable since most younger Greek artists study in Paris, New York and other international centres of art. Nevertheless, they are the exception to the rule. I doubt if they have a chance of ever fully succeeding.

As I mention in the introduction in the newly-published catalogue of the Vorres Museum, whether Greek artists stay in Greece, creating new concepts from their native rootstock, or live abroad where they are directly exposed

to powerful new currents and revolutionary experimental movements, Greek artists of today invariably keep the spark of their national identity alight, as their work clearly shows. For although they assimilate and interpret almost all the trends and "schools" of contemporary international art, they always retain those distinctive traits of "Greekness" that sets them apart from their fellow-artists in other countries. What is more, they always make us feel that we, too, are inseverably attached to the soil of Greece that is capable of absorbing all kinds of seeds, fertilizing them and giving them whatever scent and flavour it likes. This is what I regard as one of the outstanding qualities of the Greek spirit throughout the ages: its ability to receive, assimilate and transmute. This is something which, from my own personal observation, I have discerned in the work of contemporary Greek artists more clearly than anywhere else. As Greeks it makes us feel proud of our past, our present, and optimistic about our future.

Summing up the whole question of Greek national art today and its distinctive "Greekness", Greek art historian and critic Stelios Lydakis puts it as follows: "Those who can claim to be considered as truly Greek artists are the ones who, without being out of step with the age they live in (the time factor), do not ignore the tradition and background of their country (the local or environmental factor). That, after all, is their protective shell, and if they shed it they are, to all intents and purposes committing suicide".

Some contemporary Greek artists, of course, do try to commit suicide and some even succeed, figuratively speaking. Yet even this their success, if

success it can be called, can be judged as a direct consequence, however negative, of their Ulyses Syndrome.

Ironically enough the greatest challenge to the Ulysses Syndrome in Greece today comes not from the artists and the intelligentia but from the Greek public at large, the same public that through the centuries of wars and suffering had stubbornly upheld it. Enjoying an unprecedented post-war prosperity, yet basically undereducated, the Greek public, propelled by shallow materialism and a xenomania caused by ignorance, has set out unconsciously on an orgy of destruction in the superficial belief that whatever is foreign is fashionable and proper. As a result, villages, towns and cities are being haphazardly rebuilt, supposedly modernized, without respect to the past or the traditional. Worst to suffer from this destructive onslaught of a "nouveau riche" consumer society is the folk art and the neoclassic style represented mostly in traditional Greek architecture and interior design. Non regulated or illegal construction has also played havock with the historic Greek countryside. It has been said that Greece has suffered more destruction in the past fifty years than in all of its 5000 years of history!

The most tragic example of the destructive mania of the Greek public is today Athens itself. From a picturesque, neoclassic city of 400.000 before the war, the city has haphazardly grown into a cemented, non-descript monstrosity of approximately 4 million, which represents nearly half of the population of Greece. The city has also won the dubious distinction of

having been proclaimed the most polluted city of Europe, endangering its great historic monuments and the lives of its citizens. I am sure Pericles must be turning in his grave in utter disgust. Professor Constantine Trypanis, a former Greek Minister of Culture, once declared in Parliament that if drastic measures are not taken immediately, Athens and the rest of Greece will be unlivable by 2000 A.D. His prediction is alarmingly close to coming true. Many measures, in theory at least, are being taken by the authorities but they are slow to come and are proving insufficient.

Fortunately many individuals, local groups and cultural societies are coming to the rescue of what can still be saved from the treasure-trove of Greece's past.

It is primarily, I believe, a question of re-educating or rather of reminding the contemporary Greek public of its historic duty to itself and to the world as the guardian of a great civilization. The creation of the Vorres Museum of contemporary and traditional Greek art, open now to the public, is a small personal contribution towards this aim.

On the other hand, in all frankness, I begin to wonder whether trying to perpetuate the Ulysses Syndrome, this artistic dependence on a past, is not becoming futile and self-defeating especially in our times. It is in a way like trying to swim against the onslaught of a new Heracleitan tide. For this very moment, ladies and gentlemen, as we are gathered here today, one of the greatest achievements of mankind is taking place, passing, alas, nearly unnoticed. Yet it is certain to change the course of art and our own destinies radically. Pioneer 10, the tiny spacecraft, is now pushing towards the edge of the solar system, over two and a half billion miles

away, opening up the wonders of the universe to human comprehension. Will these immense new horizons prove the future magnet of all art? Will the grandeur of space and the exploration of the universe prove the Sword of Damocles that will finally cut the Gordian Knot of the Ulysses Syndrome? Or will human art, exhausted by the enormity before it, return humbly back to earth for solace and for rejuvenation? I am sure, ladies and gentlemen, not even the great Delphic oracle could have given an answer to these questions. Time alone will ultimately tell.

Returning back to earth and with the Ulysses Syndrome as our guide, we shall now view through coloured slides some highlights of the Greek artistic panorama with special emphasis on the buildings, interiors and collections of the Vorres Museum, which you are cordially invited to visit when you next come to Greece.

In ending, may I express my deep appreciation for the great honor of addressing you today, not as an authority on art but as a collector and lover of Greek art, who is doing his share to save and preserve something of the glory that was, is and hopefully will be Greece.

Thank you very much!