Imagery and Independence:

The Role of Images Relating to the Greek War of Independence

Belinda Casey

History 100
Professor Lagos
May 15, 2018
The time and place of when an artwork is created is crucial in understanding the art itself, and the works created in relation to the Greek War of Independence (1821-1827) depicted a variety of scenes that often sympathized and supported the Greek cause. The images of the Greek War of Independence tell a variety of stories—whether it was the great heroism of the Greek people fighting against their Ottoman oppressors, the heroic actions of Greece’s allies, or the tragic losses of war. Few artworks exist from Greek artists during the period of the war, therefore artists from countries such as Britain, France, and Russia—also Greece’s allies—provided positive support with their images of the Greek War of Independence. But the motivations for creating these works differed, therefore artworks created relating to the Greek War of Independence functioned to both support Greece’s fight, as well as promote social messages within the individual countries of Britain, France, and Russia as well.

The Beginning of Revolution

The Ottoman Empire arrived in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in 1453, slaughtering the people there and the Ottoman leader, Sultan Mehmed II, promptly established the city, and thus the Byzantine Empire, as his own. The oppression of the Greek people by the Ottoman Empire lasted for centuries, effectively stripping Greeks of their identity and relegating them to second class citizens for the first time in their history. By the beginning of the 19th century, the minorities of the Ottoman Empire had achieved some financial success, including some Greeks. This small group began to fund cultural institutions and from these institutions the displaced people of Greece were becoming reacquainted with their ancient history and culture, and a period of Enlightenment had begun. A group of Greek merchants, motivated by this period
of Enlightenment, established a secret group known as the *Filiki Eteria* or “Friendly Society” whose goal was to achieve Greek independence. But as revolution began for Greece in 1821, it would take years before the three Great Powers—Britain, France, and Russia—would intervene in assisting the Greek revolution.

**Utilizing Greek Antiquity**

As word had spread to Europe of the rebellion of the Greek people, the artistic community saw inspiration to both support the Greek fight for independence as well as honor the progeny of ancient Greece. This admiration for modern Greeks as descendants of their ancient ancestors was known as philhellenism, and began to gain support in Europe in the beginning of the 19th century. In works such as Revault’s *Rêveil de la Grèce* (1822; fig. 1), the French artist depicts a central, luminous figure as the female personification of Greece dressed in a flowing robe akin to that of ancient Greece, breaking free from the chains that held her captive.¹ Lying at the foot of Greece are the pieces of her ancient past—scrolls, a lyre, crumbled architectural ruins—as well as a standing temple in the background. Above Greece is a flying figure of Liberty, carrying a horn and wreath in one hand, and in the other a banner that reads “Stand up, gentle sons of the heroes” as a call to the men of Greece to save their country—both its past and its future.²

Ottoman soldiers are depicted in this print in two instances: a single soldier slain at the foot of Greece, and an army in the far left disappearing out of the frame as they are attempting to flee but being stopped by strikes of lightning, which could be read as a reference to the father of

---


Greek mythology, Zeus. The print is bordered with the words “Religion,” “Country,” “Glory,” and “Prosperity.” These words, along with the use of light on the figure of Greece and shadow on the Turkish solders, are specific attempts by Revault to invoke a particular response from viewers—sympathy for the revolutionaries of Greece, and loathing towards the Turks. By depicting the Ottomans so closely to the crumbled history of Greece’s glorious past (an important idea of the philhellenic movement) the Ottomans are seen as solely responsible for the decline of Greek civilization.³

The theme of including Greek antiquity continues in the work by English artist J.M.W. Turner’s *Tis Living Greece No More* (1822; fig. 2).⁴ This watercolor also depicts shackled figures clad in ancient dress like in Revault’s *Réveil de la Grèce*, but in this painting they are contemporary Greek people. As they lie forlorn against the rocks, over their shoulder is a shadowy Turkish soldier. In the background are more shadowed Turkish fighters charging on horseback towards the culturally significant hilltop of the Acropolis.⁵ Thus, the painting reiterates the notion that the Ottoman Empire are the oppressors and destroyers of Greek culture.

---


While both Revault’s print and Turner’s watercolor depict the oppression of the Greek people alongside the symbols of their ancient past, several artist chose to illustrate their admiration for the Greek people. One such artist was French painter Louis Dupré, who contributed many paintings depicting the Greek War of Independence as he was an admirer of Greece, and regarded as a philhellene and Orientalist painter. In his work *Fighter Nikolakis Mitropoulos raises the flag with the cross at Salona Fortress* (1825; fig. 3), a victorious Greek fighter proudly raises the flag of Salona over the corpse of an Ottoman soldier. Salona being one of the first regions to begin to revolt and succeed, taking back their fortress on March 27, 1821. The painting suggests both the philhellenism Dupré felt towards the Greeks, as well as a positive interpretation of the Greek fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Another artist who depicted figures from the Greek War of Independence and is considered a philhellene artists was the German artist Peter von Hess who depicted the Greek rebel turned politician Constantine Kanaris in his painting *Constantine Kanaris destroys by fire three Turkish ships of the line at Tchesme* (c. 1835; fig. 4). While not the official title, the caption is unnecessary as the purpose of the image is clear: the celebrated national hero and admiral of the Greek naval forces during the Greek War of Independence is shown succeeding in destroying three Turkish naval vessels. Von Hess chose one of the most well known fighters of the Greek War of Independence as a powerful subject to promote a strong idea of Greek nationalism that surrounded the war. Once again, classical artistic techniques of hierarchy of scale are used to clearly distinguish Kanaris as the most significant figure in the painting.

---

6 Louis Dupré, *Fighter Nikolakis Mitropoulos raises the flag with the cross at Salona Fortress*, 1825, Private, Greek National Historical Museum, Greece.

7 Peter von Hess, *Constantine Kanaris destroys by fire three Turkish ships of the line at Tchesme (From the Album of Greek Heroism)*, c.1835, Hulton Archive.
depicting him navigating his small vessel as the burning Turkish ships recede into the background. The obvious pride and heroic stance that von Hess chose to pose Kanaris reiterates the feelings that Greek people had for not only their own valiant fight for freedom, but also pride in one of the country’s greatest heroes.

Paintings as Social and Religious Messages

While the contributions that European artists and the philhellenic movement made to assist the Greek fight for independence are admirable, these artworks also served as vehicles for political, social, or religious messages that portrayed ideas more than just contempt towards the Ottoman Empire. Art as propaganda is one of the mediums many functions, but to utilize the suffering of the oppressed can have negative connotations. This includes works such as Eugène Delacroix’s *Scene of the Massacre at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery* (1824 Salon; fig. 5) which depicts the aftermath of the massacre on the island of Chios during the Greek War of Independence.⁸ There is an overall look of anguish from the figures in the image, each expressing an individual moment of suffering having survived the battle, but inevitable enslavement awaits them at the hands of the Turks. This painting is about the emotion of the Greek people, their individual suffering, and sense of hopelessness. Delacroix (and France, by and large) felt a great sympathy for the Greek people who were fighting so valiantly for their freedom, and yet Delacroix chose to depict a great loss that ended in suffering and slavery. And yet, the figures of the Greek people and their surrounding oppressors represent more than just slavery and death, but also civilization versus barbarity, and Christianity versus Islam.⁹

---

⁸ Eugène Delacroix, *Scene of the Massacre at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery*, 1824 Salon, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

⁹ Athanassoglou—Kallmyer, *French Images*, 34.
The French philhellenic movement reiterated the two opposing ideologies of Christianity and Islam present in the Greek War of Independence in their own political and social agendas. The French Liberalism movement of the 19th century utilized works such as the *Massacre at Chios* as a symbol of their own Liberal political agenda and Romantic revolution, for which they received much criticism.\(^{10}\) Perhaps the French Liberal movement felt such a connection towards works like Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* because it was reminiscent of an earlier French artist Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (c. 1818; fig. 6). Much like Delacroix's work, Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* is a chaotic group of people all desperate to escape their impending death on the remnants of their sunken ship.\(^{11}\) Both paintings have strong upward motion—in *Massacre at Chios* it is the Greek people crowded together while the horse of an Ottoman soldier rears behind them, and in *The Raft of the Medusa* it is the man desperately waving a flag from the top of the mound of bodies. The paintings also have similar backgrounds that depict the cause of the figures suffering— with the *Massacre at Chios* it is the Turkish soldiers massacring the Greeks, and in *The Raft of the Medusa* it is the savage ocean and imminent storm. In both works, the artists chose to depict famously horrific historical images to perhaps garner the most emotional reactions from their respective French Salon exhibitions.

Further religious themes were continued in images such as Ary Scheffer’s painting *Jeunes filles grecques implorant la protection de la Vierge pendant un combat* (c. 1827; fig. 7), which exists now in a print by Marin Lavigne, depicting a group of Greek women pleading at the

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 34—36.

feet of a shrine of the Virgin Mary inside a cave. As all the women desperately pray and plead for salvation, just outside the cave entrance is a chaotic battle. Scheffer was inspired by the poem by Henri Cros that described women and children seeking shelter from the cave and from prayer. Yet Scheffer’s depiction is more chaotic than the original poem, suggesting his motivation for the artwork came from the strong Christian religious views of the Liberal philhellenism of France, as well as a political message to the French government as the Greek war was coming to an end.

Nationalism After the War

By the morning of October 20, 1827, the Battle of Navarino had concluded the Greek fight for independence in favor of Greece. With the help of the Great Powers—Britain, France, and Russia—the Ottomans were defeated, and the Greeks were granted their freedom. With the war over, a period of restoration began in Greece, and a new generation had begun. The idea of nationalism was the strongest theme to continue beyond the war. Works such as Russian seascape artist Ivan Konstantinovich Aivazovsky’s *Brig Mercury, 1829* (c. 1839; fig. 8) illustrate a sole ship afloat in the vast ocean. The vessel, *Mercury,* was a Russian naval vessel utilized during the Greek War of Independence and is attributed with the successful destruction of two Turkish ships in a battle in 1829. In the painting, the vessel is the lone component of the image, emitting a strong sense of pride and strength as it recovers from its incredible victory over the Ottoman fleet.

---

12 Marin Lavigne (after Ary Scheffer), *Jeunes filles grecques implorant la protection de la Vierge pendant un combat*, Salon of 1827, Athens, Benaki Museum.


This commemoration of victories during the war continued in Greece itself as a new age of art was emerging that included celebrations of nationalism. One artist in particular, Panagiotis Zografos, is perhaps most well known for his images of famous battles from the Greek War of Independence. Zografos was commissioned by a general who served during the war to reproduce particular battles, including *Print after Siege of Athens*, 1827 (c. 1839; fig. 9).\(^{15}\) His works are described as “ naïve art” due to the literal fact that Zografos himself was not present during these battles, but also because of the non-traditional artistic techniques he used, including lack of coherent perspective and unique use of color.\(^{16}\) Nonetheless, Zografos represented some of the most famous and inspiring scenes from the Greek War of Independence, as well as Greece’s most iconic symbols such as the Acropolis, as a means of spreading a sense of nationalistic pride in the generation after the war who now know peace because of the bravery of their predecessors.

The artwork related to the Greek War of Independence served a variety of purposes for Greece, as well as countries such as Britain, France, and Russia, but each piece of art represented the heroism of those brave enough to fight for Greek independence. The art created about the war was not simply “art for art sake,” and instead served to support Greece’s daunting task against the Ottoman Empire. And while the purpose of these works differed from Greek nationalism to French politics, or Russian pride to European philhellenism, it can be argued that each image created both evoked sympathy for the Greeks as well as promoted significant social messages in the country’s of Greece allies.


Fig. 1. Revault, Réveil de la Grèce, 1822, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes.

Fig. 2. J. M. W. Turner, *'Tis Living Greece No More*, 1822, Athens, Museum of the City of Athens.
Fig. 3. Louis Dupré, *Fighter Nikolakis Mitropoulos raises the flag with the cross at Salona*

*Fortress*, 1825, Private, Greek National Historical Museum, Greece.
Fig. 4. Peter von Hess, *Constantine Kanaris destroys by fire three Turkish ships of the line at Tchesme (From the Album of Greek Heroism)*, c. 1835, Hulton Archive.
Fig. 5. Eugène Delacroix, *Scene of the Massacre at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery*, 1824 Salon, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 6. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, Salon of 1819, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 7. Marin Lavigne (after Ary Scheffer), *Jeunes filles grecques implorant la protection de la Vierge pendant un combat*, Salon of 1827, Athens, Benaki Museum.

Fig. 9. Panagiotis Zografos, *Print after Siege of Athens*, 1827, c. 1839. In Getty Images: https://www.gettyimages.com/license/534221032.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Delacroix, Eugène. *Scene of the Massacre at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery*. 1824 Salon. Oil on canvas. 164\" \times 139\". Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Dupré, Louis. *Fighter Nikolaos Mitropoulos raises the flag with the cross at Salona Fortress*. 1825. Greek National Historical Museum, Greece.

Hess, Peter von. *Constantine Kanaris destroys by fire three Turkish ships at Tchesme (From the Album of Greek Heroism)*. c. 1835. Private Collection.


Secondary Sources
