



# ARISTOTLE ONASSIS

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ARISTOTLE

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# ARISTOTLE ONASSIS METAMORPHOSIS

FROM A SERIES OF VISUAL ART EVENTS AROUND THE PERSONALITY AND OUVRE OF  
ARISTOTLE ONASSIS

A PROJECT BY NICOS CHARALAMBIDIS

The METAMORPHOSIS exhibition in Hydra belongs to a broader set of three-year activities, with main reference to the life and work of Aristotle Onassis. Over the course of then years the confidential files of the CIA and FBI which classified Onasis as a “a prime threat to the American national security “ have been declassified .The persona of the Greek mogul has been revisited and now when viewing him greater emphasis is placed on his the two-year research and educational program which preceded the exhibitions, as of 2017, additional information and data that outline unknown strategies and mechanisms of late modernism.

However, the choice for event activities to not be funded by foundations and other sponsors enables an unorthodox approach which is in direct contrast with academic thought and orthological treatment, that one would expect to dominate in such issues. What one commonly expects to see at an exhibition concerning Aristotle Onassis most often presupposes the cross referencing of other similar exhibitions which relate to an important personality of the arts and culture. As such one of the basic inquiries that arise through the processes of this event is self-evident: Do the mechanisms of contemporary society promote wealth on a cultural product as well as an artistic achievement?

The modular expansion of these activities and the spread of the main concept in many areas, as well as the exhibitions in various destinations and venues, both in Greece and abroad, emphasizing with their touring sense the universalism of Aristotle Onassis and the adventurous journey of this modern Odysseus, ends up in a large-scale international exhibition in New York where the Greek businessman is still a mythical person nowadays, linked to dozens of urban myths.

However, as in myths a simple stick is capable to transform Cinderellas into princesses and pumpkins into golden horse-carriages, in America, where Onassis resorted to as a refugee like many other immigrants, having the dream of a lifetime metamorphosis, the skillful stick of the fairytale turns out to be extremely intricate, demanding and complicated. As in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' (1915), the classic novella that has been set as an allegorical link and a main reference to the participants of this homonymous project, the protagonist , transformed into a huge insect realizes the complexity of various obstacles to overcome. His transformation requires, even for a single walk, a complicated co-ordination between his numerous legs in order to achieve the simplest movement! This seems to be a parable concerning the various interpretations, approaches, aspects and folds of Onassis's daedalic personality and therefore of the exhibition, but also of complex thinking-process in general, wherever applicable, requires extremely methodical work to achieve something which at first glance appears simple and effortless.



The complexity of the events, therefore, deliberately broadens the anticipated person-centered nature of an exhibition concerning Onassis, precisely because of the various issues that can be advanced: the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the modern Greece of refugees and the crisis, the dictatorship era, the architecture and the activities of the period, the tobacco crops and its trade, Maria Callas, music and the arts, politics, fashion, Olympic Airways as well as the Olympic Games. The thematic sections of the exhibitions are associated with corresponding references and citations to historical and archival elements related to the general action of the Greek mogul and its resonances on ecumenical Hellenism and the international community.

Important aspects of Aristotle Onassis's life and achievements, as well as other personalities associated with him, are in fact 'in state of dispute'. Therefore, the proposed events are triggered by the re-evaluation of archival material and its creative expansion by artists, from the perspectives of modern art. The passage of time, necessary to any credible evaluation, allows for a more distant view of the archives and an objective, more substantive reading, understanding and processing of historical and personal events, facts and conjunctions.

Hydra has been selected as the most appropriate venue for the first, introductory event, where the initiation of all gradually-structured activities will be announced. The unaltered, over the years, image of the island, contrasts with the title of the exhibition, despite the persistent efforts of many residents on transforming Hydra into a modernized tourist destination with motorways and hotel units, employing for exploitation as many parts of the island remain untouched until today.

The particularities of Hydra, made it the first Greek tourist destination to reflect internationally, the idyllic image of «Zorba the Greek». The rare photographic archive of the artist Pavlos Panteleakis, who served as a seventeen-year director of the School of Fine Arts in Hydra program (at the Tombazis mansion), will be presented at the exhibition, recording photographic snapshots that reveal hidden and unknown aspects of the island. The archival material, which will be the core of the exhibition, also records the frequent visits of Aristotle Onassis and his guests, international celebrities of the arts and the media, as well as people who have often defined global politics,

contributing significantly not only to the island to be known abroad as «Saint Tropez of Greece», but also to actively relate it with Hollywood.

The film «Boy on a Dolphin» will be the first American production in Greece, as well as the first film to be captured at Cinemascope 55 worldwide. Most of us have seen from time to time black and white photographs of this period, Sophia Loren and other stars posing on the picturesque harbor, overlooking the imposing mansion of admiral Manolis Tompazis, which today houses the annex of the Athens School of Fine Arts, venue of our exhibition.

Obviously, we all admire her melodious voice in the song, “What is this thing called love?”, but only few of us know that the voice of the legendary song was performed by Marni Nixon, a unique professional of that period who had the ability to transform her voice, enacting songs not only in different languages and styles but even in-local dialects, dubbing famous protagonists like Deborah Kerr at “The King And I”, Natalie Wood at “West Side Story” or Audrey Hepburn at “My Fair Lady”. The presence of nineteen-year-old Sophia Loren as the honored person of the exhibition gives further insights into the concept of transformation.

During same year, Elizabeth Taylor, was also one of Onassis' guests and, will be the first celebrity to decide buying a house in Hydra. Following, so do Françoise Picasso and the Canadian singer, songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, who was proclaimed an honorary citizen of Hydra after his death, living for decades at the house he bought on the island for just \$ 1,500 in the early 1960's.

This residential demand has been transferred to the opposite side, where the yacht ‘Christina’ was moored. Thus, in Porto Heli, other Onassis' guests bought houses, such as Sean Connery and the grandson of England's leader during World War II, Winston Churchill, who was almost a permanent guest in ‘Christina’ and «big fish» by Onassis, as he called him, thus emphasizing the importance of his guest in his global reach.

In the area, the famous photographer Manfred Rieker will build an enormous seaside mansion, later to be purchased by the successor and nowadays King of the Dutch throne, Willem-Alexander · besides this mansion lies the manor of the former King of Greece, Constantine. In the same royal neighborhood, we see today the retreat of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

An extremely important sign on the concept of transformation is provided by the six original Maria Sibylla Merian's works, which will be presented at the Hydra exhibition. Merian was a historic Dutch artist of the seventeenth century, devoted her life on observing and depicting images of natural phenomena's transformations concerning the world of insects, such as the metamorphosis of the silkworm into a butterfly.

Her groundbreaking character and her risky voyages, defying the routine stereotypes of her era, family habits, liabilities and the dangers that her journeys endured in order to carry out her observations and recordings, come in correspondence with her revolutionary mentality and the journeys of ARISTOTLE Onassis.

His dionysian persona belongs, moreover, to a group of timeless personas, whose course moves through a fatal path of transformation, from poverty to wealth, luster and decline, which, if interpreted in terms of ancient tragedy, seems inevitable. We might say that the utopian glow of post-war Greece and its transition to the recent economic failure lies in an exemplary co-pacing with the archetypal transformations of heroes in its history and myths.

The METAMORPHOSIS exhibition in Hydra is divided into two sections, the second section will be presented in autumn.

