

ATHENS

A New Renaissance

As Athens emerges as a leading European city for art, Emily Draper explores its recent surge in creativity and discovers how Greek art has transformed in the modern world.

Greece is the epitomic European summer holiday destination; with 227 inhabited islands, skirted by some of the continent's most attractive beaches and warmest seas, it's true that there is no better place to soak up the sun. Even so, you must put that book down, get off that sunbed and leave the islands. Instead, head to Athens, Greece's capital city, because as you lie there indulged in the pages of a fictional world, you are missing out on the country's captivating stories of ancient and modern worlds that are spilling into the streets and art galleries.

Greece is the birthplace of one of history's most ancient and influential civilisations. Whilst the foundations of it were built upon mythology, the empire created forms today's reality. Amongst conquerors, scholars and philosophers were historians, writers and artists, who together not only helped structure the paradigm of western society, but advanced its cultural influence through the development of the concept of aesthetic beauty. After all, the Renaissance era was driven by the influence of ancient Greek ideas presented through words and works of art.

One of the era's most famous paintings, 'The School of Athens' by Raphael, featuring Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and Da Vinci, celebrates this Renaissance by bringing the most masterful minds of ancient Greece and the then-modern heroes together in the hub of its creation – Athens. So important was the subject of this piece that it resides in the Catholic churches' most holy building, St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City.

The events of modern Greece have not been so worthy of such an honour; in fact, they have hung the country in silence. In the midst of the Great Recession, in 2010, Greece

reached a fatal level of national debt and called for a bailout. Coming to their rescue, the European authorities and private investors loaned the country almost €320 billion – the biggest financial rescue of a bankrupt country in history. Greece grasped onto order by the skin of their teeth until 2018, which marked a new dawn for the country as it exited its final international bailout programme and once again became able to stand on its own two feet.

The term Renaissance was coined from the French word meaning rebirth, which is what that era represented. Today, as Greece continues to propel itself out of austerity, there are many signs of a second Renaissance of sorts; old policies and constitutions have changed to make way for a country that will, with all fingers crossed, be evermore stable. This shift in the times can be seen in the attitude of its citizens and reflected in their voices, actions and art – just as the original Renaissance was.

Roaming through the streets of Athens today, you will find yourself crossing paths with centuries' worth of history. In Plaka especially, the city's central neighbourhood, you can see time's mark everywhere you look. Most striking are the churches; The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Annunciation, the cathedral of the Archbishop of Athens, may appear new, but it was actually built in 1842.

Meanwhile, sitting in Monastiraki Square is the Church of the Pantanassa, a well-preserved 10th century Catholic Church, the walls of which are still glorified by their original (albeit a little faded) religious murals. Although these two churches may be physically close together, they are distanced greatly by age.

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Just a few steps away from both of these churches, each representing a different era, is the Roman Forum, which holds the ruins of the city's original trade centre, built between 19 and 11 BC under the reign of Emperor Augustus.

And just when you think the city couldn't be any more antique, you look up. There, sitting amongst the clouds on top of the Acropolis, like Zeus, the Greek God of the Sky, is the iconic Parthenon – an almost 2,500-year-old temple that watches over the city like a god watches protectively over their people.

With the Acropolis sitting so highly above the rest of Athens, the scale of its history can never be forgotten. However, the Acropolis and its monuments, including the Parthenon, are not just major historic architectural sites; they are universal symbols of the thought and arts of the classical civilisation that seeded western society today.

Yet amongst the grandiose churches, ruins, temples and pillars are many old buildings, now mostly residences, whose stories are untold. They are forgotten, overlooked buildings falling into disrepair, leaving much of the city with an unkempt, unloved façade. What was once the ruling empire and centre



of the world is now a city that is struggling to keep up with the modern world.

These buildings may have seen better days, but still, they add to the depth of Athens' antique feel; the city looks lived-in and well versed in the nature of humanity and time, reminding you that you stand on the same ground as the world's most influential ancient rulers, philosophers and artists once did. Due to the recession, the Greeks can't afford to restore their buildings back to their former beauty; perhaps art is a way to find beauty within the shabby city once again.

Since the beginning of Ancient Greece in around 800 BC, art was of central importance. The Ancient Greeks introduced the concept of it and developed the aesthetic world around it. Many things have changed over the last (almost) 3,000 years, but a love and talent for art has remained a constant for Greeks and today, the art scene is thriving.

In fact, Athens' is emerging as one of Europe's most prominent destinations for art collectors and art-lovers, now loudly boasting over 300 museums and galleries. Events and pop-up shows are also continually opening around the city,

both in the centre and in farther neighbourhoods, showing just how active artists are becoming in creating new collections and importantly, how engaged and active the public is becoming in Athens’ art scene.

After the recession, Greece saw many of its people, including students and young creatives, leave the country in search of stability and better education. However, since Greece has got back on its feet, the country is seeing many of them rerouting back home, bringing their advanced educations and talents along with them. This includes a surge of fresh artists and curators with exciting and interesting ideas. After being away from their beloved country as it went through turmoil and hardship, they are keen to bring it back to life through the expression of art.

The growing buzz is attracting collectors, admirers and tourists alike into the Athens art scene and it is now becoming one of the most popular reasons to visit the city, alongside its enthralling history. Together, the two areas of interest synchronise and harmonise the ancient and modern worlds, making Athens stand out from every other European city. And while it might appear from the outside that the city is down and out, once you step inside its galleries, exhibitions and event spaces, you will see that it is full of colour, life and creativity.

One company on a mission to show visitors the beauty and modernity of Athens is luxury art tour company, Arthens, founded by art historian Theodora Koumoundourou. Arthens is the only luxury art tour service in the city and Theodora

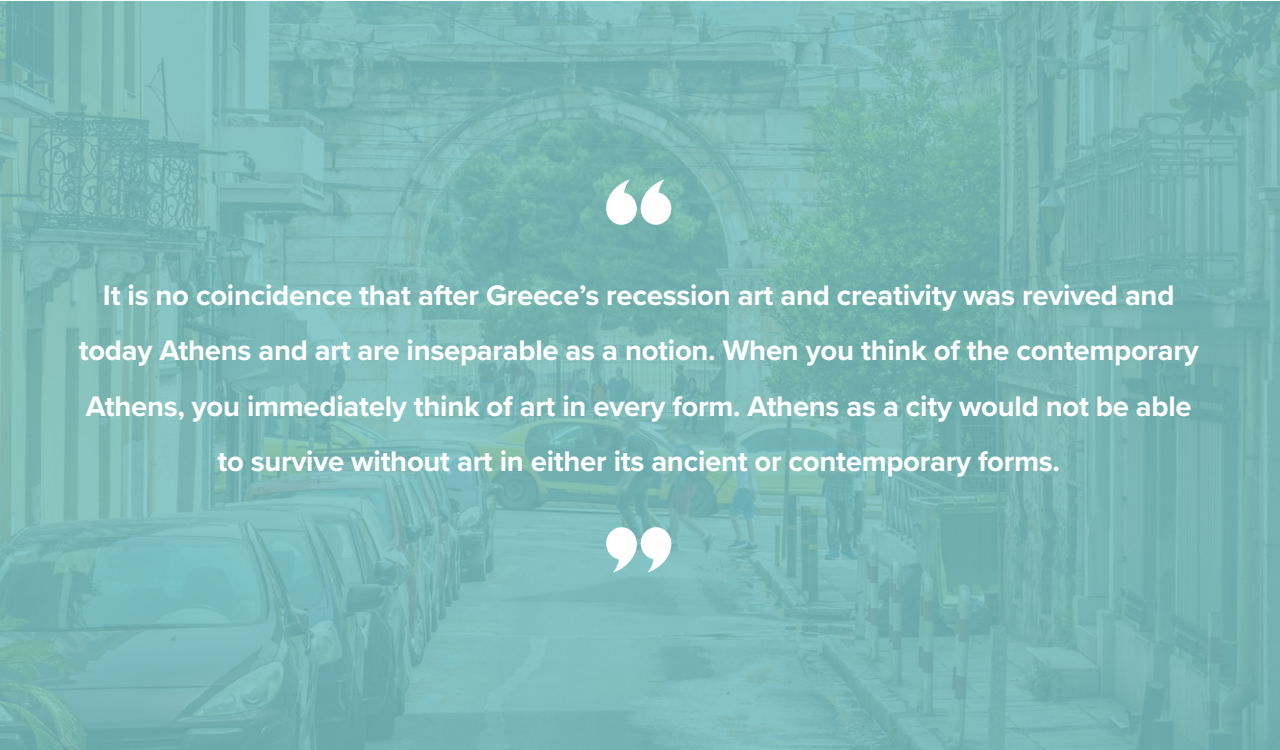
personally accompanies guests in their exploration of the best contemporary art shows it has to offer.

She provides tailored tours and personal services to view the work of both fresh talents and celebrated artists, and she even organises studio visits so clients can see the spaces that are used, run and lived in by artists for themselves in order to get a more intimate look inside the core of Athens’ art world.

Upon asking Theodora what she believes art means to Athens as a city, she replied: “For me, contemporary art in Athens is a continuum of the city’s history and its identity going into the coming centuries. Art in any shape or form is very important as it is an expressive tool, and therefore I believe that a healthy city and therefore healthy citizens need to create and be surrounded by art.

“It is no coincidence that after Greece’s recession art and creativity was revived and today Athens and art are inseparable as a notion. When you think of the contemporary Athens, you immediately think of art in every form. Athens as a city would not be able to survive without art in either its ancient or contemporary forms.”

Whilst at first glance modern art can seem superficial, when you look closer there is often a meaning or message behind it. This is certainly the case with many current Athens artists; they are taking inspiration from the hardships their country has suffered over the last few years, and throughout history and turned it into something visually inspiring.



For example, in April 2019, the Ileana Tounta Gallery displayed a collection entitled ‘Father’ by Dimitris Andreadis which featured abstract shapes and patterns that depicted the modern views on gender on large-sized canvases which were overlapped and leant at an angle against the wall. Through the set-up of his work and the nearly-sculptural painting forms, the artist attributes value to the elements that constitute the core of modern culture, whilst highlighting the eternal artistic mediums.

Also in April 2019, a show entitled ‘Beautiful’ was curated by the Dio Horia Gallery at the historic Paranasos Literary Society building. Here, artists were asked to examine existing artworks found within the building and create their own modern interpretation of it. The old, original and new interpreted artworks were then displayed together in the show, to highlight the stark contrast between the ideas of beauty that time has created.

The show features a striking collection by Io Angeli named ‘It is a Trap’ which portrays a world that is illogical and strange, yet familiar and peaceful, inhabited by a human absence to create a dystopian reality by merging elements of man and nature. In these paintings, it is clear to see how quickly life can grow, develop and destroy itself, just like many empires, like Ancient Greece, one did.

Not only are curators and artists developing new art though, they are also continuing to celebrate former Greek artists that have made a mark in the art world. In the 1950s, Dimitris Condos

created a piece entitled ‘Roman Pictoral’, a book of visual impressions and narrations of free linguistic associations where the plot evolves sequentially through the flow of the artist’s characteristic spirals.

The idea of this was to promote the wide dissemination of artistic content and reject uniqueness as the only proof of authenticity in order to create artist democracy. Condos made waves in the art world following the presentation of this piece, and so Can Gallery, a boutique art gallery run by talented curator Christina Androulidaki in Kolonaki, curated the artists’ work and displayed it for a second time in Athens, bringing it back into the spotlight.

While many things have been lost, buried, crumbled and forgotten in Athens over the turbulent centuries, art never will be. The city has lived and breathed art since the beginning of its civilisation and it seems that despite facing recession and poverty in recent years, it is only being propelled further into the hearts and minds of the Greek people. From the stories told through today’s Greek modern art, it is clear that it is not only a form of expression, it is a form of catharsis – a way of finding beauty even in the ugliest of times.

Thankfully, since paying its debts, Greece’s ugly times are over and it is beginning to flourish once again. So if there’s any time to visit Athens, Europe’s emerging leading modern art destination, it’s now, as it enters a new Renaissance.