

## Political Censorship and Artworks: Emblematic Open-Air Sculptures in Athens and Thessaloniki. From “Harry Truman” to “Alexander the Great”

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### ABSTRACT

*Censorship is a world-wide and perennial phenomenon with a variety of (social, political, cultural) ramifications and many aspects relating, for the most part, to nation, religion, race, and gender, its occurrence undermining democracy itself, human rights, and the freedom of citizens. Political censorship is an aspect that has become increasingly widespread all over the world. In Greece, in particular, it has a significant and long-lasting background, including in modern times, and it is considered the fruit of problematical political situations and the causal result of the civil war, in the late 1940s, and the divisive climate that has since prevailed in Greek society. Political censorship has been mostly evident towards open-air sculptures in big cities, due to the resounding message they deliver and to their communication function, being works of art placed in public spaces. Actions against works of this type have included destruction and all kinds of vandalism. Such actions generally target monuments which refer to specific historical events or situations of particular historical significance, statues and busts representing persons who left their mark in history and are linked, one way or another, to specific actions that have had direct consequences for the country. Numerous examples may be cited from recent years and they involve works of art or monuments linked to the Holocaust of Jews in Thessaloniki or emblematic historical personalities, such as Harry Truman, President of the United States of America, and Alexander the Great, the famous Macedonian army general.*

**Keywords:** Political Censorship, Open-Air Sculptures, Greek Civil War, Harry Truman, Alexander the Great, Jewish Holocaust, Athens, Thessaloniki

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, censorship has occurred in periods of political instability or social conflict and has originated from those forces that exercise power and are interested in imposing or maintaining the prevailing ideology. It has targeted almost all forms of art, from literature and cinema to theatre and visual arts, with the view of weakening the public function of art. Including in modern times, the phenomenon has not been eradicated, in spite of the effectiveness, in law-abiding States, of legal provisions protecting the freedom of expression, and the existence of institutions overseeing its protection.

Among the numerous forms of censorship that have been identified in Greece, political censorship is the one occurring more frequently, in particular since the end of the civil war (1946-1949) and the start, immediately afterwards, of the Cold War, during which the climate of confrontation and national divide has

been particularly intense in Greece due to the specific political situation prevailing at the time. The situation was further exacerbated in 1967 by the usurpation of power by the military junta, which remained in power until 1974, giving rise to extreme political forces both on the left and on the right. These forces, with the help of conservative groups in Greek society, have often violently intervened in cultural events (for example, theatre plays), and have also destroyed or vandalised works of art, in particular open-air sculptures, representing persons having a particular relationship with Greek history (Dimoulis & Christopoulos 2018, pp. 222-226). In this regard, research has also identified commando-like operations from racist groups against monuments referring to the Holocaust, an event which deeply affected Greek society, for example against the monument erected in Thessaloniki to commemorate the Jews of the city who were displaced, in 1943, to concentration camps by the Nazis.

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There exists a plethora of instances of political censorship in Greece in the aftermath of World War II. Most incidents have been recorded during the period of the dictatorship and they related to works of art with latent or evident political contents (such as, *Peace*, a sculpture by Memos Makris, or *Installations* by Maria Karavela) (cf. Xidis 1976, p. 192; Ziogas 2008, pp. 209-212). However, including after the fall of the junta and the change of regime (in 1974), there have been instances of political, and religious, censorship towards works of art, including at internationally prestigious exhibitions (for example, the *Outlook* exhibition, *Art Athina*, etc.) (cf. Ziogas 2008, pp. 279-312).

Among the numerous instances of violent attacks against works of art by various groups (with or without any specific ideology), this study has selected and will focus and comment on acts of vandalism directed at three monumental open-air sculptures, out of which two are located in the centre of the capital of Greece, Athens, and are directly linked to (ancient and contemporary) Greek history, whereas the third one is in Thessaloniki and refers to the Holocaust. These monuments are considered emblematic works of art and they still adorn public venues in Athens and Thessaloniki. They are the statues of Harry Truman, President of the United States of America, and Alexander the Great, the Macedonian general, in Athens, and the monument dedicated to the Holocaust in the centre of Thessaloniki.

### THE STATUES OF HARRY TRUMAN AND ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN ATHENS

In the centre of Athens, at Rigillis Square, exactly behind the official residencies of the President of the Hellenic Republic and the Prime Minister, the statue of the 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States of America, Harry Truman (1884-1972), was erected in 1963 in recognition of his services to Greece at the end of the particularly critical decade of the 1940s. Truman was President of the United States from 1945 to 1953. In March 1947 – while Greece was engulfed in a civil war – the US President announced to Congress – according to Professor Vasileios Kontis (2000, p. 138 ff.) – the decision of his Administration to provide financial and military support to Greece, which was on the brink of economic collapse and unable to deal with the Communist guerrilla. His famous

quote, recorded in history in dramatic tones, that there should “be a free Greece” epitomised the so-called “Truman Doctrine”. The relevant assistance, amounting to approximately 17 billion US dollars, was channelled to Greece through the “Marshall Plan” and provided from 1948 to 1952. It is well known that the United States provided similar assistance to other European countries too. of course, the Communist Party of Greece strongly opposed the Truman Doctrine, and since then all leftist and friendly-to-the-left organisations and groups of anarchists have made negative references to Truman’s personality.

The *Harry Truman* statue (img.1) is made of brass, 3.20 m high, erected on a marble pedestal and surrounded by eight marble columns bearing texts in Greek and English from speeches of the American President to US Congress in favour of Greece. The honoured President is standing, in a supernatural stance, wearing official attire, overbearing and upright, as befits the President of a superpower, and is reminiscent of some of the most glamorous moments of the baroque era. The work was financed by organisations of Greek-Americans, and it worth noting that it was made by Felix de Welton (1907-2003), a sculptor specialising in monumental statues, having plenty of similar works in his portfolio (*To Vima* 1963).



**Img1F.** Welton, *Statue of Harry Truman*, 1963, h. 3.20m., Athens

In its long history, the statue has sustained so much damage, so many acts of vandalism and destruction that it would take an entire book to list them. In every difficult political period, from the period of dictatorship to the years of the financial crisis, Truman’s statue has systematically been the “symbolic” target of attackers. The identity of these persons has varied (evidently, individuals from the left,

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extreme left, anarchists, frustrated individuals), and every time the action was linked to some of the contentious actions of the superpower all over the world (Vietnam, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, etc.). The statue belongs to this category of works of art whose aesthetic value has much less importance, if any, as compared to the political message they emit.



**Img2Y.** Pappas, *Statue of Alexander the Great*, 1973, h. 3.73m., Athens

In April 2019, another emblematic statue was erected in a central part of Athens, close to the Columns of Olympian Zeus, the statue of *Alexander the Great* (img. 2) made by sculptor Yiannis Pappas (1913-2005). It is also made of brass, 3.5 m high, and it represents a young, adolescent, Alexander on his horse, Bucephalus. Many Greek cities have similar statues of Alexander the Great, but the Greek capital did not have one until recently. This work was made in 1992 and it has been the property of the Municipality of Athens. It took 27 years to have it finally erected in Athens. The reason for this is rather straightforward. The neglectfulness of the local Athens authorities regarding this particular statue was finally overcome once the much debated “Prespa Agreement” was signed (27 June 2018), resolving the issue of the name of the small State on the northern border of the country which has been renamed from FYROM to “North Macedonia”. In view of the forthcoming parliamentary elections, George Kaminis, Mayor of Athens, wishing to promote his political profile, decided that the statue of Alexander the Great should be placed in Athens. On the other hand, various groups reacting against the historical figure of Alexander the Great, and usually expressing different views on

the national history of states and historical figures, have vandalised the statue by throwing paint on it almost immediately after it was unveiled to the public and in spite of it being guarded on a 24-hour basis (Skordas 2019).

This is not the first time that, because of the “rivalry” between the two countries (Greece and FYROM) about ancient cultural and historical heritage, similar sculptures/works of art have become semantic “witnesses” of a political game that does not obey to any rules with regard to protection of aesthetics and the perennial values of art, which should undoubtedly lie above and beyond motherlands and nations.

### MONUMENTS FOR THE HOLOCAUST OF THE JEWS OF THESSALONIKI

At this point, it is worth noting another incident which involves a Holocaust monument erected in Thessaloniki in honour of the memory of the more than 45,000 Jews of the city, who were displaced, in 1943, to concentration camps by the Nazis, very few of whom survived. Jews were a very strong ethnic minority in Thessaloniki and their population exceeded 50,000. They were the most active commercial, economic, and cultural community in the city. These people had been living in this large Greek city since the XV century, after they had been chased from Spain by the Catholic Monarchs, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castille.



**Img3.** Nandor Glid, *Monument of Jewish Holocaust*, Thessaloniki

The *Holocaust* monument (img. 3) is located at Eleftherias Square, where the Nazis had gathered the city’s Jewish population to be sent to the concentration camps of Auschwitz-

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Birkenau, in Krakow. The sculpture was designed in 1997 by Serbian artist Nandor Glid (1924-1997), a survivor of the Holocaust, whereas another sculpture, designed in 2014 by Xenis Sachinis (born 1954), is located at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki as a memorial of the Jewish cemetery that used to be there. Both monuments have been the target of acts of vandalism from time to time by extreme-right organisations embracing a racist ideology.

The first *Holocaust* monument referred to above is an abstract transposition and evolution of the seven-branch Menorah, Israel’s supreme symbol. It is a work of great symbolic value, made of bronze in a deep dark colour, with tongues of fire enveloping human bodies, represented falling (Zafeiris 2016; *Protothema* 2018).

This has been, as a rule, the fate of works of art and monuments bearing strong memories from the past, to the point that even experts have come to link their artistic value with the deeper meaning they carry, as a component of the integrated dimension of the work which, by definition, has a public function. The morphological language of the typology of such works follows the rules of semiotics, and therefore they tend to transfer knowledge to the beholder in the form of signs through stimuli of the senses (mostly, sight and touch). The aforementioned monuments (Harry Truman, Alexander the Great, as well as the Holocaust memorial) are “signs”, where the medium transforms the commonplace into continuous present. Indeed, the high degree of pictoriality of the signs corresponds to both the time context and the beholder’s artistic expectations (Duroy & Kerner, 1995, p. 230). It is quite impressive to watch monuments – actual works of art – being transformed, by advocates of extreme ideologies, from memorials and works of aesthetic pleasure to political “signs”, which by application of an extreme censoring behaviour undermine the freedom of expression, fundamental human values, and the basic principles of democracy. Open-air sculptures are undoubtedly carriers of memory, monuments having artistic and historical value, and they represent cultural exhibits of a particular era in any given place (monuments of space and time). Sculptures of this type “are loaded with various meanings, they completely lose their individuality, even when they represent specific persons, and they become works having

universal meaning and significance” (Papanikolaou, 1985, p. 13).

### CONCLUSION

Political censorship has frequently occurred through time, usually as an expression of totalitarian regimes, by groups and individuals having extreme ideological views which have been condemned by both national and international institutions. To this day, in Greece, political censorship is still relatively on the rise, as a result of the survival of extreme ideological stereotypes originating from the periods of the civil war and the military dictatorship.

Violent actions against emblematic works of art and monuments have been selective, at times linked to current events, and, therefore, “innocent” monuments with strong symbolic contents have been treated as “objects” representing international events and actions, where the present is intentionally confused with the past, often in a manner that “annihilates” ideas of a higher order and perennial values, such as freedom of expression, national pride, and the struggle for freedom and democracy. Three works of art/monuments located in Athens and Thessaloniki and having particular significance in Greek history have been selected as illustrative examples of the Greek situation.

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