

LA GRÈCE: VOYAGE PHOTOGRAPHIQUE ET LITTÉRAIRE AU XIXE SIÈCLE

Photographies de la collection Haris Yiakoumis

Edited by Haris Yiakoumis

Bilingual (French/Greek)

222pp. Bastas-Plessas Editions, Athens.

960 7418 28 X

LA GRÈCE: LA CROISIÈRE DES SAVANTS, 1896-1912

Edited by Haris Yiakoumis & Isabelle Roy

Bilingual (French/Greek)

257pp. Bastas-Plessas Editions, Athens & Picard, Paris.

960 7418 36 0 & 2 7084 0561 6

Maria Karavia

ODISSOS, I LISMONIMENI PATRIDA

[ODESSA, THE FORGOTTEN HOMELAND]

198pp. Agra Editions, Athens.

960 325 274 3

NELLY'S: BODY AND DANCE

Texts by Deni Efthimiou-Tsekoura, Klementini Vounelaki & Irini Boudouri.

128pp. Agra Editions & Ammos Publications, Athens.

960 325 221 2

NELLY'S FROM ATHENS TO NEW YORK

A Restrospective Exhibition of the work of Elli Seraidari

Bilingual (English/Greek)

164 pp. Bastas-Plessas Editions, Athens for the J.F. Costopoulos Foundation.

960 7418 27 1

Yiorgos Anastasiadis & Evangelos Hekimoglou

TO PROSOPO TIS MNIMIS

[THE FACE OF MEMORY]

147pp. University Studio Press, Thessaloniki.

960 12 0669 8

IKONES TIS ELLADOS, 1944-1958

[IMAGES OF GREECE, 1944-1958]

The N.E. Toli Photographic Collection

165pp. Exantas Publishing, Athens.

960 256 352 4

Nikos Economopoulos

LIGNITE MINERS

Bilingual (English/Greek)

Unpaginated. Indiktos, Athens.

960 518 048 0

Paris Petridis

KATH' ODON

[EN ROUTE]

Unpaginated. Istos Editions, Athens.

960 320 071 9

It is well known that photographs change status with bewildering facility: family snapshots mutate into sociological documents, documentary images lay claim to artistic eminence, reportage finds itself promoted to the archives. Because of this inherent fluidity, photographic images tend to be

evaluated on the basis of often contradictory criteria including evidential value, historical importance, documentary or scientific content, aesthetic quality and artistic status – all of which can be (and usually are) further influenced by extraneous factors such as market value, trophy status and an unfocused nostalgia for the past.

In addition, photography plays a significant role in the construction and definition of national identity – largely because photographic images seem to carry the promise that past experience can after all be retrieved and understood, but also because the invention of a coherent photographic narrative is seen as a legitimate source of national pride. Inevitably perhaps, given the sometimes conflicting expectations directed at photographs, the pioneering stages of this process can be accompanied by a certain amount of confusion.

Greece, which is experiencing a belated flowering of interest in all aspects of photography, is a case in point: the past fifteen years or so have seen the development of a vigorous contemporary photography movement centred on the Photography Centre of Athens, an increased interest in the domestic history of the medium, the discovery or rediscovery of significant pioneers, and the emergence of a small but active market in 19th-century prints and archival material of all kinds. At the same time, there has been a modest boom in publications dealing with every period of Greek photographic history.

Two volumes recently edited by the collector Haris Yiakoumis cover the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *La Grèce: Voyage photographique et littéraire au xixe siècle* includes work by a number of Greek and foreign practitioners active between 1855 and the early nineteen-hundreds. The photographs, mostly albumen and silver prints, are properly captioned and well reproduced in reasonably faithful if rather over-saturated colour; the great majority are of the ancient monuments of Athens, and fall neatly into the 'landscape with classical ruins' genre demanded by travellers on the grand tour. Among the best of these are a number of starkly monumental images taken in the eighteen-fifties by the talented and all too little known Dimitrios Konstantinou, many of whose views and camera angles were to be copied precisely by an entire subsequent generation of commercial photographers.

The second and rather more lightweight volume, *La Grèce: La croisière des savants*, takes as its subject the cruises organised by the *Revue Générale des Sciences* between 1896 and 1912. These decidedly superior precursors of Swann's Hellenic Cruises included several semi-amateur photographers, some of whose work is amusing, particularly views of erudite tourists dining *al fresco* in the ruins of Knossos or struggling onto donkeys. Probably the most interesting material here consists of the numerous stereographs credited to Fougères & Merle, including street scenes in Crete and Santorini, church interiors and several scenes of bustling harbours. Both these collections make available a considerable amount of otherwise obscure material, and for this one is grateful to the editor; however, instead of providing the reader with sorely needed information on the photographers and their background, he has chosen to accompany the images by,

respectively, an anthology of extracts from the works of 19th-century French travel writers and snippets from turn-of-the-century guide books.

One facet of the rediscovery of the recent past has been an elegiac fascination with the Greek diaspora. *Odissos*, Maria Karavia's nostalgic account of the Greek mercantile colony which flourished on the Black Sea between 1792 and 1919, is lavishly illustrated with page after page of excellently reproduced period photographs. This alone would make it a valuable resource, since the author's research has been extensive and meticulous; more importantly, however, she has made a major discovery in the photographs taken by Mary Paraskeva (1882–1951) and her close friend Argine Salvago (1883–1972), two particularly talented daughters of the expatriate Greek *haute bourgeoisie*.

Both were skilled photographers. Argine Salvago's taste was for the picturesque, and Karavia's book reproduces a number of surprisingly assured images of peasants and gentry in Crimea on the eve of revolution, including peasant interiors hung with a riot of embroideries and icons and some dramatic views of the mobilisation of August 1914; unfortunately, it appears that the album these prints were taken from is the sole survivor of a once extensive body of work. Salvago's lively images are impressive enough, but the real find is Mary Paraskeva, whose dramatic and remarkably contemporary-looking figure appears in many of her friend's photographs. Born on the island of Mykonos and raised at Baranovka, the Crimean estate of her millionaire father Nikolaos Griparis, Paraskeva has left a substantial number of glass stereoscopic lantern slides of an astonishingly high quality; originally designed to be projected like modern transparencies, these large glass positives can be re-photographed to produce clear, highly-detailed black and white prints.

The dozen or so images reproduced here were taken in and around Baranovka; they include scenes of a privileged family life which have the light-hearted and elegant lyricism of Lartigue, as well as some astonishingly sophisticated landscapes. Hitherto unknown and unpublished, they seem to call for a serious reconsideration of Greek photographic history at the turn of the century – a period regarding which I recently commented that “research has not yet uncovered any particularly original or ground-breaking work”. This is evidently no longer the case, and should further research bear out the promise of these images, Greek photography will be very much in Karavia's debt.

Elli Seraidari, who died last year aged ninety-nine, was by far the best-known Greek photographer. Something of a *monstre sacré* who developed the habit of referring to herself by the name of her first studio (Nelly's), she too was a child of the affluent Greek diaspora. She studied photography in Germany under Hugo Erfurth and Franz Fiedler, an investment which paid off when economic necessity obliged her to practice professionally. This she did with considerable success, first in Athens and then, for nearly quarter of a century, in New York. Self-confident, hard-working and ambitious, between 1925 and 1945 she produced work which earned her both fame and notoriety: bromoil prints of refugees from Asia Minor in 1926, expressionistic views of nude dancers on the Acropolis in 1927 and 1929,

and a bugler in traditional Greek dress who appeared on a *Life* magazine cover in 1940.

Her finest images had been taken by the mid-forties, though she continued to work at commercial portraiture until 1965. Her reputation blossomed again in the eighties following a donation of prints and negatives to the Benaki Museum, buttressed by a burgeoning interest in photographic history and her own feisty but media-friendly character; this resulted in numerous exhibitions and a bibliography second to none, but we have yet to see an in-depth critical evaluation of a very uneven body of work. What she picked up in Germany and remained faithful to thereafter was not modernism but a sometimes retrograde pictorialism; her stylised refugees and scenes of peasant life strive for transcendence but often seem merely stiff, while much of her dance photography, recently collected in a handsome volume by Agra Editions under the title *Body and Dance*, is likely to strike contemporary audiences as verging on kitsch. Her best work probably consists of the views of Old Athens which she took between 1927 and 1929, and of her relatively unknown landscape photography; the useful catalogue of her recent exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York includes examples of both.

Anonymous imagery is a crucial component of photographic history. *To prosopo tis mnimis* by Anastiadis and Hekimoglou is one of the first Greek publications to take a considered approach to vernacular photography, in this case of interwar images from Thessaloniki. It includes group activities such as trade union outings and fascist ceremonies under the Metaxas dictatorship, as well as a selection of formal and informal portraits. The longest and best section reproduces a family album of 59 photographs taken between 1922 and 1925, whose subjects the authors have carefully identified. Accompanied by reproductions of period newspaper clippings, the photographs are uniformly 'bad', and yet – in the infuriating way of photographs – exercise a definite fascination. It comes a shock to read under the photograph of a newly married young woman, clowning for the camera on a winter's day in 1925, that "she died in 1993, sunk in profoundest old age". Equally disconcerting is the unexpected conjunction between private and public spheres when the authors inform us that the child in national costume photographed on his uncle's knee grew up to become the distinguished poet Klitos Kyrrou.

The photographs included in *Ikones tis Ellados, 1944–1958* are only few steps removed from the condition of anonymity. On the cover and title-page they are described merely as "The N.E. Tolis photographic collection", and the first of no fewer than four unilluminating essays which open this book refers to them as "his photographs", meaning the collector's. Only slowly and grudgingly does it emerge that rather than a undifferentiated assemblage of images, they are the exclusive work of Dimitris Triantafillou and Takis Floros, two professional Athenian photojournalists. And that's it – we are given no dates, no background information, no indication of whether the two worked as a team, or whether indeed they had anything at all in common beyond their profession. Except for the occasional rare epiphany which is every photographer's birthright, their images are not outstanding, but they are uncannily effective at conjuring up the post-civil war years: the

claustrophobic grimness of small towns, the omnipresent military uniforms, the cinema hoardings, the cropped heads of small boys.

By the mid-eighties, such cavalier treatment of photographers was no longer possible. Among the most successful professionally has been Nikos Economopoulos, who joined the Magnum agency in 1990. His brooding, dramatic photographs, strongly influenced by Koudelka, were seen to best advantage in the superb 1995 collection, *In The Balkans*. Economopoulos's latest publication, a commission for the Greek National Power Generating Company, is something of a letdown; his depiction of the Ptolemaida open-cast lignite mines and of the men who work there is oddly pedestrian, as though the photographer had never really engaged with his subject. As though to make up for this lack of interest, the black-and-white images have been printed with grossly exaggerated grain, a stylistic flourish which adds little to the work.

Perhaps the most encouraging development for contemporary Greek photography has been the emergence of a talented new generation of practitioners. Among them is Paris Petridis, whose prize-winning documentary sequence *Kath' Odon (On the Road)* is a thoughtful account of an 'other' Greece, following the country's extended northern border from west to east. These striking and intelligent images of a rapidly changing world move easily from bleak landscapes to the eerie surrealism of small market towns with their cast of bored teenagers, grizzled shepherds, morose refugees and listless army conscripts. In the present circumstances, Petridis's reminder that Greece is as much part of the Balkans as of the Mediterranean is timely.

Between them, these publications represent a significant contribution to our knowledge of Greek photography. Welcome though they undoubtedly are, however, some of them continue to reflect the uncritical enthusiasm and inadequate research characteristic of a pioneering field. In general, too many photographic books appear without basic background information, let alone such details as the medium, size and provenance of prints. Also problematic is the excessive editorial control sometimes extended to the owners of archival material, as a result of which potentially valuable monographs can end up as glorified vanity publications, while many collections of images are accompanied by nothing more substantial than superficial biographical notes or vague generalities. Hopefully, it will not be too long before an essential degree of rigour is brought to bear on the current enthusiasm for what remains an exciting and still relatively unexplored area of European photographic history.

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