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**Stavros S. Niarchos Research Report 2005**

The subject of my research in Greece was painting from Minoan times through to Byzantium. With the generous support of the Niarchos foundation I was given the opportunity to go to Greece to see this history. I traveled to as many sites as possible in order to observe and spend time with the work. I visited Athens, Meteora, Thessaloniki, Agios Oros, Crete, and Peloponnesus. These were the areas I singled out as being the most relevant for such an inquisition, although there were many sites I didn't have time to visit. Such as, Santorini, a place that is currently under major excavation, where only one percent of what exists underground has been exposed.

I took pictures, when allowed, made drawings, and observed the environment, i.e. the context in which the work is placed. At Agios Oros we were woken up at four am to attend church. Going into a church at this time when it is dark with a few candles lit and watching the light change as the sun rises, is an original context for the icons and frescos, having been experienced in this manner for a thousand years. It gave me a different understanding for contemplative nature of those images. When I spoke to Father Paisios, an iconographer in Karyes, he described some cannons of Orthodox painting that were set down almost from the very beginning. This included showing objects from multiple perspectives in order to surround the viewer, and avoiding the kind of rendering that made things look "real". Often considered to be symptom of naïve painting, icons and frescos were painted with tipped perspectives and multiple perspectives for the specific reason of creating an image that required meditation to be understood and thus allow for prayer.

A recurring theme in early frescos all over Greece is the depiction of martyrs. They are shown as the victims of some brutal act of torture leading to death. These include beheadings, being skinned alive, sawed in half from the vertical direction, burned or boiled alive, limbs being cut off, and being tied to a wheel so that when spun the martyr meets blades and daggers and other various cutting instruments that are attached to the ground. This is a record mostly of how specific saints were killed but also a general depiction of how Christians were killed throughout the Roman Empire. These are images that no longer are a part of the average Christian Orthodox worshipper. The oldest frescos I saw were in the monastery Stagiadon, about thirty km outside

of Meteora, they were painted in the tenth century. I was allowed to draw for ten minutes. The drawing I made of Isais being sawed in half is posted on this site.

The subject matter in the work of the Minoans, and the manner in which the work was painted offered a sense of freedom and joy. Bright bold color murals dominate the palace of Knossos with fantastical scenes of aquatic life, hybrid animals, along with plants and flowers used symbolically as well as for decoration. The National Museum in Athens has a fresco taken from Santorini showing an outdoor scene with abstracted shapes serving as flowers, trees, and landscape, spotted throughout with couples of birds as if dancing in the sky. The birds are painted in a predominately linear manner with a few strokes. There also were depictions of offerings being made to idols and gods, hunting, and people fighting and even those images were painted in a manner that to a viewer today seems free and without dire consequences. I was left wondering whether or not this was true of the intended viewers. The pottery overflowed with invention, often taking on the abstract formation of humans and animals. Drinking cups that had three or four spouts for drinking and two openings to be filled, offered a puzzle as to how such a cup operated.

My trip had its conclusion in Athens where I saw modern works in museums and even graffiti that incorporated Byzantine iconography.