
Images of Exile and the Greeks of Grenoble: a museum experience

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Introduction

On 25 March 1993, the Greek national holiday, the Dauphinois museum (Musée Dauphinois) in Grenoble, France, inaugurated an exhibition entitled 'Des Grecs' (The Greeks) aimed at presenting the long-established Greek community of the town to their fellow grenoblois. The exhibition was a success for the museum, but more significantly, it represented a watershed for the Greeks themselves. Their close involvement with the exhibition process, from conception to inauguration and beyond, was to force them to examine the function of exile in their understanding of their sense of identity and belonging. The narrative and object choices of the exhibition provide a fascinating study of the ways in which museum institutions can elicit concrete expressions of human experience. This paper examines the motivation of the Musée Dauphinois in programming such an exhibition, for it has an interesting curatorial mission which needs to be understood. The stages of the researching and mounting of the exhibition will be outlined, highlighting how the Greek community was mobilised and how images of exile surfaced to be integrated into the process. Finally, the impact of the exhibition will be assessed, in political, museological and community terms.

Le Style Grenoblois: the museum as social laboratory

Founded in 1909 as a regional history and ethnographic museum, the Musée Dauphinois took on its present form and focus in 1971, with the appointment of Jean-Pierre Laurent as Director. Laurent instigated major changes which affected not only the display, but, more crucially, the ideology of the museum, making it a pioneering member of the now rapidly-expanding family of 'musées de société'.

This term is difficult to translate: history and folk-life museums, ethnographic and industrial collections, rural or urban site-museums all fall under this banner. Recognising this complex genealogy, Emilia Vaillant, of the French Museums Directorate, interprets it not as a definition of type, but rather as a means of bringing together a variety of very different institutions which have a common aim: 'to study the evolution of humanity from a social and historical point of view, and to provide means and markers for the understanding of cultural and social diversity'.¹ This approach is based on the radical museum ethics developed by Jean-Pierre Laurent in Grenoble. Laurent argued that the museum must collaborate with its visitors and the wider local community it serves, to articulate collective and personal memories. In so doing, these memories are restored to those who have no voice of their own, with the museum acting as a kind of psychoanalytical tool to explore contemporary society and community in the light of past and present experiences.² This is 'engaged' museology; the exhibition becoming an act of restitution and empowerment. Given this, objects, the usual museum currency, are only important in so far as they highlight human experience. The narrative of the museum display is therefore social rather than aesthetic. Such a mode of practice demands highly active community participation: it is their narrative, and the objects which have resonance for them, which become central to the exhibition. In making the museum public a central element in the definition of all policies and actions, the Musée Dauphinois effectively turned the original museum function on its head. It is no 'museum as a temple of Knowledge' in the mould of so many throughout Europe, for the most part direct descendants of the nineteenth-century encyclopedic national and municipal collections.³ The museum as a natural home for cultural and social democratisation is becoming an accepted part of 'musée de société' practice, and, as shown above, is even adopted by the usually tradition-bound French Museums Directorate. However the level of commitment to this code varies greatly and it remains a contested issue within the museum sector.

This 'style grenoblois' had its first major public outing in 1981. Laurent mounted the exhibition 'The Story of the Grenoblois', a grand family album of local life and issues. Hundreds of people were mobilised to uncover the complex social structure in the town from

the eighteenth century to the present. Audio-visual oral testimonies of many inhabitants gave parallel commentaries in which a picture emerged of a town growing rich from immigrant labour and less from its romanticised role as capital of the Alps. With its overtly polemical stance and theatrical presentation, the exhibition caught the attention of museum professionals world-wide, becoming a benchmark for innovative practice.

By the late 1980s, in less friendly political climes,⁴ Laurent had been replaced as Director and much of the continuation of this community-based work fell to the assistant director, Jean-Claude Duclos. Whilst working to the same philosophy, Duclos has adapted it to concentrate on sectors of the community in turn, 'show-casing' various private strands of multi-cultural Grenoblois life in the public space of the museum, building on the links created by 'The Story of the Grenoblois'. Pride at seeing their likenesses on the walls led several of the city's immigrant groups - notably Italians and Armenians - to want to tell their story, leading to a series of successful exhibitions. So how did the Greeks come to enter the museum and what is their story?

The Museum Experience of the Greek Community of Grenoble: finding a narrative

Today roughly five thousand people of Greek nationality or descent live in Grenoble, forming one of the longest-established communities in France. Their life revolves around the Orthodox Church, built with funds and labour provided by the members themselves in the 1950s, and their presence, by their own admission, is discrete. Some cross-cultural links have been established: the Association Franco-Hellénique de Grenoble being one. In 1990, this association approached the Musée Dauphinois. On a recent visit to Greece, some French members had seen a stunning collection of traditional Greek costumes in the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation. Would it be possible to exhibit them? Jean-Claude Duclos welcomed this suggestion as a logical extension of the 'style grenoblois', with the museum public viewing the institution as their space. However, the costumes by themselves were neutral objects, and, following the 'musée de société' philosophy, some accompanying human element

was needed to give them resonance. Duclos' sketchy idea was to produce a temporary exhibition and an accompanying book, elaborated in close collaboration with the community itself. He states that 'using the fact that we were to host this exhibition [of costumes] as a way of bringing to life the story of the Greek community of Grenoble seemed a perfectly natural course of action'.⁵ This decision was given weight by the fact that initial research highlighted that no scientific account of Greek communities in France existed. Any collaboration with the Grenoblois Greeks would therefore be of national importance.

Integral to the 'style grenoblois' is the creation of a steering committee for every exhibition. Its members focus the museum narrative which will ultimately shape the presentation. Besides the original contacts from the Franco-Hellenic association, Duclos co-opted members of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Orpheus cultural association and other Hellenic clubs to create a twenty-strong committee to guide the reflections and coordinate the collection of objects and oral testimonies. The project would need to unearth objects and a narrative ('story') detailing the Greek presence on French soil and the museum was reliant on the community for loans and donations. This would also allow Duclos to see what the community members themselves deemed to be significant, rather than imposing a curatorial rationale upon the subject. In the view of new museum Director Jean Guibal, the curator's role on any such committee is forty per cent scientific and professional assistance, but sixty per cent 'social work', handing over the 'product' to the members so that they 'own' it.⁶

The committee met monthly for the next eighteen months. At first the members were doubtful of being able to provide very much of interest and could not quite see why their story should interest the museum.⁷ But they played the game, and soon realised that they possessed a unique story. Committee discussions ranged over the geographical roots of the community, the evolution of daily life for the settlers, and the important components of ex-patriate life. Once the committee set about mobilising friends and families to share their memories in order to construct a narrative, and to suggest objects and documents which could feature in the exhibition, it became apparent that the process would become a psychoanalytical tool for the community.

Very rapidly, long-sublimated memories surfaced. Central to these was the notion of exile. Most early settlers had come not from mainland Greece but the significant Greek colony in Asia Minor, forced to flee via Smyrna/Izmir in August 1922 at the height of the Greco-Turkish war. One and a half million Greeks left, and the burning of Smyrna remains one of the root causes of contemporary Greek-Turkish conflict. Oral testimony revealed a strength of feeling surrounding these events ('genocide', 'catastrophe' being common terms of reference in the interviews), even on the part of those who had not lived them. Some interviewees remembered fleeing as children with their families, on French boats sailing for Marseilles. The emigrants, mostly educated and skilled, were attracted to Grenoble by its reputation as an expanding and prosperous town. Having created lives for themselves in Asia Minor, they simply began the process again in France, attempting to exercise their own trades or to work in the developing construction, cement, tannery or confectionery industries.

These Greeks were anxious to assimilate and were generally successful, especially when compared to other immigrant groups. This was a source of pride for the interviewees, but assimilation is won at a cost: the past has to be carefully packed away. Now this past was resurfacing as a focus of the interviews through the image of the burning sea-front buildings of Smyrna - the last view of home, so painfully disfigured.⁸ As the committee discussed this event, the image appeared as a defining one for the whole community: as a lived experience for those who had fled as children; as a painful sense of lost roots for their descendants. For those having arrived in Grenoble later, perhaps at the time of the Colonels' regime or as economic immigrants, the 'Catastrophe de Smyrne' had become a founding community myth which they had to some extent taken up as their own. Translated through the generations, this image emerged as an unspoken community emblem of exile. Significantly, the sense of loss was heightened by the impossibility of return - the area now forms part of Turkey.

Exile also defined the selection of objects and documents. With a highly visual cultural inheritance, the Greek community had carefully kept photographs of 'over there' and had continued to keep a detailed photographic record of their new life in Grenoble. The mass of photographic evidence pointed to a community totally reconciled to

their French environment. Yet the material objects offered to provide a record of daily life could be seen as an interesting counterpoint to this. Objects from around the home fell into three main categories. Religious icons symbolised an attachment to the Orthodox belief and were obvious objects for display. However many 'treasures' were not of religious or obvious aesthetic/monetary significance. These were objects which had been smuggled out of Asia Minor: coins hidden in the soles of shoes or insignificant jewels wound into the cloth of children's head-dresses. These objects were fellow-travellers, survivors and pioneers themselves. They had been present in homes for decades, but the reasons for their presence had never been questioned, nor their story told. The third category was that of objects representing working life. Here again most represented trades learnt in the 'old country', several being tools which had made the journey from Asia Minor - cobbler's awls, a photographer's camera, a hairdresser's razor. Every object was telling a story of a community subconsciously defining and presenting itself in terms of exile and difference.

These results of the community consultation process were widely discussed by the steering committee. It was concluded that so much time and energy had been spent assimilating to French life that there had been little individual or collective grieving for a lost past. The preservation of certain living traditions - the Orthodox Church, the use of the Greek language in the home - had never been called into question. Now exile had to be 'unpacked' and understood, in order for the community to move forward. The pain of remembering gave a fresh impetus: the resultant exhibition must reflect this pain but also ease it in a positive way. Links with Grenoble had to be re-valued in order to foster a new sense of belonging.

It was clear to the committee and curators that the defining image of the burning of Smyrna in August 1922 would form the central narrative of the exhibition, the pivot around which the history of the community had to be understood. The curators took over to shape the display, and the presentation of the 'catastrophe' and 'exodus' were placed at the geographical centre of the series of rooms given over to the exhibition. Exceptional archive film of the fire played in a continuous loop accompanied by Greek laments. Exodus was evoked

by a simple collection of cabin trunks on a stylised ship's deck, a metaphor for monumental change. Crossing this space, the visitor moved on from the history of Greece and daily life in Asia Minor, shifting from the ancient to the modern, the exotic to the familiar. Loaned objects and photographs reflected the new working life in Grenoble. Juxtaposed with this was the 'secret' life of the home and church, including a model of the Orthodox altar. Accompanying textual panels, written up from the oral testimonies by Duclos and Marie-Claire Vanneuville, gave the personal tales which lay behind these images. Various community members told their own stories via audio recordings. All emotions found their place: pain and joy, pride and regret

The Community as Museum Object: reactions

The exhibition ran from March 1993 to January 1994. The community was thrilled with the curators' work. Even those on the committee were 'surprised [...] it was very, very moving, to see what they had managed to do with our words and objects'. The symbolic power of the cabin trunks was immediately apparent to them all. But now the Greeks were no longer anonymous - they had made their private collective and individual pasts part of the public domain, and therefore open to criticism. How would they be judged as 'museum objects'?

Nationally, the exhibition was very favourably received and was reviewed in *Le Monde*. Locally, it was a popular exhibition: many visitors came out of neighbourly curiosity. They admired the model of the Orthodox Church, a part of the town's landscape since 1956. This all thrilled the Greeks, for they felt an increased sense of belonging to the family history of Grenoble, and they provided tours of the church during and after the exhibition. Grenoblois were fascinated to see familiar streets and workplaces pictured as part of a display which began in ancient Greece. Stressing difference and similarity in the same exhibition has an undeniable pedagogic value in fostering tolerance, as picked up by this local visitor: 'thank you [...] for showing [...] that Grenoble is made from so many brave men and women from many origins, who have made such a great effort to integrate local life, whilst preserving their own values and their love

of their homeland. It is very important to stress this point at the present time, when some sectors of society believe that immigration leads to so-called "insurmountable problems".¹⁰

Not all reactions were so unequivocally positive. Despite being placed in the final rooms allocated to the exhibition, traditionally reserved for the 'pièce de résistance' in a linear exhibition discourse, the Peleponesian costumes, the original catalyst for the exhibition, were obscured by the fact that the exhibition was articulated around the central display of the moment of exile. Some Franco-Hellenic association members, whilst being 'profoundly moved' by the images of the burning of Smyrna, regretted that all media attention had been turned upon the 'integration angle' of the exhibition, which they qualified as a political discourse.¹¹ This brings us back to the function of museums, now the subject of vast professional and theoretical debate. Traditional museum displays - the museum as a temple of knowledge - were generally thought to be neutral presentations devoid of any dominant discourse. But as with literary discourse, this apparent objectivity has been revealed to hide vested power interests. The museological aim of the Musée Dauphinois is to provide a space for the expression of subjective (hi)stories, inviting dialogue and raising questions. Allowing parallel narratives often places the way in which events are remembered on a higher plane than the events themselves. Inevitably this does become a political act, and so the museum must acknowledge which 'voice' is framing the narrative of the exhibition.

If the traditional 'objective' museum display masks the politics of power, this approach exemplarises the politics of empowerment. With its subjective presentation of the burning of Smyrna, a Turkish reaction to the exhibition was inevitable. In June 1993, the Turkish Consul Général in Lyon wrote to the museum, pointing to 'historical errors' and lack of 'impartial [...] scientific research'. Casting the Turkish people and government in a bad light could, he suggested, give rise to a 'political controversy' between the two countries, leading to 'hostility and lack of understanding'.¹² Duclos' reply clearly expresses the museum's motivation to empower:

Collecting and restoring memory, a continuous element of the work of a regional museum such as ours,

involves an element of risk which we acknowledge and try to assess. For this reason, we have taken the precaution [...] of pointing out the framework of our undertaking in the publication which expands on the exhibition [...]. The suffering of the Greek families who had to leave Izmir and Le Pont in 1922 was [...] all too real. Should we just silently pass over this, since it is a fundamental reason for the presence of these families in Grenoble? To acknowledge this is also part of the "grieving process" which, once complete, will allow for a more serene acceptance of the present. We felt, in other words, that it is necessary to give expression to this memory in order that a real discussion may take place.¹³

The point was powerful and the matter was dropped.

Identity Issues Raised by the Exhibition

Once the exhibition was over, how were the Greeks to arrive at a serene acceptance of the present? The belonging-exile continuum had been so strongly expressed by Duclos in the exhibition halls: how was this to be understood in human terms? The answer was provided by none other than Melina Mercouri. Immensely proud of their efforts, the Greek community contacted the Greek Culture Minister, asking if she could attend. She declined, but sent words of encouragement:

A people always on the move; through choice or necessity. A nation of travellers since its name first appeared on the map. A people happy to travel but always homesick. The Greeks.

Since the beginning of time they have spread all over the world. They have lived in the furthest corners of the globe. They also came to Grenoble; with their few scant belongings. Forced to leave, for the most part, their beloved Asia Minor, but willing to start all over again amongst the inhabitants of Grenoble. Nevertheless, they remain Greeks at heart, and this exhibition proves it.¹⁴

Mercouri's romantic prose summed up the duality felt by the community. This had also been sensed by Duclos who, by breaking

the exhibition into here/there, exposed/secret lives, faithfully reflected the sentiments forthcoming in the collection process. In his key analysis of exile, Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad shows how it must be qualified as a place and a state of mind constructed upon duality. It is neither here nor there, it is both here AND there. It is the present and the past, it is the active and the imagined life. Only a full integration of these opposites can allow an exiled community to move forward.¹⁵ By casting them as part of a Greek diaspora, central to Greek consciousness, Mercouri gave the community a vital dynamic function. Linked in time and space to Odysseus and Pythagoras, they featured in an invented traditional mythology where the Greeks are meant to travel, fanning the flame of Greek civilisation throughout the world.¹⁶ So their presence in Grenoble made them important to their homeland.

The final extension of this process was the publication of a mémoire d'une communauté grecque by three members of the steering committee.¹⁷ Their celebration of precisely this duality and role is remarkable in its clarity of expression, based largely upon the images in words and pictures contained in the exhibition. Although structured by professional curators, the narratives have been adopted as the community's own, being a most extreme example of 'the museum giving a voice to the unvoiced'. These are articulate people, who nonetheless needed a mirror held up to their experiences to shape their terms of reference, as in any good process of analysis.

Conclusions

The exhibition was a 'musée de société' curator's dream. The close subject participation led to a display of quality and integrity which prompted a dialogue with the wider community - responses ranged from local to national, personal to political. The usual quantifiable measures of exhibition success - visitor numbers and merchandising possibilities - mattered little in this process. The museum succeeded in transcending its aesthetic function to become a community facility where empowerment of a human subject replaced the power often articulated by curatorial choice. The Greeks were indeed empowered by the experience, for they understood how their contribution had shaped contemporary Grenoble, heightening their sense of belonging. Basile Zembalas spoke for the whole community:

'It was [...] a huge satisfaction, a real boost [...], [the exhibition] gave us the opportunity to show who we are. We really had been too discrete [...]. It was a great source of pride'. To a large extent it was the affirmation of their global and historical role which allowed them to belong to their adoptive home: 'I was at last able to say to my ancestors, "We didn't leave for nothing. We are your worthy successors"'. Hélène Faure-Georgopoulos' comment confirms that, in sociological terms, the consultation process was as revelatory as the resultant exhibition.¹⁸ The creation of this 'safe space' for the exploration of human experience as a parallel to the exhibition relies on a curator-participant relationship based on trust and lengthy consultation. This emphasis is gaining ground in museums, but is now imperilled by shrinking cultural budgets: time is money. The authorities who fund cultural institutions at times attempt to influence the discourse of politically sensitive manifestations, yet the museum received no interference over the presentation of the Greco-Turkish conflict. It is interesting to speculate that the geo-political and temporal distance of the conflict allowed it to escape censure. Museums are increasingly attempting the presentation of 'difficult' subjects, yet the similar tale of belonging, exile and no-return of the Pied Noir population of Algeria for example, is still surrounded by a particular French amnesia.

All too often, exhibitions are 'deconstructed' without reference to the museological stance or the hands and minds which have shaped them. Yet these seemingly intangible elements must be sought out. As this particular museum experience shows, such an exercise will miss the very significance of the display, and will be making purely aesthetic judgments of what amounts to an act of restitution.

NOTES

¹ Emilia Vaillant, 'Les Musées de Société en France: chronologie et définition', *Musées et Sociétés* (Paris, Ministère de la Culture, 1993), p.37.

All translations from the French are by the author.

² Interview with Jean-Pierre Laurent, 19 May 1995.

- ³. For the history of museum development, see Kevin Walsh, The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World (London, Routledge, 1992).
- ⁴. The municipal council who then funded the museum, changed from a Socialist to Gaullist majority in 1983.
- ⁵. Jean-Claude Duclos, 'La Communauté grecque de Grenoble et le Musée Dauphinois', Des Grecs: Les Grecs de Grenoble; Les Costumes de la Grèce traditionnelle (Grenoble, Musée Dauphinois, 1993), p.11.
- ⁶. Interview with Jean Guibal, 22 May 1995.
- ⁷. Interviews with committee members, Basile Zembalas and Hélène Faure-Georgopoulos, June 1995.
- ⁸. See transcripts of these interviews in Des Grecs; Les Grecs de Grenoble (see footnote 5).
- ⁹. Interview with Hélène Faure-Georgopoulos, June 1995.
- ¹⁰. Mme Sage to Musée Dauphinois, undated, museum archives.
- ¹¹. Association Franco-Hellenique de Grenoble to Musée Dauphinois, undated, museum archives.
- ¹². He does not specify whether this refers to France or Greece. Turkish Consul-Général of Lyon to Musée Dauphinois, 23 June 1993, museum archives.
- ¹³. Duclos to Turkish Consul-Général of Lyon, 28 June 1993, museum archives.
- ¹⁴. Melina Mercouri to Musée Dauphinois, 4 January 1994, museum archives. With echoes of a Greek tragedy, Mercouri died from cancer within weeks of writing.
- ¹⁵. Abdelmalek Sayad, 'A Land of No Return', The Unesco Courier (Oct 1996), pp.10-12.
- ¹⁶. For a discussion of such imagined genealogies, see Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London, Verso, 1991).
- ¹⁷. Faure-Georgopoulos, Lambros & Thémélidès, l'oiç: Mémoire d'une Communauté grecque; Reflets de l'exposition "Des Grecs" au Musée Dauphinois 1993 (Grenoble, 1993)
- ¹⁸. Interviews with Basile Zembalas and Hélène Faure-Georgopoulos, June 1995.