

LES **GRÈCS**
30 MAI – 28 SEPTEMBRE 2008

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THE **GREEKS**



Musée canadien des civilisations
Canadian Museum of Civilization
100, rue Laurier Street, Gatineau, Québec K1A 0M8

www.civilisations.ca/grecs

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The Greeks

One of the most celebrated and influential cultures in world history is showcased this summer in Ottawa-Gatineau as the Canadian Museum of Civilization proudly presents **The Greeks**. This major exhibition is a unique opportunity for a Canadian audience to explore — through an array of prized artifacts — the rich history and legacy of the Greek people.

Visitors will see over 180 exceptional objects, including rare sculptures and ceramics; jewellery and paintings; embroidered textiles and religious icons; toys and figurines; and much more. These artifacts provide a wonderful introduction to the diversity of Greek art, culture and society, and to the many achievements of the Greek people. The exhibition also underlines the role of Greece as a cultural crossroads, a meeting place for peoples and ideas from many lands.

The exhibition is organized chronologically and has four principal zones: **Prehistory and Antiquity** (7000 BCE – fourth century CE), **The Byzantine Period** (fourth century – fifteenth century), **The Greeks in the Ottoman Empire** (fifteenth century – eighteenth century) and **Towards an Independent Greek State** (nineteenth century).

The Greeks was organized by the prestigious Benaki Museum in Athens, and is being toured internationally. The Museum of Civilization is the exhibition's only Canadian stop and will feature a number of specially selected artifacts displayed nowhere else on the tour.

The quality of the artifacts and the fascinating storyline have made this exhibition an international hit. Although designed for a general audience, it should be of particular interest to North American families of Greek heritage who wish to explore, celebrate and share their unique culture and history.

The Greeks is presented at the Canadian Museum of Civilization from May 30 to September 28, 2008.

Join us for the official opening on Thursday, May 29 at 5:30 p.m. in the Grand Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization. Please RSVP by May 26 at 819 776-8382 or by e-mail at rsvp@civilization.ca.

Museum of Civilization is the only Canadian venue for the international tour of **The Greeks**

Gatineau, Quebec, March 14, 2008 — Athens, Sparta, Troy and Constantinople — the names echo the incredible history and power of ancient empires. The Greek world left a significant imprint on Western culture and civilizations. Discover 8,000 years of history in the Museum's upcoming must-see exhibition, **The Greeks**.

Opening on May 30 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, this exhibition presents a stunning array of more than 180 artifacts from the prestigious Benaki Museum in Athens. This exceptional collection includes sculptures and ceramics, jewellery and embroidered textiles, paintings, metalwork, religious icons, toys, figurines, lamps, wooden chests and more. These artifacts provide an insight into the diversity of Greek art, culture and society.

"Ancient Greek civilization has had an enormous influence on the social, cultural and political life of much of the world," said Dr. Victor Rabinovitch, President and CEO of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation. "We're delighted to bring this complex and fascinating story to a Canadian audience, especially through such a diverse and exquisite collection of artifacts."

The objects in the first section of the exhibition, *Prehistory and Antiquity* (7000 BCE – fourth century CE), are from a time when agriculture and animal husbandry were first established on Greek soil, and up to the early centuries of the Common Era, when Greece was part of the Roman Empire. The artifacts bear witness to the unparalleled sweep of Greek civilization, which continues to influence the world today. One striking example is a crown of oak leaves and flowers in engraved and embossed gold leaf from the Hellenistic period. Another is the marble head from a statue of Paris, a figure in Greek mythology that dates from the Roman period.

In *The Byzantine Period* section (fifth century – fifteenth century) objects span 1,000 years, beginning with the fall of Rome in 476 CE, when only the eastern section of the Roman Empire survived. The Byzantine Empire's, linguistic and cultural heritage remained essentially Greek and many of its traditions, symbols and institutions were drawn from its Hellenistic and Roman past. The artifacts in this section reflect political, artistic, intellectual and religious influences that extended far beyond the borders of the Byzantine Empire and include objects such as a processional cross from Constantinople made from moulded, hammered, engraved and punched copper.

In the third section, *The Greeks in the Ottoman Empire* (fifteenth century – eighteenth century), the artifacts represent the period when the Greek world fell into the hands of the Ottoman Turks. The richness of the artifacts attests to the resilience of Greek culture under foreign domination and shows that Ottoman rule did not signify the end of the Greek world. One of the objects in this section is an elegant chalice in gilded silver plate, inspired by the ornamentation on European watches imported into the East.

The last section, *Towards an Independent Greek State*, displays objects from the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the Greek people rose up against the Ottoman Empire and gained their independence. Some artifacts in this section date from the 10-year Greek War of Independence while others attest to the enduring power of Greece as a defining force in the Western imagination and identity. One such object is a magnificent oil painting of the English poet Lord Byron in Greek costume.

The Museum of Civilization will be the only venue in Canada for the international tour of **The Greeks**. The Museum has specially selected 12 artifacts that will be displayed nowhere else on the tour.

The exhibition, **The Greeks**, is presented at the Canadian Museum of Civilization from May 30 to September 28, 2008.

The Benaki Museum is known internationally as a leading repository of Greek treasures. It was founded in 1930 by Antonis Benakis, who contributed his private collection, in memory of his father Emmanuel Benakis. The Greek collection now boasts more than 40,000 artifacts. The Museum also includes Coptic, Chinese, Pre-Columbian and Islamic art. The collections are housed in many locations in Athens, including the former mansion of the Benaki family in central Athens, adjacent to the Presidential Palace and the Greek National Gardens.

Media Information:

Chief, Media Relations
Canadian Museum of Civilization
Tel.: 819 776-7167

Media Relations Officer
Canadian Museum of Civilization
Tel.: 819 776-7169

Fax: 819 776-7187

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About the Exhibition

This exhibition brings together some of the most beautiful treasures of Athens' prestigious Benaki Museum, taking us through 8,000 years of Greek history. In doing so, it shows us how Greece has influenced the world and how the world has influenced Greece.

The Greeks is organized chronologically into four principal zones:

1. Prehistory and Antiquity (7000 BCE to 4th century CE)

This zone begins in prehistory, when the first livestock breeders and farmers settled on Greek soil. It extends into antiquity through the Classical golden age, and into the early centuries of the current era, when Greece became part of the Roman Empire. This section looks at the great history of the Greek civilization, which, with its explorers, traders, philosophers, political reformers, writers and artists, and with its myths and its gods, established the cultural foundations of the West and left its mark on the world.

The artifacts in this zone bear witness to the unparalleled sweep of Greek civilization. Notable examples include:

- **Beak-spouted jug** (1400-1350 BCE). This is an outstanding example of Mycenaean pottery, named after the southern Greek city of Mycenae, the most important centre of a palatial culture of the Late Bronze Age.
- **Torque with lynx-head finials** (Early 2nd century BCE). This necklace of twisted gold is from the Hellenistic period. Torques were originally worn by Persian, Scythian and Celtic warriors who invaded Greece and neighboring lands. They believed the decorative subjects — in this case, lynx heads — endowed the wearer with strength and good fortune.
- **Wreath of oak leaves and flowers** (Late 2nd to early 1st centuries BCE). This stunning gold wreath is an exquisite example of the goldsmith's art in Hellenistic times. The crowning of the dead with a gold wreath signified that they were worthy enough to demand eternal life after death.

2. The Byzantine Period (Fourth to Fifteenth Centuries) this section covers about 1,000 years of history. It begins in the fourth century, when Germanic invasions threatened the Roman Empire. With the fall of Rome in 476, all that remained of the Empire was its eastern part, which came to be known as the Byzantine Empire. Constantinople (now Istanbul) was its capital, Christianity was its religion, and its linguistic and cultural heritage was essentially Greek. Through commerce, migration, invasions and other interactions, peoples from Europe, Asia Minor and North Africa lived together, encountered one another and often confronted one another.

The objects displayed here reflect this Byzantine cultural synthesis, whose political, artistic, intellectual and religious influence extended far beyond the Byzantine Empire. Among the most notable artifacts:

- **ProceSSIONAL cross** (1000-1050). This impressive religious object from Constantinople is made from moulded, hammered, engraved and punched copper. It bears images of the crucified Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Saint George.
- **Toy horse** (5th—7th century). Made of bone stained with red pigment, this wheeled horse from Egypt is one of the most luxurious toys to survive from its era, when bone was an expensive material.
- **Applique ornament** (5th century). The precision and balance of its design place this piece of jewellery among those of the highest quality from the fifth century. Probably crafted in Syria, this ornament is made from gold and glass-paste gems.

3. The Greeks in the Ottoman Empire (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)

During this period, the Greek world came under the authority of the Ottoman Turks, who arrived from Asia Minor and conquered Constantinople in 1453. By 1718, the Ottomans controlled almost all Greek territory. The Greek world nonetheless remained vital. In keeping with a Muslim tradition of tolerance, the Orthodox Christian Church was maintained by the Ottoman authorities. Greeks often occupied important positions in the Ottoman administration, and Greek communities at the parish, village and city levels enjoyed a form of self-administration.

The objects presented in this zone illustrate the resilience of the Greek world and the importance of ecclesiastical art in the survival of Greek identity. Examples include:

- **Icon of the Virgin of Tenderness** (ca. 1609). In this monumental icon — made in Crete from wood adorned with gold leaf — the Virgin is depicted holding the Christ Child, who touches his mother's chin with childish tenderness. This icon is striking for its emotional charge, sparked by the pose and the expression of both figures.
- **Chalice** (1650-1700). Made of silver, this exceptionally elegant vessel reflects a style characteristic of workshops in Constantinople. This chalice comes from a village church in a region conquered by the Turks four centuries before the fall of Constantinople. Despite the Turkish conquest, the Christian community survived for 900 years.
- **Bridal costume of Astypalaia** (18th-19th century). This impressive bridal costume from the Aegean island of Astypalaia has a blend of Byzantine and Renaissance influences. The headdress includes long silk veils and a velvet cap encrusted with pearls and embroidered with gold wire.

4. Towards an Independent Greek State (Nineteenth Century)

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a nationalist sentiment arose in Greece, leading to a widespread uprising in 1821. Although initially condemned by several European powers, the revolutionary movement forged ahead and eventually benefited from the intervention of Russia, Great Britain and France. In 1827, the Ottomans and their Egyptian allies were defeated at the Battle of Navarino. Three years later, in 1830, the London Protocol proclaimed the independence of Greece.

Some of the objects presented here bear direct witness to a decade or so of war, the Greek War of Independence. Others highlight Greece's enduring importance in the Western imagination.

- **Sabre** (Early 19th century). The sabre was commonly used by freedom fighters in the War of Independence. This one has a richly decorated scabbard. Outstanding, on one side, is the representation of a horseman with a raised sabre, evoking a triumphant Saint George, and the scene of a man wrestling with a lion, which alludes to one of the labours of Heracles (Hercules).
- **Young Greek Defending His Wounded Father** (1827). This oil painting by Ary Scheffer presents, upon the stage of history, a Greek youth who acquires a sense of duty and becomes a man in the hour of battle, as his wounded father dies. In this composition, the artist alludes to Greece's ancient past, which the fighting Greeks are defending.
- **Lord Byron in Greek Dress** (ca. 1830). This oil painting of the British poet is by an unknown artist. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Lord Byron did not perceive Greece as merely the timeless setting of a past heroic world. In his poems, Greece is revealed as a passionate, colourful land filled with living people who deserve a better fate. In 1823, Lord Byron went to Missolonghi to offer his services to the Greek cause. His death there a year later fired up the philhellenic movement in Europe, inspired artists, and forced the conditions in contemporary Greece upon the European imagination and conscience.