

THE MAGIC TOUCH OF THE WITCHES OF SMYRNA

A NEW APPROACH ON NEOCLASSICAL HOTELS

IN THE CENTRE OF ATHENS

Imagine. Women in laced shirts, long pleated skirts and straw hats over curled hair are gossiping about men. It is teatime in a high-ceiling confectionery room decorated with plaster ornaments. A musical trio is playing airs from Vienna. Tender light is diffused through windows opening to the Palace –today the Parliament, in the Constitution Square of Athens.

It is not by chance that such scene, from the famous T.V. series ‘The Witches of Smyrna’, was shot at the *King’s George II* Palace-hotel. The design of the 7th floor’s dining room and the front of the building recall the style of the late 19th - early 20th century. The scenario based on the same book - a best seller- refers to the ethics and adventures of the Greek population at Smyrna (in Minor Asia – nowadays in Turkey) at the same period.

There are many buildings in Athens reminiscent of the style ‘late 19th -early 20th century’– called neoclassical. But, gazing only at their façade often provides a plain perception. Instead, being inside a building, where interior decoration has kept also the essential neoclassical elements, offers a three-dimensional

sensation; like being on stage within the relevant scenery. Such buildings are museums, banks, homes, and hotels. Visit the latter, among other neoclassical sights of the town, even if you do not intend to rent a room. They have been specially renovated for the Olympic Games and preserved the best of their neoclassical patrimony. The advantage is that they are easy to access and open all day. Moreover, you may offer yourself a cup of coffee in those places where famous politicians, artists and diplomats have been accommodated.

For instance, we have spotted such locations in the centre of Athens: GRANDE BRETAGNE HOTEL (1 Vass. Georgiou, Constitution Square) and next to it, KING GEORGE II HOTEL; ACROPOLIS HOUSE (Kodrou 6 -the Voulis street extension- Plaka, close to the Constitution Square); and nearby ELECTRA PALACE (Nikodimou 18-20); MAGNA GRECIA (Mitropoleos 54-close to Constitution Square); CECIL (39, Athinas, close to metro Monastiraki); RIO HOTEL (13 Odysseus street, Karaiskaki square).

But what are the characteristics you should be looking for?

The architectural concept

Neoclassicism had been developed in Europe (19th century) as a reaction to the pompous 'Baroque' style (18th century) in architecture and the 'Rococo' in decoration. The new-lit style inspired directly from the Greek antiquity. The archaeological excavations in Greece and Pompey contributed largely to this new trend.

What had happened in Greece then, was not simply a transposition of the contemporary European taste. A genuine style had been created by the combination of the European trend with local elements.

The main traits were, from the outside, the wrought-iron railings with their marble supports, the end-tiles and the earthenware pots; inside, plaster decoration and the 'Pompeian style' frescoes. Iron railings often represented themes from the antiquity. These motifs formed the repertoire of the morphological and constructional elements that were gradually became the standardized features of neoclassical buildings.

The new style had been developed in Greece during the kingship of the first monarch, the Bavarian Otto. He ruled in the beginning of the decade 1830. Naturally Europe –especially Germany- had a great impact in new institutions and arts. Jurists, scholars, engineers and architects had been invited. Among the latter the Danish Hansen brothers played a prominent role, as almost all neoclassical buildings in the Athens historic centre are part of their legacy.

Especially Theophilus Edward Hansen was a leading figure of the urban construction plan implemented by the Bavarians. It was him who designed Dimitriou mansion that became later *Grande-Bretagne* hotel. Karl Schinkel a famous architect, who left his print into Berlin neoclassical scenery, had influenced Theophilus Hansen. Moreover Hansen included elements reminiscent both of ancient Greek and Roman architecture.

From Hansen's tracks

The most innovative characteristic was the successive arcades on the ground floor –as you can still see on the façade of *Grande-Bretagne and King George II*. Their style was inspired from the Roman Agora beneath Acropolis. This was made on purpose, to deviate from the linear design of the formal classicism. Additionally, this formed a pleasant contrast to the straight and rigid design of the neighbouring Palace.

The ornate wrought-iron railings at the windows and balconies depicted mythological scenes. Besides, the corbels supporting the balconies in form of lions were imported from Vienna. Indeed, *Grande-Bretagne* was considered as the sole example where “classicism on the wave managed to attain Attic grandeur” as Hansen praised himself.

It is even reported that Otto's satisfaction in Hansen's architectural prototype was so great that he commanded all other buildings surrounding the Constitution Square should follow the same principles.

The *King George II* was also originally a mansion that served as an annex to the Palace. Remember to look for the marble carpet, made accordingly to the Italian way ‘marmo-tapeto’ in the lobby, which ushers guests into a luxurious foyer.

To Ernst Ziller's footsteps

Hansen after leaving Greece (1843) remained in close contact with his pupil, Ernst Ziller, whose mark on Athenian architecture can still be seen. Ziller followed his predecessor guidelines. His buildings were often lavishly ornamented. He designed –among others- mansions that later became hotels, *Magna-Grecia, Rio, Electra*.

CECIL is next to the old market of Athens. Ziller had constructed it as a hotel from the beginning. In the high-ceiling entrance, the initial colours on the walls – deep brownish red (tile colour) and white-are meticulously preserved. On your left, in the coffee-room, authentic old geometrical designs on the floor catch the eye. “The size of the balconies and luxury in rooms was decreasing from the first to the third floor. Wealthy travelers used to rent rooms on the first floor because there were no elevators,” the owner explained what was looking contrary to our today practice. “Electricity was introduced in 1888”, he added.

Nevertheless, the unexpected treasure hidden in this hotel is an old photo of 1930. It shows the amazing scenery round Cecil hotel: marble pavements, marble coated streets. On Cecil's façade, an oil lamp hanging from its pulley can be seen. At the crossroad of Athinas and Kalamidas streets -where Cecil stands- dirty automobile wheels left dark traces on the marble roads, like a modern graphic design.

Looking for frescoes

Although Greek painters of the same period had been influenced by classicism (especially the Munich school) and later by impressionism, those who were painting frescoes did not follow the evolution of painting.

Quite the opposite of what happened in Renaissance. Then, painters gained an important socio-economic status. Ever since, they gradually concentrated on the canvas work leaving frescoes apart. The reason was both technical factors and social evolution. For instance, new substances and materials affected painting technique. On the other hand, industrialisation and commerce produced new sponsors for artists.

So, frescoes in Greece were considered as decorative art conforming to the dominant-social-class taste. Therefore, they followed architecture's neoclassical trend. You can see many of such frescoes in Schliemann's mansion (today Coins Museum, Panepistimiou 12) built by Ziller. Notice that paintings copying Pompeian frescoes had been found among Ziller's belongings.

But among hotels, *Acropolis House* is probably the only one that preserved frescoes inside. They adorn the entrance and in some rooms, frescoes were revealed from the earthquake of 1999.

Through history

The historical background is stamped by efforts of the new independent Greece to liberate the rest of its territory.

Vital events marked this era.

Greece became a state in 1827. In 1834 first king, the Bavarian Otto, transported the capital in Athens to remove the power from the local chiefs.

In 1843 people revolted. The consequence was the concession of a Constitution.

In 1862 Otto's monarchy was abolished and a year later king George I (1845-1913), from Dane mark, succeeded him to the throne. Although the Cretans rebelled against Turks in 1896, this year heralded the first resurrection of the Olympic games in Athens. Restorations took place and new buildings emerged. The impoverished Greece had been further bled by the reparation costs of the Greek-Turkish war of 1897.

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by the war in Balkans (1912-1913, that resulted Greece's expansion to the North up to Thessalonica and Ioannina), the First World War and the disaster in Asia Minor, in 1922. There, Greece had been defeated by Turkish troops, in Turkish territory, while attempting to restore ancient borders. According to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), an exchange of populations took place between Greece and Turkey. It was then that refugees from Smyrna came in Athens. Cathy, a principal heroine of 'The Witches of Smyrna', was allegedly among them.

So, consider monuments not only Acropolis and museums but also neoclassical hotels. Visit them and get a glimpse of a mythical world.