

Ministry of Culture
General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage

*The Tree of Life
through four seasons*



ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ
ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ



περιβάλλον
& πολιτισμός

“Take with you the child
who saw the light under the leaves of that plane tree
and teach him to study the trees”
George Seferis, Astyanax

In the Greek conceptions about the creation of the world, we can easily identify the close bonds that tie the social organisation to the image of the natural environment, with the aim to balance a world where knowledge can justify faith with rational arguments. In four eras of the Greek civilisation –antiquity, Byzantine middle age, modern Greece, and contemporary culture– the same perception can be traced.

The symbolism of the tree, rich and multifaceted, deeply rooted in the minds of people, combines myths and religious beliefs, traditions and philosophical ideas.

Its origins go back to the past, feed the fruits of the present and ensure the fresh sprouts that will shine in the future, as a spirit that miraculously gushes from the depths of the earth.

Launching the new annual institution “Environment and Culture”, we address a double invitation: to celebrate the arrival of spring and to visit museums and archaeological sites, places where monuments harmoniously coexist with nature.

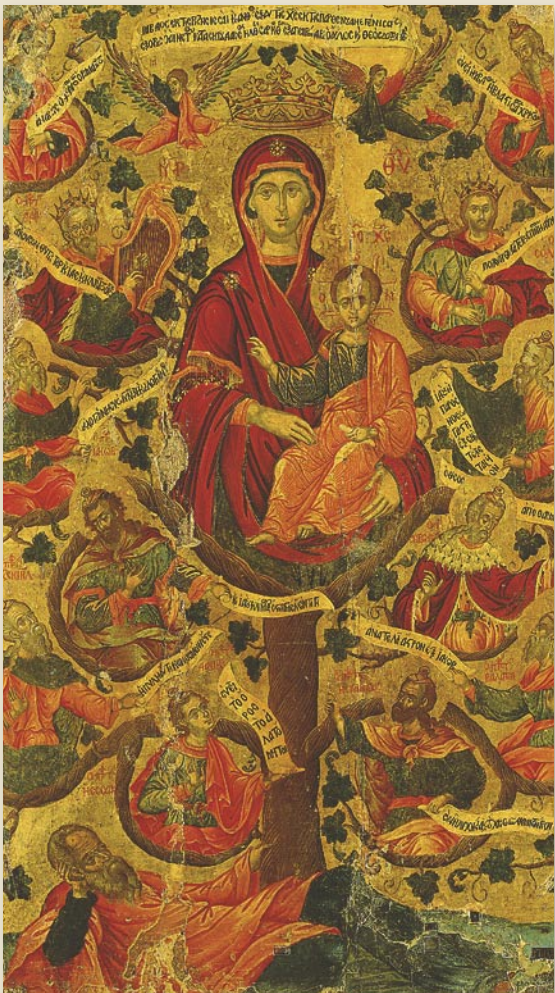
The poetry of George Seferis sends the hopeful message...



The tree between earth and heaven

The tree is the bond that brings together three worlds: the earthy, the celestial and the underworld. It springs from the ground and rises to the sky; under its leaves and its trunk, its roots spread in mysterious paths. In Greek myths many trees possess the gift of prophecy or bear fruits that offer divine wisdom and eternal youth. For instance, the sacred oak tree at Dodone whispers oracles and Apollo's laurel foresees the future at Delphi; while the great Hercules in his last labour obtains the golden apples of Esperides and thus becomes immortal.

The tree is intimately related with both death and birth. It may stand above a grave, in place of a tombstone, reminding the elusive fate of mortals. But on this vase painting an extraordinary birth is depicted. Leaning on the trunk of a tree, Leto gives birth to her twin children. Light spread on the island of Delos when Apollo was born, whereas the palm tree that sheltered his mother sprang its golden branches shining like the sun.



The tree between past and present

In describing our history and origins, we often borrow expressions from the “vocabulary” of the tree: roots, family tree, branches of a family, fruits of a wedding... We identify our relatives, ancestors and progeny, with the parts of a tree; and when we draw its image we come up with a trunk where the past meets the present –and the promises of the future.

A version of the family tree is the Root of Iessai. This iconographic pattern emerges in Medieval art, in the west and subsequently in the east, where it becomes increasingly popular, especially during in the post-Byzantine era. It shows in a symbolic way Christ's human origins from the royal family of David. From the reclined body of Iessai grows a tree. The male ancestors of Christ are depicted in the branches surrounding the precious flower: the Virgin and the Child. The picture glorifies the holy birth in the same way as the verses of the Christmas hymn: “Branch of the root of Iessai and flower of the branch, Christ, You who sprouted from the Virgin”.



The tree and the fruits of fertility

For centuries before the industrial revolution, human lives were closely linked with the cycle of seasons. Flowering and fruit bearing, decay and rebirth were experiences awesome and wonderful as well as important for survival. Underneath the hard surface of the tree's trunk run the secret fluids of spring and the emerging vegetation is conceived as a magical expression of their strength.

The tree appears through the ages and in different civilisations as a symbol of eternal rebirth and fertility. We may find it in the iconography of the creto-mycenean world, on the pottery of the archaic period, on the decoration of Byzantine churches, often surrounded by animals, real or imaginary. In each example the image may conceal various additional meanings; yet the main idea remains the same. The tree is the sacred expression of nature, the breath of universe, the very synonym of life.

In Greek folk art, the tree often decorates the embroidered sheets of the bride. With colourful fruits, joyful flowers and birds flying between its branches, it has the power to scare away bad omens, bring good luck and ensure fertility.



The last tree

The tree, once worshiped like a divine presence, loved like a partner, praised for its beauty and virtues, and grafted with multiple symbolisms, is above all a part of nature in danger. Shortly after the fires that marked the summer of 2007, the painter Kostas Tsoklis exhibited a series of works that have the aspect of an ancient tragedy. The flaming tree seems to take the role and the voice of the head of the chorus to narrate in first person the story of the catastrophe. The yellow paper attached to the canvas breaks free like a spark ready to fly away from the nightmarish picture. It is certainly the cause of disaster. Nevertheless, it could also deliver the light of hope, fluttering to the vase painting with Apollo's birth, to stand on the golden branches of the palm tree on the break of dawn. What we can do? Much! Without forgetting the crimson of the fire, we can welcome the spring, turning our eyes to the fresh green that emerges through the ashes...



2. Theodoros Poulakis, Virgin, the Root of Iessai, 1666, 70x107 cm., Byzantine and Christian Museum (n. 1575)



1. Detail from a red-figured vase (pyxis) from Athens, 340-330 B.C., h. 26 cm., National Archaeological Museum (n.1635)



3. Detail from an embroidered bridal sheet from Ioannina, end of 18th c., 120x30 cm., Museum of Greek Folk Art (n. 3386)



4. Kostas Tsoklis, untitled, January 2008, 70x100 cm., Astrolavos Art Gallery, Athens