

# ERNST ZILLER'S ARCHITECTURAL DECORATION AND ITS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Johannis Tsoumas

*PhD. Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Department of Interior Architecture, Decoration and Design*

## ABSTRACT:

Architectural decoration, whether exterior or interior, has always been a very important part in the history of architecture as it not only represented the aesthetic trends of each era, but also described vividly the cultural dimensions of architectural structures and therefore the cultural context of the societies within which they were created. In many cases, the significance of religion, national identity, social reclassification and even political activities and manipulations of the time, was reflected through the decoration of a variety of quite distinct architectural styles. The following article attempts to illuminate the unseen sides of the particularly important philhellene Bavarian architect Ernst Ziller, whose work marked the course of modern Greece. More specifically, the interior decoration of approximately six hundred buildings he designed and constructed in Athens and many provincial cities of the country, constituted the "mirror" of the social and cultural revival of Greece in the late 19th and early 20th century. Thus, the following article, through the historical and morphological dimensions of decoration in selected works of the aforementioned architect, tries to focus on its cultural value and therefore its contribution to the upgrading of the national identity of the country.

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Corresponding Author

E-mail:

iannis33@hotmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

The distinguished work of the German architect Ernst Ziller (1837-1923), constitutes a very important issue in the Modern Greek architecture history. His brilliant march began during his studies when, at the same time, he was working, in the Vienna office of the Danish architect Theophile Hansen, one of the most prominent representatives of the Greek neoclassicism, it being an important acquaintance that was to earmark his career. In 1861 he arrived in Athens as a Hansen's representative and became the supervisor of the construction of the Academy of Athens building. He quickly joined the Athenian society and settled in Greece getting married to a Greek lady, Sophia Douda, a piano teacher, the daughter of a merchant from Kozani, who he met and married in Vienna in 1876, and remained in the country until his death in November 1923. The favor of the king and the assignment to him of studying the summer palace at Tatoi, and later the Crown Prince's palace attracted unsurprisingly a crowd of bourgeois who entrusted him with the design of their mansions or cottage villas. At the same time he began designing a variety of public and municipal buildings and churches, which included the Museum of Olympia, The General Chemical State Laboratory, the Market Tower and the Church of St. Luke at Patission Avenue, that is a huge number of projects whose full cataloging has not been possible hitherto [1].

Ziller indulged with particular emphasis on the design of both external and internal decoration of his buildings and this is shown by the number of surviving decorative projects which reveal his

intention to have the overall responsibility for the final form of his creations. He studied the architecture of the Parthenon, he copied and redesigned its gables, and was among the first persons who noted down the polychrome in the statues and the architectural members of the Temple of Hephaestus (Thissio), The Erechtheion, the ancient temple on the north side of the Acropolis, and the temple of Aphaia in Aegina, while he exhibited a strong research interest in the Byzantine architecture. These studies resulted in decorative elements mainly for the dwellings that he built. So the classicist sense he applied to his most public and private edifices sealed the mature phase of neoclassicism, while similarly in the ecclesiastical architecture he tried and finally managed to preserve the Byzantine tradition. Ziller formalized the link of Renaissance with antiquity, but also with the newer northern European architecture with distinct eclectic tendencies, as it was initially implemented by his "master" Theophile Hansen [2]. From their frequent contacts he seized the opportunity to transfer to Greece decorative shapes, themes and designs which bore the history-oriented trends that flourished at that time in Vienna. These ornamental elements had always been the catalytic source of inspiration or even obvious imitation in the formation of the impressive decoration of the large theatres he designed [3]. Through our references to some selected works of his, this paper aims to investigate, detect and analyse not just the aesthetic dynamics of the decorative elements used in them, but mostly their cultural value and contribution to the creation of an indigenous



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structural / decorative style, which was to be the bastion of the modern domestic architecture, and by extension of the socio-political evolution of Greece at that time. Accordingly, we will highlight how decoration constituted an important step towards the formation of a 'new' state which, despite its long history, was looking for way so as to obtain its national identity and consciousness.

### THE APOLLON THEATER IN THE CITY OF PATRAS

Holding a dominant position in King George A! Square, now Dimokratias Square in the city of Patras, the lyric theatre "Apollon" is an emblematic building, erected on the same site which was provided in 1829 by order of the Governor Ioannis Kapodistrias [4].



Figure 1: the "Apollon" theatre of Patras in water colour. Its renaissance structural form merges wonderfully with its ancient decorative elements [5].

Ziller, moving within the aesthetic currents of neoclassicism and eclecticism, chose to design a building of neo-renaissance style. He subdivided the, inspired by the early Italian Renaissance, facade in three zones with two peaks, using successive arches, which gave the building its unique features of his architectural stamp and personal style. Four marble pillars of Tuscan style supported the arched openings of the first elevated zone with a gallery while the second zone's arched openings, i.e. the loggia, were based on our marble Ionic columns. For the painting decorating of the gallery, he chose mythological subjects with forms of seated young men, while the six pilasters on the parapet of the third zone, formed the basis of the clay statues, which, crowning the roof, lent grandeur to the building, completing the aesthetics of the facade and suggesting the "Apollonian" harmony of the lyric theatre. Its interior was modelled according to the architectural grading of the corresponding Italian theatre posts. The velvet curtain, the chandelier and the elaborate paintings, dominated by ochre, brown and blue, completed the Ziller's aesthetic proposal for "Apollon" [6]. All of this architecture and visual glamour prepared in the most appropriate way the reception of melodrama in Patras. Besides, the capital of the Peloponnese was

then the cradle of financial soundness, the modernizing spirit and the European culture of the bourgeoisie whose cosmopolitan conception was akin to the aesthetics and spirit culture of Western metropolises.

### The Ziller - Loverdos Mansion

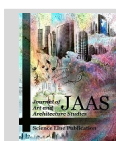
In the late 19th century the Ziller-Loverdos Mansion designed and built under the supervision of the great architect in order to house the home, office and a workshop of his, was an excellent example of mature Neoclassicism. With Hymettus marble at the base of the ground floor and carved decorations on the facade, the building was decorated with rich plastic items such as thumbnail forms with Caryatids heads, Ionic pilasters, roof paintings and mouldings, wonderful earthy colours that suggested Pompeii frescoes, mosaics, marble and ceramic tiles [7].

The linings of the wood that was used for the rooms and the public areas of the building had often gilded sections. Regarding the metallic items, two massive chandeliers stick out for their decorative aesthetics, whereas the fireplaces with the inlaid metallic embossed plates, the radiators with the relief decoration, the unique style window railings and the doors of cast iron, the ornamented bronze locks and door handles as well as the window frames made of copper, are unique objects of the interior architecture of that era. Some of its parts were strongly characterised by the Byzantine style which he was influenced by mainly because of his church architectural works. For all these reasons the building has been declared as a protected one since 1981 [8].

The plot, which Ziller bought in 1882 was of an odd shape, because although it was principally rectangular with its main face on Mavromichalis Street, it featured an elongated strip which "saw" Akadimias Street. In that section there was a small office for the trade of the cement plates and tiles, which Ziller used to design and manufacture in a laboratory located in the rear of the plot. The construction of the building was completed in 1885 and its interior painting and decoration were made by the well-known Slovenian painter Jury Subic who painted the Schliemann's Mansion "Ilion Melathron", another Ziller's work, too [9].

### THE STATHATOS MANSION

In this building Ziller had chosen to combine elements of the ancient Greek and Roman architecture and created a work typical of his eclectic viewpoint. The two wings of the building, which are parallel to each other, give the impression that they are symmetric, but they are not. The wings form an inside corner, upon which the architect created an impressively fashioned renaissance entrance comprising two floors. The entrance has arches and columns downstairs, while upstairs there are pilasters (columns in a square shape that are embedded in wall next to an opening as a support and / or a decorative element) and two classical statues on the roof.



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Figure 2. The Stathatos Mansion was one of the most impressive Ziller's houses both for its structure and decoration, [10].

In the other corners of the roof there are rosettes (marble or ceramic architectural ornaments which usually represent flowers), characteristic features of the classical ancient architecture. The building consists of ground, first and second floor. Doorways on the first floor lead to bows, and the doors of the second floor lead to triangular pediments. The balconies on the second floor stick out, while in the openings in the first floor there are railings that do not protrude from the frame of the building. In this way the second floor balconies visually follow the large balcony that forms the roof of the entrance [11]. The portico of the Stathatos Mansion has a specific interest. Its shape makes it stand-alone in space, and its composite role is particularly important, as it is actually the element that unifies the whole building and gives clear direction to the axis that it specifies. Four columns of Doric - Tuscan rhythm and another four complex ones support the domed structure which is the propyl on housing and ends in a horizontal roof. To highlight the main movement shaft two larger Corinthian rhythm columns are used, flanking the entrance but they do not perform a static role, [11].

In appearance, the eight columns (composite or not) support arches with supernatant curled Ionic entablature. A sculptural decoration in floral patterns and forms is presented at the side triangles, the arcs, as well as in the frieze. The ground plan is defined and formed by both the four corners of a rectangle and two semicircles. The four Doric-Tuscan simple columns are mounted radially in the Chamber, two in each one. They are positioned at the corners of an imaginary regular hexagon, whose two halves are grown away from each other and are impressed on the two semicircles. With respect to the complex double columns, one part follows the formulation of semicircles, while the other is located on the narrow sides of the parallelogram. The creator of the Stathatos Mansion was modeled according to the city palaces designs (palais), which were distinguished for their complex construction and rich architectural decoration.

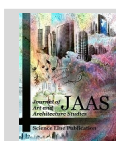
## THE NATIONAL THEATRE BUILDING

The theatre, which opened in 1901 as "The Royal Theatre" and immediately became the centre of the Greek capital, lived a turbulent life, following close behind the fate of the city which hosted it. The decorative fashions brutally disfigured it, earthquakes destabilized it and the needs of its history changed often its use; so its background looks today like a dense history of the city of Athens. Architects, builders, civil engineers, conservators and dozens of workshops have since laboured to bring to light the Ziller's buried treasure. So gradually 1,500 sq. m of original painted decoration were revealed under a layer of 8 mm, which chronologically consisted of whitewash and plastic paint. The baseline in the process of renovation of the project was the preservation and restoration of paintings and sculptural decoration based on the aesthetic unity, but also with respect to the historical and artistic value of the work. The work revealed murals and ceiling paintings with high painting technique with patterned features of Ziller's aesthetics of the late classicism with representations borrowed from nature and themes from the ancient Greek art [12].



Figure 3. A partial view from the interior of the wonderfully decorated Ziller's National Theatre. The European aesthetics and culture are reflected uniquely on its decorative style [13].

Entering from the entrance road at Koumoundourou Street to the basement leading to the former royal gallery and present offices, we cross a beautiful mosaic with paintings of geometric shapes, while the roof is dominated by corresponding geometric motifs, an evocative chandelier and on the wall by a baroque golden mirror; a staircase with wooden decoration on the handrail, which was repainted with natural layer this time, after its old synthetic glaze was scraped off, leads to the Central Scene stretching on the ground floor and the first floor. The preserved impressive bowl of the stage with sculpted floral decoration was discovered under a thick layer of plaster with which it was covered, and the same happened with the famous cupids that were painted on canvas stuck on the ceilings. But the most important revelation was that of the foyer on the first floor as its hallways were filled



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from end to end with amazing paintings with geometric patterns and floral motifs (tress, rosettes, stems, pigtails, etc.) that were buried under thick, dull gray plastic paint. Of particular beauty is also the current hall of the first floor. It is a huge room that was formerly the royal ballroom and is particularly impressive, with three massive chandeliers hanging in a row and a luxurious rustic mirror towering above the marble fireplace. Conservators worked even as archaeologists, since through the archives of the National Theatre they found the Ziller's original watercolours with murals and ceiling paintings that once were at the hall. After some time, they revealed classic designs with cupids and geometric motifs on the walls and ceiling and delivered them practically unchanged, giving the room the prestige it initially had had.

### THE CULTURAL VALUE OF THE EDIFICES DECORATION

"Ziller's architecture is phototropic, conversing with the light of Greece. Fluted columns in all styles, arcades, vividly decorative patterns, seem to transform his buildings into "musical instruments", where the light and shadows perform with the turn of the sun an unheard melody of a large harmonic variety. Ziller identified the residential character of the mature urban Greek society of the late 19th and early 20th century; he profoundly influenced both the petty, and the popular neoclassical architecture. His architecture was Hellenized, like its creator, who married a Greek and made his second home the place who greeted him and generously gave him the opportunity to carry out a task unparalleled in scope and quality" [14]. This was the view of art historian and director of the National Gallery Mrs Marina Lambrakis - Plaka within the major exhibition organized in Athens in 2010 for all Ziller's architectural work. From these sayings we begin to discover the cultural value of the decorative elements that he profusely used in the most Greek-spirited, in their entirety, architectural structures. Through his numerous decorative interventions both in the interior and the exterior surfaces of the two urban houses mentioned above, we find that the style of the Greek art that he borrowed, is recognized as the "ideal type" of art because through its imitation, Ziller aimed at mimicking the nature and man, and even the way they were accredited to ancient Greece. He was a proponent of the rationale that many city projects should be characterized by the "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" of the classical antiquity works. Through this the architect seemed to pursue the transmission of aesthetic principles derived from faith, the harmony of nature, logic and the reflection of moral clarity, simplicity and clearance. However, in many of his works, the scale he used appears to suffer and many of their rhythmic elements are incomplete or inconsistent. For example, the capitals of the pilasters are made of clay instead of marble, so that they cost less; as an example the marvellous

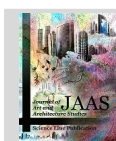
arathemote antefixes which are made of clay, as well as the pillars of railings and statues. The waves shapes he used were not carved in stone or marble, but were pulled over the plaster and changed form. Thus, the interior decoration of the Stathatos Mansion has a beauty and artistic quality, which not only shows a single spirit, but also a rare sensitivity to using these strict sculptures which suddenly became familiar again and through which the Modern Greek art regeneration was created. This building looks like, at least aesthetically, mimicking the "marbled" monumental buildings, since there have used cheaper materials in it, thus creating a standardized architecture (major economy in materials but also in decoration). Through all these features, Ziller tried to "help" Greece to regain through the new architecture its own cultural and social identity which was tied with its archaic past. Within the general climate that prevailed after the independence of Greece, and according to which the connection of the Greek national identity with its glorious past and also its integration into a European context were sought, Ziller through his structural, but also his equally remarkable decorative approach, highlighted the most of this theoretical problem of the era, the revolutionary spirit of the people and generally the high ideals of the Greek society.

Because of his strict adherence to the Orthodox Church and the legacy of Byzantine church architecture, Ziller did not hesitate to borrow and eventually adjust religious architecture frills even in the internal aesthetic approach of some urban buildings such as the Ziller- Loverdos Mansion.



Figure 4. A "byzantine" entrance in the newly restored Ziller - Loverdos Mansion [8].

Despite his intensely archaic internal aesthetics as already described we should not neglect to mention his Byzantine aesthetic bold management at many points (Aegeas, 2013). The early Christian columns with the painted over, pseudo-marble surface and their strongly painted capitals embellished with the shape of the cross in one of its rooms, create a sense of temple. But the gilded surfaces of the arches with the stylized, Byzantine aesthetics peacocks surrounded by natural decor, look like they want to



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give the viewers the impression that the history of Greece continues unabated, from antiquity to Byzantium in this building. We therefore observe that the architect in an effort to enhance in the most ideal way the Greek nation's attempt to rediscover their cultural identity which was so brutally plundered by the hard and long Turkish occupation of previous centuries, did not hesitate to use strong Christian frills the semantics of which have their roots mainly in the requirements of the Great Idea (vision of Hellenism based on the superiority of a single Greek civilization and the reconstitution of a Greek empire with its capital at Constantinople). But above all it was important to find a single architectural style, which, together with the closely affiliated decorative style would help Greece with its long and illustrious history to regain its former glory. On this reasoning were based the figurative words of Lysander Kaftantzoglou, a 19th century Greek architect and lover of the ancient Greek art, who then declared: "Wherefore Greece receiving this ancestral civilization transfigured in this way, must deprive it of its alien and estranged shell and admit it with its natural clothing, intimate and fitting to the Greek manners and customs" [15].

The theatres Ziller designed had a completely different interior decoration. It is not a coincidence that they were the first buildings he constructed in Greece and it is reasonable that they bear practically unchanged, in some cases, decorative patterns, designs, themes and techniques from the northern European culture and the Renaissance. Let's not forget how binding was their functionality regarding their decorative approach. For example, the European historicism is evident both in the way in which the ceiling paintings of our selected examples we re-elaborated and in their matography which, though ancient, is reminiscent of Renaissance. The metal constructions (rails, locks, parts of the scene) have in both theatres an almost identical decorative, northern European approach, while the heavy mirrors, and several columns refer to the Tuscan style which was very popular during the Renaissance period. However, even in these two cases the Greek aesthetic and, consequently, cultural element does not cease to exist: the Ionic or Doric columns sometimes mingle very well with the above respective structural and aesthetical elements, while the Roman Cupids seem to converse harmonically with the Greek the archaic floral motifs and geometric patterns of the corridor tiles. The imposing ancient statues on both ends of the "Apollon" Theatre neo-Renaissance facade seem to be the depository soft the western musical theatre heritage, recalling the presence of the Greek origins of the European performing arts [16]. The same goes for the relief stylized floral motifs of the National Theatre's masonry, which, based on the principle of repeatability, blend masterfully with the deep gold, almost metallic, paint of some of the walls surfaces, creating interesting ancient Greek and Europe and abates.

We therefore observe that Ziller's effort to restore the glory and truth of the ancient Greek culture in the then New Greek reality starts not so much through the initially Neo-Renaissance architecture, as through its decorative "shades". The decoration in this great architect's first works was the forerunner of the national and cultural renaissance of Hellenism which occurred through the numerous buildings that followed. It also constituted a very valuable set of messages and symbolisms which showed Greece's new position in the then European cultural scene. This very important semantic explanation is not related only to the acceptance of this relatively newly released state within the Western culture, but also to its social and political acceptance, giving it thereby the ability to move forward with optimism and lay strong foundations for its further development.

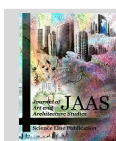


Figure 5. The ancient type statues on the "Apollon" Theatre roof highlight the ancient Greek influence on the Renaissance architecture [17].

## CONCLUSION

According to P. Lekkas (2001) "nationalism is the ideology that legitimizes politics with the use of cultural arguments which are usually drawn from the past. "We will supplement, of course, that this was achieved largely through the delineation and standardization of a nation's art and the history past, elements that usually formulate an exclusive, symbolic and entrenched ideological basis. The symbolic and ideological use of the past, which appears strongly in the context of the emergence of new states, usually acquires the form of a common origin myth. This can also signify the association of the past with an initial identity which is, many times, the key feature of a nation-state as it strengthens and forms a common consciousness [18].

Such a new state was also the late 19th and early 20th century Greece, which made it automatically as a breeding place of new cultural ideas and ideologies, that thrived, in this case, through Ziller's architectural decoration. We also saw that the culturally defined labelling of his architectural structures was produced through the material and symbolic process of decoration, the memory of which seems to be extremely important. But that was the Ziller's main



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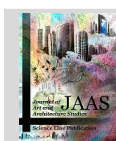
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objective: his love for the ancient Greek civilization, but also his stable political, cultural and social beliefs according to which modern Greece should be a vital part of Europe in the 20th century, armed his mind and soul with creative inspiration. Through the decorative order of most of his buildings Ziller managed not only to reproduce the ancient Greek aesthetic and ideological spirit and to propose it as an integral part of the Modern Greek culture, but also to indicate the true cultural position of Greece within the set of the culturally advanced European countries of the time. All of his aesthetic / symbolist interventions charted a new path for the country in its agonizing effort to acquire its cultural and national identity which had been lost for many centuries.

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