

MARIA KATSANAKI



GLORY
by Nikolaos Gyzis

*And deep down
Stir what was just
Unearthed from mother's soil,
The great vision, Glory.
And in her book kneeled reflectively
Let Glory write his name!*

Kostis Palamas
"For the Grave of the Painter Gyzis" (1901)



Glory of the Dimitris Gkertsos collection,
as donated to the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic on 8 February 2021

MARIA KATSANAKI

GLORY

by Nikolaos Gyzis

The painter of ideas
and the visualisation
of his national dream



BENAKI MUSEUM

The publication was issued on the occasion of the commemorative exhibition “1821 Before and After”, under the Patronage of H.E. the President of the Hellenic Republic Ms Katerina Sakellaropoulou, co-organised by the Benaki Museum, the Bank of Greece, the National Bank of Greece and Alpha Bank, in the framework of the activities of the Committee “Greece 2021” and presented at the Benaki Museum | Pireos 138, 3 March - 8 November 2021.

The edition was exclusively funded by Dimitris Gkertsos.

On 8 February 2021, Dimitris Gkertsos donated the painting by Nikolaos Gyzis *Glory* to the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic.

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Timos Tsoukalas, National Gallery / Photographic Archive, National Gallery / Stavros Psiroukis, Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki, General State Archives of Greece, Collectors

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Ecotypia SA

ISBN: 978-960-476-287-3

© edition: 2021 Benaki Museum

© texts: Maria Katsanaki

© photographs: the photographers

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GLORY BY NIKOLAOS GYZIS - the emblematic oil painting that the artist completed before the close of the 19th century, inspired by the poem “The Destruction of Psara” of Dionysios Solomos - has been imprinted in the collective memory with the image of Greece itself. Dressed in white, winged, solemn and majestic, she strides resolutely in an apocalyptic landscape under a heavy, clouded sky. She walks on the burned land the day after the destruction - but she is not pale and drawn, bent by the weight of the temporary defeat. She is lofty and untamed. She is moved by the vision of a future that will be won with a fierce struggle. Supersubstantial, she is reborn from the ashes and she heads towards a destiny of national integration, of victory and glory.

From 8 February 2021, Nikolaos Gyzis’ *Glory* belongs to all the Greeks. Its owner, Dimitris Gkertsos, in a kind gesture of high national symbolism, donated it to the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic. His gift, which acquires an added significance, as it is made in the year that we are celebrating the bicentenary of the Revolution of 1821, establishes him in the collective memory as the latest in a long line of Greek benefactors. It is a gesture of great national scope that enriches the meaning of benefaction, due to the great symbolic value of the painting. Offering to the highest office of the state a work of art whose theme, masterly elaboration and transcendental dimension energises the national imagination and elates our collective visions, Dimitris Gkertsos reminds us with poignancy of the importance of historical memory in the formation of a nation. At the same time, he introduces a guidance model, which combines moral generosity and social responsibility, patriotic ethos and democratic sensibility.

The donation of *Glory* of Nikolaos Gyzis to the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic is an offering to the Greek people. In difficult times, as the ones we are going through, it raises the national spirit, it strengthens the bonds between the citizen and the institutions of the state, it connects the private sphere with the public one, and underlines the role that high art can play in enhancing our self-knowledge.

Katerina Sakellariopoulou
President of the Hellenic Republic

“I WOULD HAVE EXECUTED WITH GREAT PLEASURE the Apotheosis of Hellas, but I cannot possibly apotheosise her all by myself, since most are set on undoing her.” These words by Nikolaos Gyzis, anthologised by the author of the book at hand, convey on the one hand the artist’s bitterness for the vicissitudes which had befallen the country he had “held within” and saw “each day greater” and on the other hand the idealism with which he approached this country’s image. In his painting *Glory*, executed with an economy of means corresponding to the laconic nature of its poetic genealogy, this image emerged as a happy union of literary and artistic creativity as well as a monument to a denied opportunity for a national apotheosis. The image’s idealism was destined to meet the painter’s disillusionment with the opinions of Greek critics and collectors. Some works of art seem to have the power to distil eras and ideas, and *Glory* is undoubtedly of that ilk.

However, we would not have been able to comprehend the importance of this work without the essay which I am fortunate enough to hereby introduce. This piece of research traces the historical grid upon which Gyzis’ inspiration lay, a grid of events in his distant homeland as well as late 19th-century artistic currents. Maria Katsanaki’s scholarly text articulates *Glory*’s fascinating biography from its creation to its acquisition at the 1928 exhibition while it scrutinises both its inconsistent reception by art reviewers and later readings. Finally, the author manages to give a layered evaluation of the work’s iconography, symbolism and technical refinements through an erudite analysis of its materiality. She does not dither in the face of questions and, most importantly, she is unafraid to leave them open to future research when investigations prove inconclusive.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Benaki Museum, I would like to congratulate Maria Katsanaki for her remarkable work and extend warmest thanks to Dimitris Gkertsos, both for his consent to include the work in the “1821 Before and After” exhibition and for his support towards this publication. Bringing this much-loved painting and a study on it to the public’s attention on the occasion of this major show, which marks the bicentenary of the Greek War of Independence, is a source of particular joy and indeed pride. The donation of *Glory* to the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic on this anniversary year signifies one more jubilant chapter in the work’s biography.

George Manginis
Academic Director, Benaki Museum

ALMOST 100 YEARS AGO, my grandfather, Vangelis Papastratos, bought the work *Glory* by Nikolaos Gyzis, encouraged by his wife, Kaiti Dambergis, one of the first women to attend the School of Fine Arts, who loved and admired Greek artists. As soon as their only daughter Haris got married to Thanasis Gkertsos, they offered the painting to them, so I grew up looking up to the *Glory* above my father's desk, until today.

We all were in awe when seeing her. I was always attracted by her gaze and each time she filled me with different emotions. Certainly a beautiful woman with an air of pride... I was wondering how much the painter himself must have admired her... At a younger age, I could not understand how *Glory* can exalt a defeat, I thought only victories. Maybe today I can understand that a *Glory* can inspire through our daily effort for a better world, even in absence of victories.

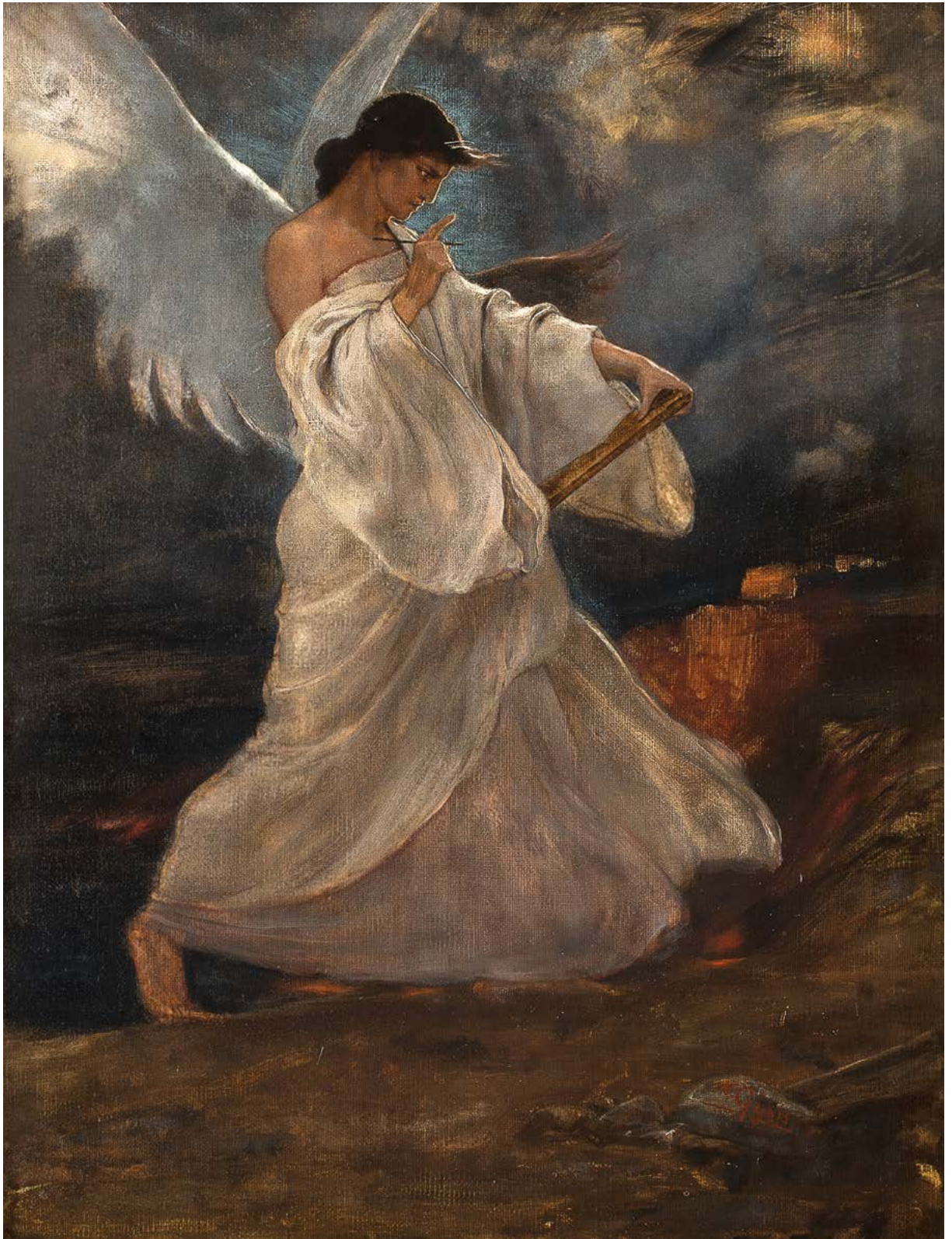
On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of 1821, I was asked to lend *Glory* in the large exhibition at the Benaki Museum, as one of the most significant works of this period. I gladly accepted and in addition suggested that a study be dedicated to *Glory*. I would like to thank Maria Katsanaki, Curator of the National Gallery, who highlighted carefully the importance of the work and its meanings with her expertise and love for the artist, Timos Tsoukalas for his thorough research of facts while conserving the painting, as well as my friend Irene Orati who looked after this edition and helped me so much in every step.

At the same time however, I thought that this family heirloom in a way can not belong to me. In the own words of Gyzis, *Glory* was his favourite work and already has a great national dimension and recognition. Hence, I felt that "Glory should not be walking alone" in a house, but among all Greeks. Even more so, between prominent Greeks and foreign visitors, within the space of the supreme institution of the country, in the Presidency of the Hellenic Republic.

I must admit that the presence of our new President also influenced my thought. I am happy and grateful that the President of the Republic, Ms Katerina Sakellariopoulou, accepted this move, honouring *Glory* and all that it symbolises.

I hope that the legendary figure of *Glory* will always inspire her, as well as the ones that will succeed her.

Dimitris Gkertsos



1. *Glory*
Oil on canvas, 42.5 x 33.4 cm
Dimitris Gkertsos collection

Glory and the visualisation of Nikolaos Gyzis' national dream

*True, ingenious Solomos was my inspiration for Glory,
nevertheless within her lie my spirit, and my heart, and a part of my life.*

Nikolaos Gyzis¹

Nikolaos Gyzis, painter of ideas

NIKOLAOS GYZIS (1842-1901) UNDOUBTEDLY RANKS among the prominent artists who left their imprint on Greek art of the 19th century, shaping its image as it is known to us today.

The journey of the painter of humble origin, from the small Cycladic island of Tinos - renowned for its artistic tradition - to acclaim, passing through his apprenticeship initially in the School of Arts in Athens, and then in the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich where he would later teach as a professor, having settled in the capital of Bavaria, is remarkable. Honours, awards and distinctions have crowned the stages of his brilliant course. His celebrated genre scenes, his charming portraits and his beautiful still lifes show of course his major technical skills and personal sensitivities, but his mastery lies in another of his traits: his spirituality.

For him, artistic completeness does not come by stressing his solid academic education but through transcending it, especially, when in his work the symbol dominates realistic description, when the idea, the spirit, prevails. This is the case in his idealistic creations, particularly in the compositions of his last period.

A sensitive dreamer, Gyzis manifests his tendency toward allegory and idealism at a very early stage. His idealistic output was already important in the 1870s and the 1880s: it is testified by works that have survived,² like his early and rather conventional *Nike* (1871, Museum of the City of Munich), a 260 cm-diameter tondo celebrating the victory of the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, with the winged goddess of victory in the clouds, appearing white-clad against a golden background, holding two laurel wreaths - or, like *Spring Symphony* (1886, National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum, Athens), a defining work in terms of the artist's spiritual orientation, an ethereal rendering of heavenly brisk spring, with angelic figures and cupids in nature, painted in iridescent hues worthy of Eos, child of dawn, a representation that defies materiality, conveys a sense of joy, elation and freedom, and calls to a kind of "methexis" in art, poetry, dance, and music.

During the century's last decade, which coincides with the last years in the life of Gyzis, the painter comes under the influence of Symbolism, an artistic movement that spread across Europe, where fantasy is

1. Letter to Edla Nazou, 12 October 1899: *Letters*, p. 248. [All the letters mentioned herein were written by Nikolaos Gyzis, unless otherwise stated].

2. Many important allegoric compositions by Gyzis were destroyed in World War II, such as *The Liberal Arts and Their Spirits* (1880, ceiling painting for the Museum of Decorative Arts in Kaiserslautern), *Art and Its Spirits* (Munich Town Hall) and *The Triumph or The Apotheosis of Bavaria* (1899, for the Conference Hall of the Museum of Applied Arts in Nuremberg), while his oil painting *The New Century* (1900) is also missing. Only studies and drawings for these works have survived, many of which are found in the National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum, Athens.

in the posthumous exhibition of Gyzis' works in Munich in 1901, within the 8th International Artistic Exhibition in the Glaspalast, along with tributes to the prominent painters Arnold Böcklin and Wilhelm Leibl, who had also passed away recently.⁵⁵ There, from 1 June until the end of October, according to the catalogue, a total of 109 works – oil paintings and drawings – were exhibited, 17 of which not for sale (the oil painting *Glory* was one of them).⁵⁶ Then, in the biweekly illustrated Berlin magazine *Moderne Kunst*, Alex Braun will publish a review of the exhibition praising Gyzis' art which he qualifies as a revelation for art lovers.⁵⁷ He will also publish a view of room 39 with his works [fig. 14]: *Glory* is placed in a particularly privileged position, in a joint easel with the painting *Bacchanalia* (private collection), next to the older large scale composition *Art and Its Spirits* (it started in 1876), that was acquired for the Munich Town Hall and is believed to having been destroyed during World War II.⁵⁸ This *Glory* is the one also appearing in photographs of Gyzis' studio in the Academy of Fine Arts of Munich, where he taught as a professor, by his student Elias van Bommel the Younger (1870-1938): among many other artworks, we notice *Glory* in a carved, probably gilded frame.⁵⁹ In one of these photographs [fig. 15], the painting is placed standing on a chair, while in another one [fig. 16], hanging on the wall next to the large canvas *Joy* (1883, private collection).⁶⁰ In other Van Bommel photographs we see *Glory* with a margin or in a passe-partout in a simpler frame [fig. 25]; this is most probably a reproduction.⁶¹ At last, a photograph of the oil painting is included in a special edition with a collection of 26 Van Bommel photographs of Gyzis' works.⁶²

In autumn 1962, when the National Gallery held in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki an "Honorary commemoration for Nikolaos Gyzis" in the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of the liberation of Macedonia, the public had the unique occasion of admiring the *Glory of Psara* of the Palace Collection, since "their Majesties the King and Queen were kind enough to grant the painting to the exhibition".⁶³ This is probably the last registered case where this specific work was shown to the public. As it appears, the two oil paintings were never exhibited at the same time, despite the fact that the owner of the other *Glory*, Evangelos Papastratos, lent to the exhibition a work by Gyzis belonging to his collection.⁶⁴

55. According to Misirli (p. 382), the *Glory* exhibited in 1901 was the one formerly in the Palace Collection, although there is no such clear evidence in the photograph of the National Gallery Archive.

56. Exh. cat. *Offizieller Katalog der VIII. Internationalen Kunstausstellung im kgl. Glaspalast zu München 1901*, veranstaltet von der Münchener Künstlergenossenschaft im Verein mit der Münchener Secession, Munich: Rudolf Mosse, 4th print, 9 August 1901, I. Böcklin-, Gysis- und Leibl-Ausstellung, no. 71: *Gloria*.

57. Alex Braun, "Die VIII. Internationale Kunstausstellung in München", *Moderne Kunst*, year 15, no. 25, 1901, pp. 310-311. In the same magazine, in issue 2, of the same year, p. VII, there is a photograph of Gyzis with his fellow professors in the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. Presentation of the Gyzis exhibition by William Ritter too, "Correspondance d'Allemagne. La VIIIe Exposition internationale de Munich", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 26, 3d period, 1 October 1901, pp. 344-347.

58. Exh. cat. *Nikolaos Gyzis, the great master*, exhibition curated by Nelli Misirli, Maria Katsanaki, Athens: National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum, 2001, pp. 40, 92, 131 (note 25), 132 (note 10). The photograph confirms the large scale of the specific work, the size of which was only provided in the inventory of Gyzis' works in: "Dead artists (1900-1901)", op. cit.

59. The initial frame depicted does not coincide with either frames (the one of the Palace Collection as known based on the photographic evidence of the General State Archives or the one of the Gkertsos Collection): it seems that it was replaced later. Nevertheless, as far as we are able to judge from one photograph, based on the form of the wing at the bottom, the work depicted is not the one of the Gkertsos collection.



14.
View of the posthumous exhibition
of Gyzis' works in Munich
in the German magazine
Moderne Kunst (1901);
Glory is displayed on an easel



15.
Photograph of Gyzis' studio by Elias van Bommel the Younger; *Glory* is placed on a seat



16.
Photograph of Gyzis' studio by Elias van Bommel the Younger; *Glory* is hanging on the wall

60. The first one (Photography Collection of the Municipal Museum of Munich) is published in: *Gyzis in Tinos*, op. cit., p. 34, photo III. The second is included in a photography album by Elias van Bommel the Younger, with about 98 takes of works and 8 of Gyzis' studio (partly before and partly after his death), which was put on auction on 4 July 2018 in Germany by the Neumeister house of auctions. It is probable that both these photographs were taken after his death, since he does not appear in any of them.

61. In the Photography Collection of the Municipal Museum of Munich; published in: *Gyzis in Tinos*, op. cit., pp. 33-34, photos I and III. Photo I is also published in: *Letters*, insert repro., between pp. 224-225, dated 1898. The fact that in this photograph, a different painting, and not *Glory*, is hanging next to *Joy*, allows us to assume that the photograph was indeed taken during the Vienna and Munich exhibitions in 1898, or while the work had not yet been returned from Athens. See also previous note.

62. *Nicolaus Gyzis*, n.p. [Munich]: Elias van Bommel, n.d., no. 10: *Gloria auf Psara*. A copy of this rare edition can be found in the National Library of Greece.

63. Exh. cat. *A celebration of the fifty years of the liberation of Thessaloniki. Honorary commemoration for Nikolaos Gyzis*, Thessaloniki: Archaeological Museum, October 1962, pp. 2, 11, no. 25: *Glory* (Property of their Majesties the King and Queen). See also E. Raftopoulou, "The Gyzis Exhibition. The work of the great master of the 19th century", *Mesimvriini*, 2 November 1962; "The Gyzis Exhibition becomes a great success", *Eleftheria*, 15 November 1962.

64. Evangelos Papastratos had then lent the painting *Visit to a Sick Woman* (Exh. cat. *A celebration of the fifty years of the liberation of Thessaloniki*, op. cit., no. 24).

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