



‘Reluctant Museums’: Between a Church and a Museum. Displaying Religion in Cypriot Museums

Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (Cyprus University of Technology) and
Alexandra Bounia (University of the Aegean)

Abstract

In the 1990’s a new kind of museum appeared in the North, mainly Muslim, part of Cyprus: Orthodox Christian churches that have been dis-used after the events of 1974, were turned into icon museums. In these museums, religious objects (mainly icons) have been displaced, ironically not from their natural place, which is the church, but from their original function, which is that of worship. Furthermore, the administration and ownership changed from their legal owners (the church of Cyprus and the Greek Orthodox people) to that of an occupying force of a different religion of the self-declared “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (TRNC).

After briefly presenting the on-going claims made by both Greek and Turkish Cypriot authorities regarding the destruction of religious sites and the illegal trafficking of religious objects, this paper will examine issues of cultural ownership and “heritage wars” as these are exemplified in the the five icon museums, currently under the supervision of TRNC’s “Department of Antiquities and Museums”. These museums seem to take different forms depending on the national claims of the two communities. For the Republic of Cyprus, they are either seen as proof of the purposeful and continuous cultural destruction of Christian religious sites or as spaces which are temporarily «out of order» due to the Turkish occupation and which will resume their normal function as soon as a solution is found. On the other hand, for the TRNC, icon museums are the answer to Greek Cypriot accusations for cultural destruction and a public display of respect and religious tolerance. As a result, these museums are in limbo between permanent, neutral institutions (as museums are supposed to be) and temporary, emotional ones. These ‘reluctant museums’ bring to the forefront issues of ownership and purpose, of religious and national representation, of restitution of cultural property and peaceful cultural co-existence.

Introduction

One sunny day a Greek Cypriot taxi driver drove a group of tourists to the location of St. Barnabas monastery in the northern, occupied part of Cyprus. The tourists were interested in visiting an icon museum located in the monastery. When they arrived at the location they paid the three-euro entrance fee and entered the monastery. When inside, the tourists started examining the icons and reading the labels which clearly marked the depicted saint's name and the icon's date of creation. On the other hand, the taxi driver, who was admitted for free since he was escorting the tourists, made the sign of the cross and started kissing the icons in the iconostasis. ¹ When he finished, he turned around and was surprised to see the group of tourists staring at him. An uncomfortable silence prevailed. No one said or did anything (personal communication with taxi driver).

A very interesting conflict of receptions has just been described. As a Greek Orthodox Christian entering what he perceived to be a church, proper, with religious icons, he proceeded to the for him natural act of paying respect to St. Barnabas and the other saints. The tourists, entering what they perceived to be a museum, seemed to be shocked by the display of religious worship that involved handling the exhibited items. After all, museum objects are not supposed to be touched or handled in any way. A sign on the wall indicated that even flash might harm the icons.

The controversial performer Pierre Pinoncelli attempted to piss and smash in 2006, for the second time (the first attempt was in 1993), one of the official replicas of Duchamp's «fountain» (Lichfield 2006). His aim was to return the specific museum item to its original function, that of a urinal. He was fined 200,000 euros for this attempt. Curiously, the taxi driver was not sued, thrown out of the museum or even reprimanded for kissing the icons and thus returning the museum items to their original function – that of worship. His act was not a conscious performance directed towards the art world or even a political statement. He simply perceived the space as a church and therefore a sacred space for worship, a 'mistake' easily made since St. Barnabas Icon Museum is currently in limbo between a church and a museum – a religious space for worship and a space for preservation, education and aesthetic appreciation. But in order to understand the space's double identity we need to examine the broader political and cultural conflict which surrounds the five icon museums that exist today in the northern part of Cyprus.

Religious and Heritage Wars

Since the intercommunal conflicts between Greek and Turkish Cypriots that began in the early 60s and lead to the Turkish invasion in 1974 which divided the island in half, political as well as cultural wars find expression in the local and international arena. The Republic of Cyprus publicizes as much as possible the cultural destruction of religious sites as well as the lack of religious rights in the northern, occupied part of Cyprus. It is well documented that art looters took advantage of the lack of control in the north of the island after 1974, and methodically removed and illegally exported items of cultural and national value (see Jansen 1986 for a detailed presentation). European police investigators described the situation as 'one of the most systematic art looting operations since the Nazis plundered the countries they occupied during World War II' (Miller and Kinzer 1998). The Church of Cyprus, the department of Antiquities,

the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia, private institutions and foundations are working towards the location and repatriation of stolen Cypriot antiquities and religious objects. A few successful law cases involving the repatriation of icons and frescoes illegally removed from churches received a lot of publicity internationally (Rose 1998; Sullivan 1991). The most famous ones are those of the Kanakaria mosaics, the Christ Antiphonitis frescoes and the Evthimianos church frescoes (Rose 1998). All items involved in these court cases were returned to Cyprus and are housed in the Byzantine Museum in Nicosia or are about to be returned. At the same time, the Turkish authorities claim that religious sites are not only neglected and destroyed in the northern, but also in the southern part of Cyprus. Mosques and other Islamic religious sites, such as cemeteries, have been reported to be as either vandalized or demolished.

Attempts for an objective report of the destruction of cultural heritage started as early as 1975. Right after the Turkish invasion, UNESCO sent Jacques Dalibard, a Canadian architect, to Cyprus to examine and report the preservation or destruction of cultural heritage in both the northern and southern parts. The report was censored and cut down from about 120 pages to only 9. In the published version, Dalibard mentions that some of the mosques in the southern part of Cyprus were vandalized but later repaired. When he examined churches, archaeological excavation sites, monasteries, castles and museums in the north, Dalibard found some buildings in a bad state, some museum objects missing and some icons stolen. Through his multiple visits, Dalibard observed that Greek Cypriot authorities made more progress in restoring Muslim religious sites than Turkish Cypriot authorities restoring Christian religious sites. Turkish Cypriots claimed that they lacked the budget, facilities, expertise and staff in order to restore and preserve the various cultural sites (Dalibard 1976). A Council of Europe Report from 1989 also confirms this (der Werff 1989).

More recently, Greek and Turkish Cypriot Architects listed and evaluated Greek and Turkish Cypriot religious buildings built before 1974. The project was funded by the United States Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Program. 505 Greek Cypriot and 115 Turkish Cypriot religious buildings were recorded, documented and evaluated (CCEAA and CCTA n.d.). Destruction is evident in both churches and mosques but there is no information regarding the time of destruction in order to determine whether or not the destruction was a direct effect of the 1974 invasion.

Greek-Cypriot Claims

Various Greek-Cypriot reports mention the destruction of 500 or so churches (Chotzakoglou 2008; Iliades 2011; UDHC 2009) in the northern part of Cyprus but again it is not clear what percentage of the religious sites were destroyed after 1974. In a more realistic report, the website of the Cyprus embassy in Washington DC states that as a result of the events in 1974, 133 churches, chapels and monasteries have been desecrated, 77 churches have been converted into mosques, 18 are used as depots, dormitories or hospitals, 13 are used as barns, 1 was converted into a hotel and one is used as a school of fine arts (Embassy of the Republic of Cyprus in Washington D.C. n.d.).

Referring to the destruction and alternative uses of churches Chotzakoglou (2008) mentions:

The only exception to the Turkish practice is the Anglican Church of St. Andrew in Keryneia and only those of the Maronite churches – which were not transformed into military camps,

stables and museums – demonstrating in a effort [sic] to display so-called free exercise of their religious duties and so-called freedom of choice of religion, that is given to the population residing in the northern occupied part of Cyprus (Chotzakoglou 2008: 33).

It seems that all alternative uses of churches are placed under the same category as military camps and stables ignoring the fact that some uses, like those of museums, might contribute towards the at least partial preservation of the building and its contents. As the general rapporteur on the architectural heritage sent by the Council of Europe in 1989 reports, ‘as long as no reuse brings irreversible change to the churches in question and as long as the icons are kept in store, I cannot criticize it as such’ (der Werff 1989:14). Furthermore, allowing Anglican and Maronite churches to function is viewed by Chotzakoglou as a purely propagandistic tool.

Additionally, Chotzakoglou (2008) argues that the destruction and misuse of churches, takes place under the watchful eyes of the occupying army and:

... reveals a well organized plan for the desecration of Christian holy places. These entire actions serve the political target of extinguishing every single Greek trace of the occupied part of Cyprus reminding the Greek past and frustrating their rightful owners in their efforts to return to their fatherlands. (Chotzakoglou 2008: 49).

Greek Cypriot authorities see the desecration of churches as a deliberate tool for erasing the Hellenic and Christian identity of the north (Balderstone 2010; Jansen 1986). This is a crucial point because the Greek Cypriot identity is perceived as being threatened. Considering that a museum’s aim is to preserve and promote its collections, the creation of icon museums in the occupied part of the island contradicts this point of view. A Greek Cypriot churchgoer was shocked when she heard about St. Barnabas’ Icon Museum. She asked in disbelief: ‘*They* are exhibiting *our* icons?’ (her emphasis). She could not understand why ‘they’ – Turkish, Muslims – would be preserving and promoting ‘our’ – Greek, Christian – heritage. It is possible that the fact that religious objects of one community are displaced and displayed by another community can create personal psychological barriers to both communities.

Turkish-Cypriot Claims

On the other hand, the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’ (TRNC) Public Information Office (2009) states that:

The problem of maintenance of cultural heritage is not an issue that is only affecting North Cyprus. The Turkish-Muslim heritage in South Cyprus is also in urgent need for cleaning and restoration. There are many Turkish-Muslim cultural monuments including mosques, baths, fountains and cemeteries in South Cyprus that are in very bad condition due to rough handling, negligence and willful destruction.

According to the same website, 16 out of 106 mosques located in the Republic of Cyprus have been totally destroyed, 61 mosques are in a state of neglect and most graveyards are neglected or destroyed. Furthermore, it is stated that:

... the Turkish Cypriot authorities are doing their best, with limited resources, to protect and preserve the diverse cultural monuments in North Cyprus. Considering the meager financial means and total lack of international assistance due to the Greek Cypriot policy of isolating the Turkish Cypriot people, the performance of the Turkish Cypriot authorities is praiseworthy.

Lack of international assistance due to the fact that the TRNC is not recognized by any country apart from Turkey is often used as an argument and an explanation for the neglect of

Christian religious spaces. However, priority was given to restoration projects of Ottoman buildings such as the Büyük Han over for example the important Lusignan Cathedral of Nicosia (Cormack in der Werff 1989). Balderstone (2010) offers another explanation about this neglect. She argues that the misuse of churches might be due to Turkish secularism as much as anti-Greek or anti-Christian sentiment. Turkish Cypriots were traditionally less religious than Turkish settlers. It is argued that for some Turkish Cypriots a ruin, of a church or any other building, is still a ruin that can be utilized in other ways, even as a stable.

In conclusion, the Republic of Cyprus and the church of Cyprus publicize as much as possible the destruction of their religious heritage and use any political and legal tools available in order to repatriate and preserve it. At the same time, they publicize the preservation of mosques in the south. The Turkish authorities defend themselves by claiming lack of resources and support while suppressing reports of destruction. In their efforts to make clear, strong and straightforward points, both sites seem to offer a one-sided view of the problem. Most publications on these issues simplify and omit important information that is necessary for a more balanced and objective point of view.

Icon museums in the Turkish occupied part of Cyprus: a museological view

After 1974, icons from the occupied areas were stored in the Kerynia Castle. The icons were stamped, catalogued and stored (Papageorgiou 2010). Even though Dalibard in 1975 found the storing conditions to be 'far from ideal', he also found the catalogue of religious items 'quite advanced' (Dalibard 1976: 5). However, from 1975 till 1981 the archive was significantly altered (Jansen 1986). Nusret Mahirel, an archaeologist who worked at the Kerynia Castle in 1975, reported that upon examining the archive and icons in 1982, he found the books falsified and 225 icons missing (Papageorgiou 2010). The director of the museum at the Kerynia castle as well as Aydın Dikman, the mastermind behind several illicit exports and sales, were captured by the Turkish authorities but were subsequently freed. The English professor R. Cormack who visited Cyprus in 1989 as a member of the Council of Europe delegation, which investigated the Cypriot cultural heritage, reported that only 19th and 20th century and a few 18th century icons remained in the Kerynia Castle (der Werff 1989).

The year 1989 is an important one for Cypriot cultural battles. The much-publicized Kanakaria frescoes case was in the news and marked an important victory for the Republic of Cyprus. The stolen mosaics were reclaimed and returned to Cyprus. Furthermore, the report of the Council of Europe delegation the same year stated that most cultural destruction in Cyprus 'has occurred in the north and is the result of looting' (der Werff 1989:11). It seems that in response to the accusations that TRNC was involved in illicit trade of icons, the Turkish authorities proceeded in the creation of five Icon Museums. Conveniently, four of them were officially created between 1990 and 1994. The first icon museum opened in 1990 in the Archangelos Michael Church located within walking distance from the Kerynia castle. The collections of the icon museums come from different churches located in the occupied north. Missing icons were replaced with other, mainly newer icons. The only museum which retains the original icons on the iconostasis seem to be the St. Mamas Church and Icon Museum in Morphou which was opened as an icon museum much later, in 2004.

The five icon museums under the supervision of TRNC's Department of Antiquities and Museums are: 1. the St. Barnabas Icon and Archaeological Museum in Famagusta (Mağusa, opened in 1992); 2. the Archangelos Michael Church in Kerynia (Girne, opened in 1990); 3. the Iskele Icon Museum in Trikomo (Iskele, opened in 2001); 4. the St. Mamas Church and Icon Museum in Morphou (Güzelyurt, opened in 2004) and 5. the Agios Ioannis Church and Icon Museum in Famagusta (Mağusa, opened in 1994). The last one (Agios Ioannis Church and Icon Museum) is located in a restricted area and was closed to the public at the time of this research.

St. Barnabas Icon and Archaeological Museum (Famagusta, opened in 1992)

The St. Barnabas Icon and Archeological Museum is the biggest and most well-known icon museum in the northern part of Cyprus. Apostle Barnabas was born in Cyprus and, along with St. Paul, was responsible for spreading Christianity in his native country. St. Barnabas monastery is considered one of the most sacred sites in Cyprus and many Greek Cypriots were baptized there before 1974. The monastery was build in 477A.D. to celebrate the discovery of St. Barnabas' body but the present structure was built by Archbishop Philotheos in 1756 (Department of Antiquities and Museums n.d.,a). The church was operational till 1976 when the three brother monks who operated the monastery moved to the southern part of Cyprus. The St. Barnabas monastery and Icon Museum consists of a church now serving as an icon museum, a monastery now housing an archaeological collection, and about 100 yards from the monastery, a chapel containing the empty tomb of the saint.

According to the handout available at the museum, the Turkish authorities began restoration work on the monastery and church in August 1991 while more icons were added to the collection in 1992 (Department of Antiquities and Museums n.d.,a). Furthermore, the rooms of the monastery, which once housed monks and pilgrims, have been turned into an archaeological museum and the rooms at the entrance into an administration office and a shop. The shop sells rugs, postcards, guide-books and souvenirs. Interestingly, this might be the only shop in Cyprus that sells small icons of St. Barnabas alongside key rings featuring whirling dervishes.

On the walls of the church's interior hang icons mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries. Under each icon a label in English and Turkish states the depicted saint's name and the icon's date of creation. The icons are not arranged chronologically, by provenance or artist, but by their subject matter. For this reason we observe the interesting effect of having four icons of Archangel Michael next to each other or three icons of St. George killing the dragon. This 'typological' arrangement is especially strange for an Orthodox Christian since it would have never appeared in a functional church. It is equally strange for an archaeologist specializing in Byzantine art and culture, since the criteria for arranging and organizing byzantine collections are usually different.

On the iconostasis we observe another unusual arrangement. The icons are curiously misplaced. The bottom tier includes two icons of Christ on the left of the gate. Furthermore, the top tiers house icons of varied sizes with some vacant spaces. We can assume that some icons (if not all) have been replaced or rearranged. As a matter of fact, it was reported that 36 icons were stolen from the church in 1988. Some of them were found, but the ones dating from the 17th century are still missing (Papageorgiou 2010). However, instead of having the icons re-arranged in the Orthodox tradition, the curators seem to have arranged the icons quite randomly.



Fig 1: Interior of St. Barnabas Icon Museum, 2011, photograph by the authors

Archangelos Michael Church in Kerynia (Giren, opened in 1990)

The Archangelos Michael Church in Kerynia seems to house the most carefully planned icon exhibition of the four museums examined. Since June 11th 1990 this religious building from 1860 has been turned into a museum. According to the handout available at the entrance, the collection includes icons dating from the 19th century or later; some are icons that belong to the specific church, while others were collected from unspecified churches in the area. The oldest icon is dated from 1714 (Department of Antiquities and Museums n.d.,b).

Out of the four museums examined, this is the only one that contains a special museographic arrangement: specially-constructed, freestanding panels and cases accommodate the icons. This demonstrates a more careful consideration for the arrangement. Like the St. Barnabas Icon Museum, the icons are arranged thematically but in a more subtle way. The labels under the icons include only the name of the depicted saint in English and Turkish.

Furthermore, a wall text provides information about the representations most commonly found in icons and the material used. Another wall text provides a short history of the museum. In addition, unlike the St. Barnabas Icon Museum solely lit by its windows or large chandeliers, the curators of the Archangelos Michael Icon Museum have installed special lighting for each panel. Unfortunately, without the proper planning for a museum, the electricity wires are visible on the walls along with the extensive damages caused by the humidity (despite recent restoration in 2004). In addition, the icons seem to be badly in need of restoration.



Fig 2: Interior of Archangelos Michael Church, 2011, photograph by the authors

Iskele Icon Museum in Trikomo (Iskele, opened in 1991)

The Iskele Icon Museum in Trikomo opened its doors on the International Museum Day on May 23rd 1991. The building that houses the icons is the church of Panayia Theotokou which was built in the 12th century while different additions were added until the year 1804. Rare frescoes from the 12th and 15th centuries decorate the church (restored in 1966), while icons from this and other churches in the northern part of Cyprus are arranged around the walls of the church (Department of Antiquities and Museums n.d.,c). A Turkish newspaper reported the theft of the icons from the iconostasis in 1984 (Papageorgiou 2010).

The icons do not seem to be arranged in any particular manner. Just like St. Barnabas Icon Museum, wooden panels support individual icons with a small label attached at the lower part. The label offers the name of the saint in English and Turkish. Again, no information about the date or provenance of the icons is displayed. Furthermore, some icons are displayed on tripods while wooden poles with rope surround the tripods, probably to protect them from curious visitors or faithful Greek Cypriots.



Fig 3. Interior of Iskele Icon Museum, 2011, photograph by the authors

St. Mamas Church and Icon Museum in Morphou (Güzelyurt, opened in 2004)

The St. Mamas Church and Icon Museum in Morphou is located next to the ‘Museum of Archeology and Nature’ and is the most ‘reluctant’ of all icon museums examined. Despite the sign outside that reads ‘St. Mamas Church and Icon Museum’ and the fact that there are some icons arranged on the walls of the church, quite clearly this museum feels more like a church than a museum.

The icons in the iconostasis seem to be in the right place, the light comes from the large chandeliers, candles are standing in the candle holder and no labels are visible anywhere. Furthermore, St. Mamas’ sarcophagus, which is believed to ooze a balm that can heal eye and ear diseases (Department of Antiquities and Museums n.d.,d) is surrounded by eye- and ear-shaped silver and wax offerings. St. Mamas operates as a church once a year on September 2nd, the saint’s name day. Visiting the church in November, the smell of frankincense is still in the air.

The iconostasis was recently restored thanks to funding from the U.S. agency for International Development (UDHC 2009). The icons in the iconostasis are protected with large glass panels while smaller newer icons of the same saint are located directly below them. This is common practice in Orthodox Christian churches. Smaller icons are used by churchgoers for paying respect, in order to preserve the older icons. Finally, the icons on the surrounding walls seem to be arranged by size alone. The TRNC promotes St. Mamas church as an example of restoration and preservation of Byzantine art. However, according to Papageorgiou (2010), the silver and gold case with St. Mama’s bones was stolen and dismantled while the saint’s bones were discarded since they had no commercial value.



Fig 4. Interior of Mamas Church and Icon Museum, 2011, photograph by the authors

Icon museums: preserving or destructing

Created as a response to political and cultural conflict and still functioning in an unstable political situation, icon museums in the northern part of Cyprus satisfy only the minimum requirements to justify the title of museum. This is evident in the lack of more careful and meaningful arrangements of the collections, the incomplete labels that lack information about dates, materials used, provenance or artist, the one-page handout in Turkish and English ignoring the needs of Greek visitors, the minimum security and the total lack of educational or other programs, events or relevant publications. As a result, the icon museums in the northern part of Cyprus seem to serve the purpose of a ‘sign’; a sign whose sole existence is to argue for the preservation of Christian art by an occupying force (regardless if this is achieved or not).

Icon museums in the northern part of Cyprus seem to take different forms depending on the national claims of the two communities. For the Republic of Cyprus, they are seen as proof of the purposeful and continuous cultural destruction of Christian religious sites, as propaganda tools, or as spaces which are temporarily ‘out of order’ due to the Turkish occupation and which will resume their normal function as soon as a solution is found. On the other hand, for the TRNC, icon museums are the answer to Greek Cypriot accusations for cultural destruction and a public display of respect and religious tolerance. As a result, these museums are in a limbo between permanent, neutral institutions (as museums are supposed to be) and temporary, emotional ones; they are ‘reluctant’ museums. The St. Barnabas icon museum, the largest icon museum in the northern part of Cyprus, receives most of the publicity when it comes to the icon museums examined. Interestingly, it is either envisioned as the ‘saviour of the Christian art of

Cyprus' or another version of its systematic destruction. Two short documentaries featuring St. Barnabas monastery nicely demonstrate these two very different perspectives.

The Supreme Master Television, a non-profit channel airing news and programs that foster peace, produced a 15-minute TV program as part of the series 'The world around us' about St. Barnabas Icon and Archaeological Museum (supreme Master Television 2011). The documentary aired on October 2nd 2011 and the narration is in Turkish with subtitles in several languages (no Greek). One of the tour guides of St. Barnabas, Zehra Akpınarlar, talks about the story of St. Barnabas, the history of the monastery and the religious ceremonies that take place at the church. Interestingly, the documentary places an enormous emphasis on the religious practices that take place at the monastery, especially the devotional act of lighting candles.

When describing the process of lighting candles at the church, Akpınarlar mentions that since 2003 'many orthodox Greeks visit this place and pray, make wishes here. They believe that all wishes made here come true'. Furthermore she mentions that since 2005:

... every year a ceremony would begin to be organized. This is a ceremony which that is held via privileges that the ministry gives [with permission from the Ministry of Antiquities and Museums of the Turkish authorities]. And Cypriot Greeks from the Southern part here [sic] from June 11, organize a ceremony for 2-3 days. And they often visit the church, they make their wishes, they pray.

Even though the documentary narrative seems to be respectful of the Christian Orthodox practices, the descriptions, especially that of lighting candles, are extremely simplified to the extent that it resembles descriptions of tourists throwing coins into a fountain and believing their wishes will come true. By reducing a complex and meaningful religious act into a simple light-a-candle-and-make-a-wish procedure demonstrates a distance and insensitivity to orthodox religious practices. Furthermore, the documentary tries to demonstrate that Greek Cypriots exercise freely their religious rights. However, candle lighting is not a service per se. The only real religious service is the mass that takes place once a year and only after receiving permission from the Turkish authorities. The Republic of Cyprus claims that it restricts the religious rights of Greek Cypriots who are unable to use the church for regular services.

Towards the end of the presentation, the documentary reassures viewers that the museum houses icons mainly from the 18th century and that '[T]he church of St. Barnabas is exactly as it was when its last three monks left it in 1976. The church pulpits, wooden lectern, and pews are still in place.' This is echoed in the popular website 'North Cyprus' (n.d.) where the information must have come from. As we have seen, the church furniture might still be intact but valuable icons were stolen.

Another documentary, this time produced by the Public Information Office (PIO) of the Republic of Cyprus, offers a completely different story. 'Where Heaven Falls Prey to Thieves' (Amara Films and Klaus Gallas, 2008) is directed by Dr. Klaus Gallas, an art historian and Byzantine expert who supports the Cypriot church in its efforts to repatriate religious items smuggled from the north. The 18-minute English documentary describes the 'systematic destruction and plundering of all the Orthodox churches and monasteries in the Turkish occupied north by order of senior officers. These are not Turkish Cypriots'. The last sentence distinguishes Turkish Cypriots from the Turkish army and settlers. The PIO makes it clear that the Turkish army and settlers are responsible for this destruction and not Turkish Cypriots, the

only ones recognized as ‘Cypriots’ by the Republic of Cyprus. The St. Barnabas Icon Museum is offered, not as an example of religious respect and cultural preservation as presented in the Turkish documentary, but as another example of destruction. According to Gallas:

Even this Christian site famous in the life of St. Barnabas, nephew of St. Mark the Evangelist fell victim to art theft after 1974. The monastery that is opened to tourists today as an icon museum is a *farve*. Nothing remains of the original precious decoration of the church. Worthless icons of the 19th and 20th century are exhibited here in a haphazard manner whilst the museum is self-proclaimed as the *saviour of the Christian art of Cyprus* (emphasis in the original, Amara Films and Klaus Gallas 2008).

According to the documentary, the oldest and most valuable icons of the church were removed and probably sold on the international art market. Newer, less valuable ones replaced the missing icons.

Conflicting information also exist for other icon museums. For example, a Kerynia website mentions that Archangelos Michael Icon Museum: ‘... enables the preservation of valuable icons that were saved from theft and looting after 1974, when many churches in Cyprus had these icons stolen from them.’ (All about Kerynia n.d.). At the same time the official website of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Cyprus Republic mentions that thirteen 19th century icons have been stolen from the church of Archangelos Michael (Antiquities Department n.d.). Furthermore, it is mentioned that icons dating from the 16th and 17th centuries and a gospel with precious stones have been stolen from the same church. Even though it is possible that both claims are true, the message presented is conflicting. While the TRNC argues that its actions preserve Christian art, the Republic of Cyprus points out the serious destruction that takes place in TRNC’s territory.

Conclusions

The physical setting of an object as well as the way it is displayed can determine its identification as an artwork or a religious item (Clarke 2003). For example, African masks, intended by their makers for use in religious services, are displayed as artworks in museums all over the world. To achieve their identification as high art, and thus place the emphasis on their aesthetic, historical and educational value, curators isolate the objects on white walls or glass cases, illuminate them with ‘boutique lighting’ and offer explanatory texts (Clarke 2003). This approach decontextualizes objects from their original uses as well as disassociating them from their original users. Instead, objects stripped from the aura of their previous lives, are offered for admiration to a new audience. Similarly, the devotional significance of an Orthodox icon can predominate in a church whether its art, historical and educational significance is accentuated when displayed in an art museum (Gaskell 2003; Liakos 2001). In order to illustrate this, Gaskell (2003) refers to the double identity of the famous ‘Virgin of Vladimir’ that is exhibited at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Three times a year this icon is removed from its case and transferred to a church connected to the museum for liturgical use. This was a compromise achieved after the Patriarchate of Moscow reclaimed the icon. Conveniently, the significance of the icon changes according to the location where it is exhibited. Furthermore, as Liakos (2001) discusses, the presentation, arrangement and organization of exhibitions hide serious ideological issues that need to be addressed and understood.

But what happens when the devotional space, in our case a church, is the same as the museum space? The discussion about the use of worship spaces as museums has been long in other Orthodox countries as well (Konstantios 2008). In our case, all five icon museums are housed in churches while in some cases, like in the case of the St. Mamas' Church and Icon Museum, nothing much has changed. The arrangement, lighting or displays remain the same as in the pre-1974 church. Furthermore, once a year, on the Saint's name day, the museum assumes its other identity and functions as a church. The most important characteristic of these museums seems to be their reluctance to accentuate the aesthetic, historical, educational or devotional value of their collections. This contributes to feelings of uncertainty and the fact that visitors' perceptions prevail over any curatorial intentions.

When describing an exhibition of Indian sculpture at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Guha-Thakurta (2007) talked about the 'curious double identity as both a state art treasure and a liturgical object' (Guha-Thakurta 2007:632). The author also commended on the feelings of unease and indignation that some South Asian viewers have when confronting Indian religious imagery in American museums. According to Guha-Thakurta (2007):

Their disconcert comes from a conviction that the 'true' life of these sculptures (certainly in the past, but even in the present) are as worshipped gods, and that their very place in a museum is an offence to their ritual existence. (Thakurta 2007: 630)

This feeling of disconcert, is not unlike the feeling Greek Cypriots must experience when visiting St. Barnabas museum. Icons assume the same double, shifting identity as Guha-Thakurta's Indian sculpture. Greek Cypriots seem to value the icons' liturgical and ritual value over their aesthetic one, while tourists are mainly concerned with their historical and aesthetic value.

Often, a lack of empathy can be observed in cases of museums exhibiting religious items coming from other cultures or countries. For example, Hemenway (2010), a native American Indian tribal repatriation specialist, felt angry and betrayed because museums did not consider his tribe's beliefs seriously when requesting the return of human remains. Most museums consider human remains as 'collections' or 'archaeological findings' while for the tribes those are sacred items in need of burial. According to the author, the museums were ignoring moral and ethical obligations. Similarly, most of the icon museums examined demonstrate a lack of empathy for the religious values of Orthodox Greek Cypriots. For example, the displaced icons in the iconostasis, the typological approach of arrangement and the Supreme Master TV documentary simplifying complex religious ceremonies demonstrate a lack of interest in Orthodox religious beliefs. As Balderstone (2010) has put it when referring to St. Barnabas Icon Museum, '[A]s a tourist site it is well done. But for Greek Cypriot pilgrims there is no sense of the venerability of the place' (Balderstone 2010: 235).

In conclusion, assuming the role of both a church and a museum, these institutions bring to the forefront issues of ownership and purpose, of religious and national representation, of restitution of cultural property and peaceful cultural co-existence. More research is necessary to explore the following questions: How is the double identity of spaces and contents influence visitors' perceptions and museum uses? How does nationality and religion influence how icon museums are perceived and used? Do Greek Cypriots experience icon museums in the northern part of Cyprus in the same way as they do in the south? Does the fact that icon museums in the

north are housed in churches and run by an occupying force influence Greek Cypriot experience and how? Further research will allow elaboration and possible responses to all the above questions.

Notes

¹ Iconostasis is a wooden or marble partition or screen, decorated with icons that separates the sacred part of the church from the rest of it. (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2010).

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