



### *EMPORION by Andrea Valleri, set against an archaeological background*

It is not the first time that the Archaeological Museum of Patras hosts the work of a European artist inspired by the grandeur of classical antiquity; in 2017 the exhibition *TIMELESS* by René Triebel and Walter Müller was received with enthusiasm. Considering that a modern artist's viewpoint explores and introduces new approaches, an archaeological museum should foster the revisiting of ancient art and architecture through such a lens. In the *EMPORION* exhibition, curated by the architect Marianna Savrami, the esteemed Italian artist Andrea Valleri draws a connecting thread between ports of the Mediterranean diachronically - a topic also of scholarly investigation.<sup>1</sup>

Cradle of various ancient civilizations, the Mediterranean was a shared homeland to a multicultural milieu. The inhabitants of littoral areas in particular were bound to pursue travelling in search of worlds further away, new discoveries and new contacts, as suggested by shipwrecks in the Aegean and the Adriatic Sea, but also by Homer's epic poems. Seafarers were lured by myths, uncharted lands, different people and exotic creatures. The Mediterranean could be calm or rough, with ships commanded by peaceful captains or dangerous warlords. Very soon this cultural hub that stimulated communication and opportunities was recognized as the sea that unified all and belonged to all; it was *mare nostrum*. The Mediterranean represents the traffic of people, ideas, influences and knowledge; in essence, it represents the liberal, progressive, unleashed spirit of our ancestors nourished by the eternal sun and sea.

Before turning into a trading outpost amid a complex network of routes, Massalia/Marseille was a Greek colony. Its increased traffic and connection to the Rhône axis consolidated its rank on an even larger market. Empúries was yet another Greek colony that grew into a significant point of distribution towards areas north of the Pyrenees in the Iberian peninsula. Dedicatory inscriptions of Roman date, some engraved in Greek and others in Latin occasionally including Romanized Greek words, have been

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Gailledrat, M. Dietler, R. Plana-Mallart (eds), *The emporion in the Ancient Western Mediterranean. Trade and Colonial Encounters from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period*. Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018, Mondes anciens. Also P. Arnaud and S. Keay (eds). *Roman Port Societies: The Evidence of Inscriptions*. British School at Rome Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

found along the coasts of Spain confirming that these sites were frequented by sailors, merchants and craftspeople, among others, from the eastern Mediterranean (Pamphylia, Cilicia, the Aegean et al.). Ports and maritime villas provided a shelter to merchants, and they are supposed to have carried a symbolism relevant to the spatial association of the palace with the harbour, as at Alexandria, for example.<sup>2</sup> The port as a landscape is often depicted in wall-paintings, raising questions as to the accuracy of representation,<sup>3</sup> even if certain components can be identified. Insight into the appearance of an ancient port and its spatial layout comprising monumental architecture, public buildings, statuary, decks, cargo spaces etc. can be gained from Kos.<sup>4</sup>

Among the factors that make Patras an appropriate starting point for the journey of Andrea Valleri's itinerant exhibition EMPORION let us note the position of ancient Patras in the Mediterranean, in terms of both geographical location and artistic production or commissioning, the various influences it exchanged and spread, and primarily the multiethnic synthesis of its population in peaceful symbiosis, which shaped the city's cosmopolitan character throughout the centuries.

Having designed and set up the exhibition 'Mediterranean Patras' in 2019, the Archaeological Museum of Patras is the ideal venue to host a display largely inspired from maritime trade and contacts in antiquity. The exhibits of the Museum, as well as the modernity of its architectural design, converse with the ambience and the messages conveyed by Valleri's artworks, which embody firstly the experience of shapes and forms of ancient artefacts, and secondly the notions and allusions stirred up by them. This experience dwells in the artist's subconscious and is subtly expressed as either a reflection or a transformation. In this way, the modern artwork evokes the imprint or the echo of some archaeological find, by placing it in an entirely new, different context, without reducing its impact at all.

This is what an archaeologist grasps in Valleri's 'Dialogue', for instance. The περίκεντρον shape of a rotunda, an ancient Greek architectural type with religious connotations, is rendered by Valleri as the segment of a cylinder suggesting perhaps a sense of introversion or introspection, namely the process of knowing oneself. Interestingly in this painting the structure is topped by a patterned pane almost like a skylight reminiscent of the unparalleled glass window-pane from Roman Patras.

In the EMPORION exhibition the viewer can see, feel and reflect, incited by the artist's allusive language that allows everyone to make their own, individual, subjective associations. Andrea Valleri encourages the unobstructed thinking and his attitude *per se* could be interpreted as an overtone of sailing in the Mediterranean. The gentle gliding of the galley on the sea, depicted in the hallmark of the EMPORION exhibition, brings to mind the so-called fleet coins of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC from Achaëa, which suggest its inclusion among the naval bases of the Romans.

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<sup>2</sup> P. Arnaud, Municipal Authority, Central Authority and Euergetists at Work at the Port: Layers of Activity and Interplay at Ephesos. In: Arnaud and Keay 2020, 292-325, esp. 318.

<sup>3</sup> U. Pappalardo, Les cités dans la peinture romaine: représentations fantastiques ou véritable architecture?. In: S. Guizani, M. Ghodbane, M. Galinier (eds), *Perceptions de l'espace dans les arts de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Âge méditerranéens*, 223-248. Tunis, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> M. Livadiotti 2021, Kos: the official language of the imperial architecture. In: B. Poulsen, P. Pedersen, J. Lund (eds), *Karia and the Dodekanese: Cultural Interrelations in the Southeast Aegean II. Early Hellenistic to Early Byzantine*, Oxbow Books, 193-208.

Valleri boldly combines vivid colours, and he successfully pairs solid with translucent forms, light with shade, intense prevalent forms with faint, oneiric ones, thus creating the impression of flickering between real and unreal or even ethereal. This might suggest balance in life but it could also be perceived as a hint to the infinite possibilities. The mobility of our ancestors and their desire to cross any boundaries or borderlines, to establish new communities and ateliers, to interact and to discover what lies beyond them in this *wet continent*<sup>5</sup> reverberate a restless spirit constantly in quest for knowledge, which equals living in freedom.

Without deviating from the principles of ancient Greek master sculptors, Andrea Valleri uses sunlight as a key-element in his creative process. As a result, clarity and translucence allow the robust columns of ancient hieratic architecture to radiate the blue-ess of the Mediterranean sky, even if they are set against a black background ('Corinth, Apollo sanctuary'). Valleri experiments with a variety of modes and media in conveying his message as a prompt for soul-searching on the analogy of seafaring. In his 'Cape Sounion' the silhouette of the ancient temple rises while the golden sunlight and the sea merge, almost like memory and remembrance. Is it dawn or dusk? The ambiguity seems to be deliberate on the part of the artist. A definition is unimportant, if it is supposed to mark the end of exploring. Because exploration is endless.

An exaltation of light is obvious also in the 'Otranto Lighthouse', again in purposeful ambiguity that whets the viewer's imagination. Is this a reflection of moonlight? Is it a skyborne blessing or a force emerging from the depth of the sea, springing up and quenching the thirst of thinkers and travellers alike? This brilliant painting verifies what we can now document via archaeological finds: the Mediterranean was neither a frontier nor a barrier; instead, it marked the beginning of contacts, progress, spread of knowledge.

The ancient spirit could not have prospered in isolation/seclusion; people sought communication from time immemorial, creating fords and passages even through rough mountain ranges. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC the North Apennines became a connecting zone between societies of various cultural backgrounds, where human mobility allowed a spread of knowledge in pottery production.<sup>6</sup> Indirectly and allegorically this innate urge for contact is brought to life in Valleri's 'Acropolis Museum', where different notions and concepts surface: Collective memory? Joining forces? A gathering of beauty? The scene may be construed in any number of ways. The artist presents statues in dialogue, and although the ones in the foreground turn their back to the viewer, they are no less expressive and eloquent. All sides and aspects matter, and all of them are meaningful. Despite the clearly rendered pedestals, the statue-figures seem to be floating in space and time; yet, it is their congregation that wins the viewer over, as if this assembly was part of a dream, a vision, or a fleeting moment in eternity.

A mutilated, incomplete statue ('Interpretative view') is just as effectively expressive via its stance, sturdiness and bodily perfection, which indirectly point to the physical and moral excellence of an

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<sup>5</sup> As J. McNerney describes the Mediterranean in his book *Centaurs and Snake Kings* (Cambridge 2024), 95.

<sup>6</sup> On the passage between the Po and the Arno valleys, see R. Da Vela, *Local knowledgescapes in pottery production: A new heuristic approach to the Iron Age pottery workshops between the Arno Valley and the Po Plain*. In: E.C. Partida and C. Graml (eds), *ERGASTERIA. Premises and Processes of Creation in Antiquity* (Oxford Archaeopress, 2024), 230-246.

athlete. Values and ideals can be manifested just as well via a headless, armless torso. Valleri delineates the importance of interrelation by setting up his figures accordingly: the Riace Bronzes are portrayed so as to face each other in a fascinating encounter that we would only imagine.<sup>7</sup> At a deeper level, this unveils Valleri delving into the significance of dialogue, meditation and philosophy - his field of expertise.

By artistic license, the painted portrait of 'Athena Promachos' seems to be featuring a raised helmet above a diadem – a convention probably serving to extend and sharpen the powerful lines of the goddess's profile, imbued with determination and wisdom. This is yet another asset in Valleri's art that serves simplicity and minimalism: his drawn lines reach the viewer immediately, through their very subtlety.

'Apollo' highlights Valleri's love of symbolism. The portrait features a knot in hairstyle, typical of the Roman iconography of Dionysos and, therefore, implying the interchangeability of the two gods especially in the oracular sanctuary of Delphi. In terms of staging, however, the optical effect devised by Valleri is highly interesting, as Apollo's face appears at the far end of a series of arches that augment the sense of perspective. We would construe these arches as a sequence of portals to be crossed before one reaches the status of self-awareness (γνώθι σεαυτόν). In order to further elaborate on a superior, surreptitious, mystical sphere of divine wisdom not impossible for humans to conquer, Valleri encircles Apollo's portrait by concentric circles, an overtone of the illusionistic effect of swirling, which is exemplified in Roman mosaics of Patras.

Valleri's paintings of Venice attest to his dynamic rendering of seascape by handling/mastering the texture and consequently the visual impact of graded optical effects. His keenness on contouring buildings and landscapes recalls the silhouette mode (σκιαγραφία) developed locally in pottery workshops of prehistoric Voudeni (suburb of modern Patras). In Valleri's paintings of Venice, solid dark surfaces with detailed outlines contrast and simultaneously complement the colour of the sky at sunset. The reflection of this amazing rosy hue stretches upon the sea, which literally glitters. Such a masterful rendering of motion brings the seascape to life. Originating from Venice, Andrea Valleri moves comfortably from the bichrome to the polychrome synthesis, culminating in the translucent reflections that help the viewer travel notionally. The visual reflections conjure up spiritual ones. The curved outlines of the domes set against the starry sky pose a recognizable landmark while, at the same time, they set the clock back to past centuries, when Venice was a major distribution centre.<sup>8</sup> The scenery takes us back to medieval Europe (12<sup>th</sup> century), where guilds of foreign merchants developed beside the local ones. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century these associations had gained considerable political power and, especially in Venice, a merchant élite dominated the city to the extent that the establishment of a merchant guild was dispensed with altogether.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the unexpected, coincidental and brief 'meeting' of the Naxian Sphinx with the so-called Philosopher at Delphi: E.C. Partida, Temple Landscape: The Direct and the Latent Impact of Natural Environment upon Artificial Environs. In: J. Tae Jensen and G. Hinge (eds), *Ancient Greek Cult II. Sacred architecture/space/objects. In Honour of Erik Hansen* (Copenhagen 2011). *Acta Archaeologica* 93.1, 2022, 197–218, esp. 197.

<sup>8</sup> M. Mayer, The Port Society of Naronia. In: Arnaud and Keay 2020, 266–291, esp. 272.

<sup>9</sup> K. Verboven, The Structure of Mercantile Communities in the Roman World: How Open Were Roman Trade Networks. In: Arnaud and Keay 2020, 326–266, esp. 330.

As concerns the sculptural section of the EMPORION exhibition, Valleri's divinities are represented by slender, attenuated, weight-less figures refusing to disclose their origins, despite the slight overtones from the prehistoric Cycladic idols. After all, the Divine is ubiquitous. Gods have neither home nor race. Yet, they reside in art and they may possess an artist (ένθεος), endowing him with inspiration and skill/dexterity. From time immemorial mankind has turned to the transcendent element seeking not just a way out of frustration but actual answers.

Valleri's sculpted deities do not impose themselves through their volume in space. Instead, these slim, light forms simply exist discretely, like an epiphany (apparition), a gust of wind or a lightning. Is this not how divine intervention enters our thoughts and actions?

Texture still seems to be important for Valleri, and he employs both texture and colour to convey his messages. Although he makes deities of solid wood, he selects white colour to designate his supposed Roman copies, and black to designate the Greek archetypes. In the case of Demeter and Persephone, in particular, he purposely combines different workmanships, leaving the lower torso and the feet roughly hewn. This could be taken to denote the figures' connection with the netherworld.

The humanoid figures, on the other hand, have certain body-parts replaced by gears, screws and machine accessories accentuated in gold. Valleri aims to show the overwhelming mechanization of modern life, with humans operating like machines. However, if we draw a parallel from a votive offering probably by King Croesus of Lydia, namely, the Archaic Bull at Delphi, whose horns and genitals –symbols of power– were made of gold, we would alternatively assume that the details rendered in gold (heart, hair, inner organs) might manifest the sentimentalism, sensitivity and vulnerability of human nature. We would expect no less profundity from a *philhellene thinker* like Andrea Valleri.

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*July 27th, 2026*