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# Safeguarding the Past, in an Uncooperative Present



Angelos Tzortzinis for The New York Times

"I am stubborn. I am still afraid of entropy. An organization that does not evolve is condemned to die." **ANGELOS DELIVORRIAS**

By **SUZANNE DALEY**  
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ATHENS

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HIS office, in the basement, feels like a storage room with stacks of bubble-wrapped picture frames leaning against the walls. There are piles of books, and catalogs and scholarly papers, too. On this day, a small, graceful statue — a headless female figure — sits on a table near his

cluttered desk.

Angelos Delivorrias cannot help but study her with a critical eye. She could be Roman or just a 19th-century replica. "Figuring that out is a little project of mine," he says.

But it is hardly his only challenge these days.

Mr. Delivorrias has been the director of the [Benaki Museum](#) here for 40 years. When he took it over, the display space filled just half the Benaki family's neo-Classical mansion. Objects were crammed in oak and glass cabinets — about 37,000 Islamic and Byzantine items, mostly grouped by function.

Since then, he has overseen a steady modernizing and expansion, building the Benaki — and now its six annexes — into one of Greece's foremost cultural institutions. Under his tutelage, the Benaki has acquired an additional 60,000 objects, books and

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documents through purchases and donations. Buildings have been renovated, exhibits reorganized.

The Benaki's permanent collection now includes a huge range of Greek art that traces the development of Hellenism from antiquity through the Byzantine age, the fall of Constantinople, the Ottoman occupation and the formation of the modern Greek state. But there is also an antique toy collection, a stunning collection of Greek regional costumes, an annex devoted to Islamic art and a new building for temporary exhibits, cultural events and workshops.

At the age of 76, Mr. Delivorrias might be expected to be slowing down, taking time to savor his accomplishments. Instead, with Greece's financial crisis, he is in a battle to save them, wondering whether he was too ambitious over the years. He has started smoking again, which his wife of 50 years is not at all happy about. "She is threatening to divorce me," he says with a sigh, before lighting up. "She says it affects my memory, too."

When Mr. Delivorrias takes a list of employees from the top drawer of his desk, his hands are trembling just a bit. There are red question marks beside some of the names — the ones who might be getting laid off next. Already the museum has reduced its staff to 191 from 267 in 2010, he says. Even those who still have jobs have had their salaries cut 20 percent and then, to save more money, their hours reduced by 20 percent.

"It is all so awful," Mr. Delivorrias says, putting the list aside and resting his head in his hands for a moment. "The Department of Conservation has suffered a lot. When I got here there was no Department of Conservation. But we have so much paper and metal and treasures that need to be tended to."

MOST of the Benaki's problems are straightforward enough. In the fat years, the museum, which is run by a board of directors that includes three descendants of the Benaki family, could rely on the Greek government to pay for most of its operating costs. But with the crisis, the cutbacks have been abrupt and steep. The government contributed about \$2.6 million in 2009; this year, just a bit more than \$900,000.

"I have asked for an appointment with the prime minister," Mr. Delivorrias says. But that strategy, he admits, is not working. "I have been waiting since — I don't know — November, no, maybe October."

But Mr. Delivorrias soon catches himself and insists on optimism. "This must not be too sad a story," he says.

Certainly, he has not given up. Even now, he is adapting to the times. He keeps a box of index cards on his desk — reminders of how to operate his laptop computer, which he starting using only three years ago. He is still a man of energy. He admits to a temper, too. That is one of the secrets to his success, he says. It helps to blow up, to throw things and then to "move on."

The Benaki has made an appeal for funds, trimmed its hours and taken measures to earn more revenue with new exhibits and more guided tours. The money is not exactly rolling in. But there has been a tidbit of good news in recent days, Mr. Delivorrias says: he has a donor who will pay for the glossy yearly publication that the Benaki produces. "That is something," he says, his hand running over last year's edition. "It is guaranteed. We have this money."

Most of the men in Mr. Delivorrias's family were engineers. But that life never had much appeal to him. He was drawn to the humanities and classical archaeology. Early on he worked for the Greek Archaeological Service and was the curator at Patras and Sparta.

But in 1969, he left the country to study in Germany. He had won a scholarship, but he was also leaving behind trying political times. Greece had been taken over by a military junta two years earlier. He finished his Ph.D. and then moved on to postdoctoral studies in Paris.

The phone call to take over the Benaki came in 1973. The early years, Mr. Delivorrias says, were the toughest. The museum had been deeded to the state in 1931, by Antonis



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Benakis, a wealthy Alexandrian cotton merchant, who spent a life time accumulating its contents. But the space was cramped and objects were crowded together. Changes needed to be made, Mr. Delivorrias says.

He found himself in a battle with insiders who wanted to preserve things as they were. "When I took over it was a closed organization," he says. "But I am stubborn. I am still afraid of entropy. An organization that does not evolve is condemned to die."

It is easy to see the giddy excitement that must have guided him over the years. At one point he wanted to put together an exhibit on the period between World War I and World War II, a difficult time for Greece, but also a period of great artistic output. "Greece should be proud of that generation, so I called the successors of some of these great artists and I said, 'Please Mr. So-and-So, I would like some of your father's manuscripts.'" Mr. Delivorrias smiles. "And the next day they were here."

MR. DELIVORRIAS has begun writing his memoirs, which he says should be out later this year. They are to be titled "An Account and an Apology." The apology is to those who are losing their jobs, he says.

But he is not really sorry that he thought ambitiously, only, perhaps, that he did not worry more about sound financial footing. He runs through his decisions to separate the various collections into annexes, to organize chronologically, to appreciate not just the contributions of the ancient Greeks but even the country's more modern artists.

Asked to choose his proudest moment, he cannot. His biggest disappointment? The museum was once outbid on a 13th century icon.

"Oh, I really wanted it," he said. "It was made during the crusades. But there was only so much money. Afterwards, I really wanted to know — who got that?" Eventually, Mr. Delivorrias did find out: a very rich man named after the saint the icon depicted.

Even now, Mr. Delivorrias shakes his head, incredulous that such a treasure should be acquired for such a reason.

*Dimitris Bounias contributed reporting.*

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