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A Repository for Working-class Memories and Hybrid Hellenisms: The Hellenic Cultural Museum in Salt Lake City, Utah

Why do communities remember the past? How do they decide which past is worth remembering and which one is worth forgetting? Who has the authority to make such decisions and for what purposes? How do such decisions inform identities in specific moments in time?

In this paper I draw from scholarship on the cultural production of the past to analyze the representations of the Greek immigrant experience in the Hellenic Cultural Museum (HCM) of Salt Lake City. I use examples of museum displays to show how the HCM presents ‘companion objects’¹ and ‘memorabilia’² of early 20th century working-class immigrants to communicate the personal memories, values, and ideas of these immigrants to contemporary and future generations of Greek Americans. In doing so, I emphasize the important role of the Hellenic Cultural Museum in producing a local memory community.

As I discuss, the exhibition blurs the boundaries between personal, collective, and official interpretations of history. By representing the everyday life, the labor struggles, and the folk culture of lower-class Greek immigrants the museum links personal lived experiences with broader historical phenomena and sociopolitical realities in a manner that critiques dominant narratives of US immigration such as the ‘white ethnic’ bootstraps success model. In doing so, the exhibition challenges the power hierarchies that such narratives reproduce in terms of class, race, and gender. At the same time, the exhibition draws from popular narratives of Hellenism in the United States, such as American Hellenism, to distinguish the local Greek American community as a prominent community of immigrant origins in the Intermountain West. The HCM, therefore, oscillates between nationally dominant and regional understandings of Hellenism, proposing Greek American identity narratives that are culturally, racially, and socially hybrid. By operating as a grassroots communal space of inter-generational memory transfer and identity-making, the HCM enriches our understanding of Greek America as a transnational cultural group consisting of varied experiences and identity narratives.

References

¹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1989. “Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review.” In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader*, edited by Elliott Oring, 329–338. Logan: Utah State University Press.

² Pearce Susan. 1993. *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books.

Angeliki Tsiotinou is a PhD candidate in Museology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, School of Architecture. She conducted her doctoral research in the United States as a Fulbright Scholar and is currently completing her dissertation under a State Scholarships Foundation grant. She has also received numerous grants and awards for her BA and MA studies in Archaeology, Cultural Anthropology and Museology, such as the 2021 & 2020 Emerging Scholar Award by the Inclusive Museum Research Network. Her research interests focus on the politics and poetics of cultural representations, including the relationship between museums, memory, and power. Her PhD thesis brings together the fields of Museum and Greek American Studies to discuss identity-making in museums of ethnic groups through a case study of Greek America. Angeliki also works as a consultant in various museum planning projects in Greece which entail research, concept-content development, and design. She also has professional experience as a teaching assistant, and she has presented her work in many forums such as graduate seminars and international conferences.