THE ACADEMY OF ATHENS

The Academy was the philosophical school founded in 387 B.C. in Athens by the philosopher Plato near the sanctuary of the hero Academos to the south-east of present-day Kolonos district. The school, after nine centuries of functioning, was closed down in 529 A.D. by an imperial decree barring the teaching of philosophy. Subsequently, mainly from the Renaissance and on, the fame of the Platonic Academy triggered, in several countries, the foundation of Supreme Centres of Learning, which adopted the name «Academy». In modern Greece attempts were repeatedly made, but it was only in 1926 that the Academy of Athens was founded following the model of the European Academies. Since then, it has been active uninterruptedly.

The main purpose of the Academy of Athens is the advancement of the Sciences, Humanities and Fine Arts through the individual research and activities of its members, the collaboration between its members and other Academies, the conduct of research in its Research Centres and Offices, and the support of the work of scientists, artists and literary personalities outside the circle of the Academy’s own members. The Academy of Athens includes three Orders: the Order of Natural Sciences, the Order of Humanities and Fine Arts, and the Order of Moral and Political Sciences. Research is also carried out by the Offices of Modern Greek Art, International and Constitutional Institutions, Economic Research, and several others of the Order of Natural Sciences. There is also a Library containing 200,000 titles. A Foundation of Biomedical Research functions under the auspices of the Academy.

The Academy building, of the Ionic order, was erected according to the designs of the famous Danish architect Theophil Hansen (1813-1891) at the expense of Simon Sinas (1810-1876), a wealthy Greek established in Austria-Hungary originating from Northern Epirus, on a site donated by the Municipality of Athens and the Petraki Monastery. The foundation stone was ceremoniously laid on August 2nd 1859 in the presence of King Otto and Queen Amalia, the members of the Government and the Holy Synod. The building was completed in 1887 and was presented to the Prime Minister Charilaos Trikoupis by the architect Ernst Ziller (1837-1923), Hansen’s assistant. The Academy building is considered as the most beautiful neoclassical edifice in the world. The masterpiece of the Erechtheion inspired Theophil Hansen for the architectural elements of the Ionic order, which characterizes the edifice. On the exterior, the building has rich sculptural decoration, the main element of which is the central pediment, which depicts Athena’s birth and is the work of the sculptor Leonidas Drosis (1834-1882). The eight smaller pediments of the side wings with sculptural compositions were the work of Franz Melnitzki. The two statues, of Apollo the Lyre-player and of Athena Promachos, both on tall Ionic columns, are the work of Leonidas Drosis. They symbolize the continuation of the ancient Greek spirit by the Academy, a spirit which is personified by the two gods and the two philosophers, Socrates and Plato, whose seated statues in front of the building were also created by Leonidas Drosis.

The painted decoration of the Assembly Hall consists of eight panels executed in oil on canvas by the painter Christian Griepenkerl (1839-1916), a student of Carl Rahl (1812-1891). The paintings are related to the

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The statues of Plato and Socrates in front of the Academy of Athens bearers of wisdom and light. Their theme is the myth of Prometheus about man’s creation and his gift of fire and light.

The eight panels depict this myth, starting from the left side of the doorway to the Hall. On the first panel, Prometheus’ mother, Themis, prophesies her son’s future fate. On the second panel, Prometheus, with Athena’s help, is ready to take the fire from the Sun. The third panel depicts the creation of man. On the fourth panel, which is on the wall facing the entrance to the Hall, a scene of Titanomachy depicts the victory of the Olympian gods over the Titans. On the fifth, on the wall to the right, Prometheus brings light and fire to man. On the sixth, Prometheus is depicted bound on Mount Caucasus with the eagle devouring his liver. On the seventh, Heracles releases Prometheus. On the eighth panel, extending over the entrance door, Heracles introduces Prometheus to Olympus. The paintings are characterized by the monumentality of the figures, the heroic pathos, and the idealistic elements, with forms borrowed from the great Masters of the sixteenth century, especially Michelangelo, and the baroque tradition.