

“Environment and Culture: The Tree of Life through four seasons”

“Environment and Culture” is an annual campaign launched in 2008 by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. In the heart of this initiative lies the belief that the notions of natural and cultural environment are intimately related, forming two facets of a single cause. Therefore, it wishes to establish a policy on a national level in order to inspire and stimulate their protection through a wide variety of cultural activities. Nature serves as a source of inspiration for artistic creations; in turn, art and cultural heritage can provide an incentive for raising awareness on the dangers that threaten our environment and, thus, for enhancing the quality of our lives.

For years 2008-2009 the campaign explores the theme of “The Tree of Life”. The symbolism of the tree, rich and multifaceted, deeply rooted in the minds of people, combines myths and religious beliefs, traditions and philosophical ideas through different eras of Greek civilization: Prehistory, Ancient times, Byzantine period and Modern Greece. These four historical periods are seen as “four seasons”, each one adding new branches to the trunk of the tree’s narratives, depictions and symbolic values. Offering thematic educational activities and tours in archaeological sites, museums, monuments and art galleries in all over Greece, we address a double invitation: to celebrate the arrival of spring and to visit places not only interesting but also beautiful, where monuments harmoniously coexist with nature.

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Hellenic Ministry of Culture



Environment and Culture

The last tree

The tree was once worshipped like a divine presence, loved like a partner, praised for its beauty and virtues and grafted with multiple symbolisms; today, it is above all a part of nature in danger. Shortly after the fires that marked the summer of 2007, the painter Kostas Tsoklis exhibited a series of works that have the aspect of an ancient tragedy. The flaming tree undertakes the role to narrate the story of the catastrophe. The yellow paper attached to the canvas breaks free like a spark ready to fly away from the nightmarish picture. It is certainly the cause of disaster. Nevertheless, it could also deliver the light of hope, fluttering to the vase painting with Apollo’s birth, to stand on the golden branches of the palm tree on the break of dawn. What we can do? Much! Without forgetting the crimson of the fire, we can welcome the spring, turning our eyes to the fresh green that emerges through the ashes...



Untitled, Kostas Tsoklis, January 2008,
70x100 cm. Astrolavos Art Gallery, Athens



Gold sealing ring known as “The Ring of Minos”,
1450-1400 B.C., 3,55x2,45 cm.
Herakleion Archaeological Museum (n. 1700)



Virgin, the Root of Iessai
by Theodoros Poulakis,
1666 A.D., 70x107 cm.
Athens, Byzantine and
Christian Museum (n. 1575)



Detail from a red-figured vase (pyxis)
from Athens, 340-330 B.C., h. 26 cm.
Athens, National Archaeological Museum
(n. 1635)



Detail from an embroidered bridal sheet from Ioannina,
end of 18th c., 120x30 cm.
Athens, Museum of Greek Folk Art (n. 3386)



Hellenic Ministry of Culture
General Directorate of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage

The worship of the Tree

Trees with a distinctive meaning because of their place, their beauty, their strength and history became landmarks or symbols, thus taking part to a magical world.

Nature generated myths and legends and inspired ceremonies. Men used, for example, to cut a branch and decorate their houses, shrines and temples, in an effort to bring the power of nature with them.

In prehistoric times, ritual depictions of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilization engraved on gold rings often present an imposing tree settled at the centre of a scene as an indication of its holiness. Male and female dancers are shown in ecstatic movements, while offers are given to the shrine, until the goddess descends from the sky in order to take her place under the beautiful branches of the tree.

Tree, its branches and its valuable fruits are related up until our days with symbolisms and traditions. In them people trust their wishes and hopes for a happy, prosperous and fertile life. Even today, during Christmas, people decorate Christmas trees with candies, gifts, colourful balls and shiny lights.



The Tree between earth and heaven

The tree is the bond that brings together the three “worlds”: the earthy, the celestial and the underworld. It springs from the ground and rises to the sky; under its trunk, its roots spread in mysterious paths.

In Greek myths, many trees have magic powers, possess the gift of prophecy or bear fruits that offer divine wisdom and eternal youth. For instance, in the ancient sanctuary of Dodone there was a well-known oak tree that whispered oracles; while the great hero Hercules in his last labour obtained the golden apples of Hesperides and thus became immortal.

The tree is intimately related with both death and birth. It may stand above a grave, in place of a tombstone, reminding the elusive fate of mortals. But on this vase painting an extraordinary birth is depicted. Leaning on the trunk of a tree, Leto gives birth to her twin children, Apollo, god of sun and music, and Artemis, goddess of forests and hunt. Light spread on the sacred island of Delos when Apollo was born, whereas the palm tree that sheltered his mother sprang its golden branches shining like the sun.



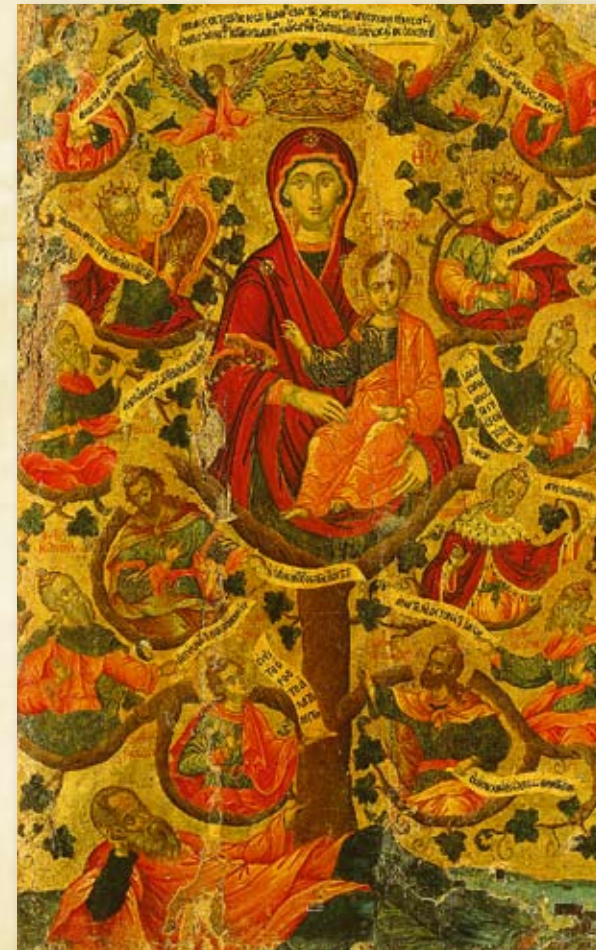
The Tree between past and present

In describing our history and origins, we often borrow expressions from the “vocabulary” of the tree: roots, family tree, branches of a family. We identify our relatives, ancestors and progeny, with the parts of a tree; and when we draw its image we come up with a trunk where the past meets the present –and the promises of the future.

A version of the family tree is the “Root of lessai”. This iconographic pattern emerges in Medieval art, in the west and subsequently in the east, where it becomes increasingly popular, especially during the post-Byzantine era. It shows in a symbolic way Christ’s human origins from the royal family of David.

From the reclined body of lessai grows a tree. The male ancestors of Christ are depicted in the branches surrounding the precious flower: the Virgin and Child.

The picture glorifies the holy birth in the same way as the verses of a Christmas hymn: “Branch of the root of lessai and flower of the branch, Christ, You who sprouted from the Virgin”.



The Tree and the fruits of fertility

For centuries before industrial revolution, human lives were closely linked with the cycle of seasons. Flowering and fruit bearing, decay and rebirth were experiences awesome and wonderful as well as important for survival. Underneath the hard surface of the tree’s trunk run the secret fluids of spring and the emerging vegetation is conceived as a magical expression of their strength.

The tree appears through ages as a symbol of eternal rebirth and fertility. We may find it in the iconography of the creto-mycenean world, on the pottery of the archaic period, on the decoration of Byzantine churches, often surrounded by animals, real or imaginary. In each example the image may conceal various additional meanings; yet the main idea remains the same: the tree is the sacred expression of nature, the breath of universe, the synonym of life.

In Greek folk art, the tree often decorates the embroidered sheets of the bride. With colourful fruits, joyful flowers and birds flying between its branches, it has the power to scare away bad omens, bring good luck and ensure fertility.

