

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Spolia: Transcripts of the Stones of the Little Metropolis”

Makryiannis Wing of the Gennadius Library, American School of Classical Studies at Athens
September 10 – November 2, 2019

Chloe Lovelace

Housed in the Gennadius Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Nora Okka’s “Spolia: Transcripts of the Stones of the Little Metropolis” (Fig. 1) brings new life to the relief sculpture on the church colloquially known as the Little Metropolis, so named because of its towering neighbor, the Metropolis Church.



Figure 1. Installation view of “Spolia: Transcripts of the Stones of the Little Metropolis,” 16 October 2019, Gennadius Library, Athens, Greece. Photograph by author.

The Little Metropolis (also known as the Church of Agios Eleftherios or the Panagia Gorgoepikoos) was built sometime between the 12th and 15th centuries. Although Athens is full of monuments both grander and more ancient, the Little Metropolis boasts a unique architectural quality – it is built entirely out of

spolia, or reused materials (Fig. 2). Okka, an artist and architect currently based at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, highlights these reused materials as the focus of her artistic enterprise. For this exhibition, Okka made what are called “squeezes” of the church reliefs, which are displayed throughout the gallery space (Fig.3). Traditionally used to document epigraphy at archaeological sites, squeezes are made by hammering layers of paper against stone to create a copy of the relief. There is a tenderness towards the church that is evident in Okka’s careful documentation of the reliefs. A close observer will notice smatterings of surface dirt and rocks from the church on the squeezes themselves, brushed across the peaks and valleys of the reliefs. One can easily imagine the diligence and care that Okka had to take to create successful squeezes. It is an arduous process that requires a great deal of strength in order to properly hammer the paper; focus as to not damage the original stone; and a sensitivity to the object itself so that the artist can reproduce its relief in an honest way.



Figure 2. View of the entrance of the Little Metropolis Church, 12-15th century, Athens, Greece. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Nora Okka, Squeeze for relief E71, 2015. Photograph by author.

At first glance, the exhibition strikes the visitor as a repetition of white: each squeeze appearing plaster-like in its white mount and wooden frame, reflected upon the marble floor of the I. Makryiannis Wing. The surprise comes when you look closely at each individual squeeze. Each has its own texture, covered in relief both high and low, and allows the visitor to think about the reliefs on their own merit, divorced from the architectural program of the church for the first time since the Little Metropolis was built (Fig. 4). Being able to process the reliefs as distinct objects is a transformative experience, allowing one to think about the life of the spolia prior to its inclusion in the church: as part of a funerary stele, temple, or doorway. Simultaneously, the viewer also is faced with the competing idea of the squeeze as an original work of art. It copies the relief, but does not exactly reproduce it, as it shows the work in negative.



Figure 4. Nora Okka, Squeeze for relief E50, 2015. Photograph by author.

In the center of the room, visitors can look at archival material from both the ASCSA's own archives and from the Benaki Museum, which shows images of the church from the 19th century onward, ranging from architectural plans and photographs to an 1890 watercolor by artist Mary Hogarth (Fig. 5). These images serve to both place the visitor within the context of the church and as a tool to place the reliefs, seen in negative on the gallery walls, on their Byzantine building. More than that, the archival material functions as a lens, illuminating how this building has been seen over time. Often these images have the same perspective on the Little Metropolis—a slightly askew picture of the front of the building, surrounded by either people or plants or construction. Sometimes, they show independent spolia, prompting an eagle-eyed visitor to find its imprinted counterpart in the exhibition. Consistently, however, they are able to demonstrate both the persistent, if sometimes repetitive, nature of interest in the church and the durability of the Little Metropolis, as a living monument in the center of Athens.

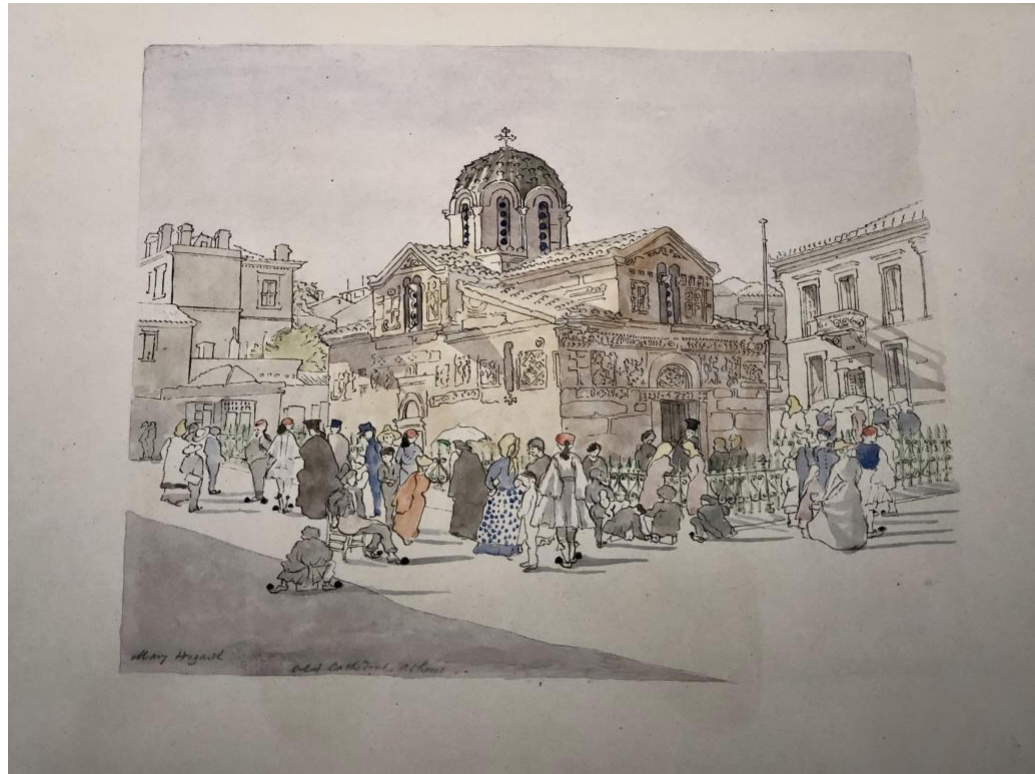


Figure 5. Mary Hogarth, *The Old Metropolis at Athens*, watercolor on paper, 1890, Benaki Museum, Athens. Photograph by author.

While the exhibition does not answer any questions about the church—which is something of an art historical enigma without a confirmed date, patron, or a wealth of archaeological documentation—it does prompt the visitor to think about reuse of materials not just as an ancient practice, but one that is perpetuated through modernity via the reproduction of images in books and the replication of images that persevere on the exhibition walls. Okka's three-dimensional negatives are not only a fascinating look at the surface of an oft-overlooked monument but are a continuation of its reuse.