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Alexandra Kehayoglou's Cavafy-inspired artwork is displayed in the living room

THE PRIME MINISTER'S INTERIORS

*The new interiors of the Greek Prime Minister's residence in Athens explore the beauty of Greece's cultural history, writes **Alice Dunn***

Last year, our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, received criticism for the refurbishment of his Downing Street flat and the source of the funds used to pay for it. The redesign called for some luxurious new gold wallpaper, reportedly costing over £800 a roll (it would peel off the walls just weeks later), a new sofa for a plump £10,000 and a table for £3,000. The total sum of the entire re-fit came to about £58,000. Discovering how that bill was paid for became a distraction to news otherwise dominated by the pandemic.

The process of politicians' property renovations would appear to be a more amicable affair in Greece. When Maximos Mansion, where Greek Prime Minister

Kyriakos Mitsotakis keeps his office, was redecorated last year, his wife Mareva Grabowski-Mitsotakis took the helm.

Grabowski-Mitsotakis proved to be the perfect candidate for the job owing to her experience in aestheticism and design. After years spent working in investment banking, she co-founded Zeus + Dione, a Greek fashion and lifestyle brand that champions Greek craftsmanship. Each item in the label is 'characterized by a unique interpretation of myth and tradition' and highlights the skills of artisans from all over Greece. Textiles made from silk, for example, are created solely for the Zeus + Dione brand in Soufli in northeast Greece. Silk shirts are embroidered in Argos and

Metsovo. Dresses and skirts are knitted 'by the craftswomen of the Cyclades and Attica,' as the website boasts. Such exclusive workmanship is understandably not cheap. A dress markets for around €700 while a ceramic vase will set you back approximately €350.

Regarding the renovation project of Maximos Mansion, Grabowski-Mitsotakis said that her husband was open to the idea of change, but under one condition. As she told one interviewer, "He said, 'You can do whatever you like, but it can't cost the Greek state one penny.'"

This provided an opportunity to combine the best of Greece's design offerings. One of the central players involved in the renovation



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Maximos Mansion in Athens

was Elina Kountouri, Managing Director of NEON, a non-profit organisation whose focus is to make contemporary art accessible to everyone. NEON and its founder, Dimitris Daskalopoulos, recently co-funded the transformation of the colourful Public Tobacco Factory into a space for exhibitions. Renovations for that project cost €1.2 million, with the space held under the control of the Hellenic Parliament for public use. Part of the exhibition space was designed for a ‘permanent contemporary cultural and social space – open to all – that functions as a dynamic hub for meeting and exchanging ideas,’ while a significant portion was set aside for the Hellenic Parliament Library and Printing House. Last year, the cultural hub was home to an exhibition called

‘Portals’, which featured work by 59 artists from 27 countries.

For the Maximos Mansion project, Elina Kountouri joined forces with Michael Anastassiades, a product designer from Cyprus, and together they gathered a list of Greek artists and collectors and issued requests to borrow select pieces of art to be housed in the Mansion for the next two years. One of the pieces, now in the meeting room, is a console table designed by the late architect and interior designer Rena Dumas.

Rena Dumas was born in Greece and founded her own architectural design practice – RDAI (Rena Dumas Interior Architecture) – in Paris in 1972. It is still a thriving interior architecture and architecture practice today. Dumas’s passion for architecture was ignited by watching her brother while he was a student at the technical school in Athens. Her own training was in arts and crafts in Paris before she continued to study in Greece and America. Her husband was Jean-Louis Dumas, the former president of Hermès, and she has designed hundreds of

Hermès’s stores, making each a luxurious place to shop. She has also designed beautiful yet functional furniture, including the ‘Aria’ console table, which found favour with the designers for the meeting room of Maximos Mansion. Originally created for a private household in the mid-1980s, it has a striking silhouette of cut-out squares as legs and a top-heavy appearance – imbalanced, yet sturdy.

In the living room of Maximos Mansion, meanwhile, a piece of textile art flows from the wall onto the floor. Titled ‘Hope the Voyage Is a Long One’, it was made by Alexandra Kehayoglou and named after Cavafy’s famous poem, Ithaka. ‘As you set out for Ithaka / hope your road is a long one, / full of adventure, full of discovery’, the first lines of the poem read. The dual-picture scene depicts beautiful trees leading into a sedate blue sea, while on the floor, the picture gives rise to a three-dimensional representation of two large rocks at Samaria Gorge on Crete, convincingly produced in a textured material.

In all their myriad forms, the renovations are a symbolic tribute to Greece and everything it means to be Greek. Next in line for an update are the gardens at Maximos Mansion. Let’s hope that they will dig just as deep into Greece’s rich history for botanical beauty.



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The Invisible Collection)

The Aria Console Table