
Saint Louis Art Museum, February 6–April 5, 1998
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, July 31-October 11 1998
New Orleans Museum of Art, October 31-January 4, 1999
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, January 17-March 14 1999
Museum of Fine Arts Boston, April 2-June 7 1999
Detroit Institute of Arts, June 25-August 29


1 Exhibition Concept

The invitation to organize the exhibition was addressed to the President of the Republic and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria in October 1994 by Trust for Museum Exhibitions, Washington DC, USA. By submitting materials for the concept and composition of the future exhibition, 7 American museums were selected out of the 20 candidates for its hosting: Saint Louis Art Museum, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, The California Palace of the Legion of Honor,

San Francisco, New Orleans Museum of Art, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Detroit Institute of Arts. The exhibition was selected from the holdings and expositions of 17 Bulgarian museums and included 203 items with more than 300 exhibits. The interest of the hosts was primarily aimed at familiarizing the American audience with the little-known ancient Thracian culture as an integral part of the culture of ancient Europe. The concept of the exhibition was developed on the principle of the thematic structure of the Thracian art. For the first time the organization of this exhibition overcame the traditional archaeological structure of this type of exhibitions, created back in 1974, based primarily on the geography and chronology of the archaeological complexes. The themes: (1) Thracian Burial; (2) A Horse and a Chariot; (3) Gods and Heroes; (4) Treasures; (5) Royal Insignia; (6) Royal and Religious Drinking Sets. The advantages of the new approach: (1) it presents the Thracian art as an integral process; (2) it manifests the role of the precious object as a social distinction; (3) the functioning of the precious object in the ritual system of the Thracian society; (4) it presents art as a response to certain ideological requirements; (5) mythological and ideological ideas are embodied in the iconography; (6) it presents the Thracian culture as an organic amalgam of imported Greek, Scythian and Celtic artifacts as a
result of the cultural interactions in the ancient world; (7) the concept of the exhibition, implemented in the design and in the luxurious and detailed catalogue, offers a new perspective for the study of the barbarian cultures in Europe.

2. Reception

The exhibition was the central event of the year in the seven American museums. It was widely reported in the media – for example: only in print media of San Francisco there were publications about it in more than 20 million copies. Not only the regional, but also the national media and press reported the success of the exhibition. The opening of the exhibition in each of the museums was a magnificent public event attended not only by the Friends of the Museum, but also by High Ranked Officials. The first opening in Saint Louis was performed with the participation of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria. Congratulatory letters for the success of the exhibition were entered in the catalogue by the U.S. President Bill Clinton, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria P. Stoyanov and the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria. Thus the exhibition also became a political event, which undoubtedly increased the interest in Bulgaria and reset its image to the world. In the days before the opening of the exhibition, the Bulgarian curator held in the museums training seminars for volunteer guides concerning the exhibition, as well as for teachers from the schools in the area. The total number of visitors reached about 600 000 people and over 15,000 catalogues were sold. In the Museums of Saint Louis, San Francisco, Detroit and Paul Getty in Los Angeles public lectures on Thracian culture were given which were met with
extraordinary interest. The public popularity of the exhibition was demonstrated by some seemingly minor facts: e.g. the Hellenic Society of San Francisco organized its meeting in the halls of the museum and printed an exhibit of the exhibition on its invitation. The catalogue continues to maintain a high price in Amazon Books. The reception and the appreciation of the success of the exhibition resulted in an invitation to the curator Prof. I. Marazov to participate in the international conference "The Barbarians of Ancient Europe" at the University of Richmond in 2003. The concept of a thematic exhibition was then adopted in the following exhibitions of the Thracian culture in Helsinki, Brussels, Madrid, Zurich, Bonn.

Photo courtesy The California Palace of the Legion of Honor
3. Exhibition Design

The presentation, although individual for each one of the museums, focused on authentic ancient artifacts of gold, silver and bronze. The design concept followed the themes and was organized dynamically as links between the different themes, represented in the windows: different functional types of objects, styles, iconography, time-sequence. The labels in the windows gave detailed information on each object, and the posters on the walls presented the main topics of the Thracian culture, illustrated by the exhibits and by the oversized photos of monumental monuments of the Thracian culture (rock temples, tombs), and of monuments for relative comparisons with the Scythian culture. This created an atmosphere and environment for the exhibits and deepened the meaning of the exhibition concept. Therefore, during the exhibition at the Detroit Museum the walls of the halls were lined with black velvet and only the windows were illuminated, creating a particular mysterious atmosphere and focused on the perception of the themes and artifacts. All these measures helped the viewer to better absorb the messages of the exhibition concept, to perceive every exhibit not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a participant in a specific socio-political and ideological situation.

4. Visitors Approach - Activation/Participation

Photos courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum
The exhibition was accompanied by a rich catalogue in English with editorials by leading Bulgarian experts, with introductions to each theme, with detailed annotations and pictures of the exhibits. The scientific focus of the articles coincides with the main task of the exhibition concept: to overcome the two dangers imposed to the study of the barbarian cultures – overestimation of their originality and the Hellenic-centrism. The emphasis is on showing the beginning of the European culture (burial gifts from Varna Chalcolithic Necropolis), the beginning of the Thracian culture (the treasure from Valchitran), the interactions with the Greek, Macedonian, Scythian and Celtic art, the use of Greek iconographic and stylistic elements in the creation of the artistic language of the Thracians and the common features with other barbaric arts from Europe. Thus the Thracian art tradition was placed in the broader European cultural context in ancient times. Luxury invitations and a series of color cards were printed with illustrations of the most prestigious objects of the exhibition.

5. **Conclusion: the Exhibition “Ancient Gold. The Wealth of the Thracians” in respect to the COP1 and COP2**

**Toolkit 1:** The exhibition is a successful example of the thematic approach. The concept overcomes the existing and dominant archaeological and topographical in substance approach that involves a purely descriptive exhibition of the individual findings. Comparing local with "foreign/imported" artifacts, the concept of the exhibition focuses on the comparative approach, especially suitable for interpretation of the barbarian cultures, experiencing influences of the more developed (Greek) culture. Moreover, the concept emphasizes not only and not so much on the aesthetic aspect, but on the functioning of the precious objects in a particular ideological environment.

**Toolkit 2:** Through its design the exhibition gave the visitors the chance to activate their role. For the individual topics posters were prepared that put the Thracian culture in the context of the ideological life in Thrace and in the context of the cultural interactions with the rest of the ancient world.

**Toolkit 3:** The catalogue with issues in Russian, English and Bulgarian, the other printed materials, the press conferences, the publications in print and electronic media, the group visits with lectures given by leading experts, the international scientific conference organized, undoubtedly facilitated the ability of the audience to perceive the messages embodied in the concept the exhibition.

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Toolkit 4: Synesthetic translation of perspective: the new character of the exhibition, consisting of archaeological findings, has also led to an innovative scenographic design that facilitates the communication of the visitors with the exhibits and helps them achieve the message of the exhibition – dynamic interaction between Greek and Barbarian cultures.

Toolkit 5: Integrating of visitors to the ancient technology of making precious objects: at the exit of the Detroit Museum a “workshop” was organized, where experts from the nearby craftsman school trained the interested visitors (mostly children) to produce jewelry.

Further Literature, Links and Information:


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