

## **GEORGE ZONGOLOPOULOS**

George Zongolopoulos (Athens, 1903-2004) was one of the most important Greek artists and representatives of the so called “Generation of 1930s” with diverse and internationally recognized work.

The work of the artist, who was often called the “eternal teenager”, extends across the unusual vector of time of almost eight decades, and its rich range of subject matter is characterized by incessant renewal.

### **Biography**

George Zongolopoulos was born on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1903, in Deligiorgi Street in the center of Athens, while his place of origin was the village Manna or Markasi in Corinth (as Zongolopoulos narrated to his family the real year of his birth was 1901 and not 1903 as is appeared in all his official documents). He grew up in a family of lawyers that did not encourage him to deal professionally with art, although he showed a special inclination towards painting and drawing from childhood.

He served his military service as a sergeant until 1923 and during that period he met his peer and later important Greek architect Patroklos Karantinos, who became one of his closest friends and colleagues.

### **First years of apprenticeship**

- National Technical University of Athens, Athens School of Fine Arts (1924-1930)

In 1924 he entered the Athens School of Fine Arts and studied sculpture under Academician Thomas Thomopoulos. In his student years he expressed with militancy his opinion on the need for modernization and reorganization of teaching, and also on the need to increase the School’s budget. His attitude towards the academicism of the School and his participation in the “occupation” of the School by its students in 1929 meant for the young Zongolopoulos expulsion from the School for a year. The famous poet Ioannis Griparis intervened in order for Zongolopoulos to be accepted by the School again and be allowed to finish his studies in 1930. In 1929, a year before getting his degree, with a group of friends and fellow students he helped bring Konstantinos Parthenis to the School, a painter who represents Greek modernism.

- Zongolopoulos and Architecture, 1926-1928

In 1926 while still a student, Zongolopoulos’ ability in drawing earned him a chair next to [Academician] Anastasios Orlandos in the Technical Service of the Ministry of Education (Department of Restoration of Ancient and Byzantine Monuments). His collaboration with the famous Greek architect and archaeologist lasted until 1928 and was the momentum for the first substantial contact between Zongolopoulos and Architecture. Later on, Architecture was to become an integral part of Zongolopoulos’ artistic career and development. During this collaboration he made studies and designs for churches and temples.

- First Group Exhibition

In 1927 he took part for the very first time in a group exhibition held for charity, which took place at the home of the scholar Nikos Velmos, the space that housed the “Art Asylum”.

- **Helen Paschalidou - Zongolopoulou**

In 1933 George Zongolopoulos, who was working then for the Ministry of Education, met Konstantinos Parthenis’ student painter Helen Paschalidou. Helen, who came from Constantinople and was raised in a family environment full of arts and letters, was an equally restless spirit and the

person who would be next to Zongolopoulos in studies, educational travels, conferences and exhibitions and would inspire and support the sculptor.

In 1936 they married shortly before the outbreak of World War II and they acquired a plot in Psychiko where they built their home and studio. The couple chose not to have children. Helen's sister Alexandra Paschalidou–Moreti (the seventh woman architect in Greece) explained, "They did not want to have children so as not to afflict them with their poverty and their bohemian way of life, but also because they wanted to work undistracted in their arts."

Helen and George remained inseparable for almost 60 years, and George in old age confided that "Helen was the most important thing I've had in the world."

- **Ministry of Education 1930-1938 and the first travel to Paris**

In 1930 Zongolopoulos, a graduate of the Athens School of Fine Arts, returned to the Ministry of Education where he was appointed as a decorator in the Office of Studies for Urban New School Buildings under the architect Nikolaos Mitsakis. Zongolopoulos made studies and designed school buildings, churches and museums, and although he did not officially have the qualifications of an architect he made and refined architectural designs which in some cases he signed.

He closely collaborated with old and new friends of his, mostly painters and architects, "in an attempt to overcome what we perceived was a strict academicism," as the sculptor characteristically said. This friendly companionship included Dimitris Pikionis, Spyros Papaloukas, Patroklos Karantinos, Nikolaos Mitsakis, Fotis Kontoglou and Nikos Hadjikyriakos – Ghikas.

In 1937 he made with his wife Helen his first trip to Paris in order to attend the International Fair and an exhibition with artworks of El Greco. There he saw the work of Auguste Rodin, which in Athens at that time was known only through books, and came in contact with the work of Charles Despiau. In the International Fair he was impressed by the minimal Spanish pavilion which "in its entirety was preparing us for the big shock, the 'Guernica', the work that Picasso sent in light after a series of drawings", as Zongolopoulos narrated.

That journey, along with Helen's persistent urging and encouragement, led him to resign from his job in the Ministry of Education in 1938 and devote himself entirely to sculpture. The decision to leave a job that offered him a good salary brought the couple many hardships and privations especially in view of the Occupation of Greece in 1940.

- **Works before 1939**

- The initial works

In his initial works Zongolopoulos worked with marble and bronze while he was preoccupied with busts and burial monuments. He worked his portraits based on an archaic style but not tied to a strict realistic performance. Typical examples of his work are the bronze-made 'Head of Dimitris Vitsoris' located at the National Gallery of Athens, the marble-made 'Bust of Andreas Miaoulis' located at the Pedion tou Areos (Field of Mars), the bronze-made 'Head of Errikos Fradjeskakis', the bronze-made 'Bust of Ariadne Xenakis', the marble-made 'Bust of archaeologist Panagis Kavvadias', while he also made the bronze urn for the bones of the Orthodox Metropolitan Germanos III of Old Patras. He also embossed the marble-made 'Mourning Spirit' located at the First Cemetery of Athens.

- The 1<sup>st</sup> National Art Exhibition

In 1938 he took part in the 1<sup>st</sup> National Art Exhibition at the Zappion Megaron. George Zongolopoulos went on to participate in all National Art Exhibitions other than those during the dictatorship.

- 1933 - Member of "Art Group"

In 1932 he joined the “Art Group” that had been originally founded by Nikolaos Lytras in 1919 and then reorganized in 1929 with the participation of Konstantinos Parthenis. Zongolopoulos took part in all group exhibitions held by the “Art Group” until 1940.

- In 1934 he participated in a group exhibition at the Stratigopoulou Art Gallery along with Aginor Asteriadis, Spyros Vassiliou, Dimitris Vitsoris and Kostis Papachristopoulos. In many curriculum vitae of Zongolopoulos this particular exhibition is referred to as a solo exhibition because of its great importance for his early artistic recognition by the audience and art critics.
- 1933 - Sivitanidios Public School of Trades and Vocations  
He taught drawing at the Sivitanidios Public School of Trades and Vocations in 1933-1934.
- Competitions

In 1931, as he was a member of the Association of Greek Sculptors, he was involved with the remodeling of Omonia Square. Zongolopoulos, years later, would come back twice to work on Omonia Square and his name is connected with the famous central Athenian square until the present.

The first known Zongolopoulos sculpture for public space and one for which he received the second prize was the study for the monument of the ‘Unknown Sailor in Psitallia’ in 1933. In 1939 he took part in the important competition of that time for the equestrian statue of ‘Georgios Karaiskakis’. Zongolopoulos’ plaster model qualified along with that of the sculptor Michail Tompros with whom he received equal prize money and a mandate to continue the competition between the two artists. The competition was temporarily canceled because of World War II but was finally completed postwar with Tompros winning the first prize and Zongolopoulos the third one. Among other participants in the competition was renowned sculptor and Academician Yiannis Pappas, cousin of Helen Paschalidou–Zongolopoulou.

- **First international presence**

During the difficult years of the Occupation when many people were struggling for survival, Zongolopoulos proposed to the Ministry of Education and particularly to the Stegi Grammaton kai Tehnon (House of Arts and Letters) a mess hall for artists.

Zongolopoulos was thematically interested in historical and social issues of the time. His participation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Art Exhibitions in 1939 and 1940, in which major names of the field took part, received rave reviews. As noted by the art critic Marinos Kalligas, “... Zongolopoulos, as a brilliant craftsman, knows as very few do how to give plastic value to volume.”

- 1940 - the **Venice Biennale**

In 1940 Zongolopoulos took part for the first time in the Venice Biennale. Zongolopoulos’ name would be associated with the Venice Biennale for the next sixty years, until 2001 when at the age of 99 he took part for the last time in the Venice Biennale with the mobile sculpture “Five Circles”. The sculpture is located at Omonia Square.

- The interwar period  
During the interwar period Zongolopoulos was mainly directed to anthropocentric representation.
- 1946 - Cairo Biennale and President of the Association of Greek Sculptors

He participated in the Cairo Biennale [1946] and took part in the exhibition of Greek art (Greek State Artists) in the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm and in the exhibition of the members of the Greek-French School at the Athens French Institute.

In the same year he was elected Vice President of the Chamber of Fine Arts in Greece and President of the Association of Greek Sculptors.

- 1947 - 'Monument to the Fallen'

He participated in a competition for the 'Monument to the Fallen' in Keratsini with the marble-made 'Bust of Ariadne Xenakis'. He won the first prize.

- 1948 - The first solo exhibition and the consolidation of his fame

In 1948 Zongolopoulos held his first solo exhibition at the Zachariou Art Gallery in Athens.

In the same year the first post-World War II National Art Exhibition took place at the Zappio Megaron where he was distinguished with the silver medal among 330 artists for his plaster-made "Ariadne", (the first prize was never given).

- **The 1950s – the complete and the vacuum**

- 1949 - French Government Scholarship

In 1949 Zongolopoulos was granted a scholarship from the French Government and moved to Paris for further studies at Marcel Gimond's studio.

- Architecture in Paris

Alongside his studies he worked with the architectural firm of Joseph – René Binet, a factor which helped him extend his stay in the French capital and to continue his studies.

- 1952/1953 - the Greek State Scholarships Foundation and Italy

In 1952 a scholarship from the Greek State Scholarships Foundation took him to Italy where he specialized in bronze-casting techniques. During that period there was a gradual change in his work and a shift from realism to abstraction, although his sculpture still remained anthropocentric. He introduced abstract elements in his work, whilst realistic forms and volumes became more flat.

He studied in Rome, Milan, Florence and Pistoia. In Italy he came in contact with the work of Marino Marini.

- Monuments and public sculpture

In 1952 he participated and won, along with the sculptor Achilleas Apergis, the competition for the construction of the 'Monument to the Fallen of Itea'. This particular monument in Itea constitutes a unique phenomenon of cooperation in Modern Greek sculpture where two sculptors jointly signed the forms of the sculpture; Zongolopoulos signed the female figure and Apergis the male one.

- 1953 - Significant international friendships and the Tate Gallery

In 1953 Zongolopoulos became a member of the European Society of Culture (Société Européenne de Culture) that was founded in Venice in 1950 and held a dominant position in the European cultural scene of that period promoting dialogue and cooperation among the people of Europe. Through the Society he met important artists, writers and scientists.

In the same year he took part in a competition held by the Tate Gallery in London for the "Monument of the Unknown Political Prisoner".

- 1954 - 'Monument of Zalongo'

1954 was the beginning of the implementation of one of the most iconic of George Zongolopoulos' works in public space, the 'Monument of Zalongo'. He began the first sketches and drawings of the sculpture in Florence and for six years the sculptor worked in situ at Mt. Zalongo on the six abstract female figures that represent the women who led the namesake dance. The memorial presented many construction difficulties, as the almost 4,300 limestone blocks that were needed for the construction of the monument were transferred from a distance of 160 km. and were carved on the top of the mountain. The monument was financially supported by two national student fundraisings.

The monument is 15 m. high and 18 m. long and is visible from a distance of 25 km. The construction of this monumental scale artwork was the impetus through which Zongolopoulos understood thoroughly that in sculpture "vacuum plus complete equals one."

- 1954 - 'Monument to the Fallen of Kokkinia'

Zongolopoulos created a memorial to the Fallen of Kokkinia, a bronze sculpture with two forms that is placed at the Osia Xeni Square and is a reference to the blockade of Kokkinia in 1944. The sculpture is used by the Municipality of Nikaia - Ag. I. Rentis as its linear logo.

- 1957 - Sao Paulo Biennale

He participated with six metal sculptures in the Biennale of Sao Paulo. Amongst the sculptures is the 'Poseidon', the first sculpture in which Zongolopoulos shows "a significant abstract configuration in an imaginary form", as the artist indicatively noted.

In the same year he became a member of the select committee of the Greek State Scholarships Foundation for sending sculpture students abroad, a position he held until 1959.

- 1958 - Omonia Square – 'Poseidon'

In 1958 he participated in the competition for the redesign of Omonia Square in Athens and in collaboration with the architect K. Bitsios won the first artistic and architectural prize. The proposal included a sculptural composition of water jets in the center of which was placed the 'Poseidon', the abstract sculpture that had been presented internationally in Sao Paulo the year before.

- **The 1960s – emphasis on geometric forms**

- 1964 - Venice Biennale and the 'Delphi'

He participated in the Venice Biennale and he created the abstract bronze sculpture 'Delphi'. In this period he introduced a series of bronze artworks that are distinguished by their clean architectural structure with plates which he processed by applying welding methods. Since 1989 the geometric composition of 'Delphi' has been located at the junction of Vas. Sofias Avenue and Vas. Konstantinou Avenue in Athens, opposite the National Gallery.

- 1965 - Paris

Up to 1975 he took part in all exhibitions of the Salon de la Jeune Sculpture, while during the period of the dictatorship in Greece Zongolopoulos did not participate in any National Art Exhibitions.

- 1966 - TITF – Thessaloniki International Trade Fair

In 1966 Zongolopoulos, having won the first prize in the related competition, created the 'Sculpture for TITF' or 'Cor-Ten'. The 18 m. high innovative creation of George Zongolopoulos roused a storm of protests, as it was not widely accepted by the Greek public of that era. The Cubistic sculpture is one of the earliest examples of Modernism in Greece and is said to represent the Winged Victory of Samothrace.

In the same year, King Constantine conferred honors on Zongolopoulos for his work. The sculptor politely refused to attend the reception and to receive the medal.

For the period of 1960-1988 he was a member of the Executive Council of the Société Européenne de Culture Prés la Biennale of Venice, which Zongolopoulos had firstly joined in 1953. He also became a regular contributor to the Society's magazine entitled "COMPRENDRE".

- **The 1970s –kinetic art and the transparency of the media**

- Kinetic art

In 1971 a new period in Zongolopoulos' artistic course was inaugurated, the period of kinetic art. The "Manifesto of Kinetic Art" had been presented in 1955 at the Denise René Gallery in Paris, but the movement was slow to make its appearance in Greece. George Zongolopoulos was one of the first Greek artists who dared to experiment by introducing movement in his works. He created his

first kinetic sculptures in the 1970s and presented them in a solo exhibition at the Hellenic American Union.

The artist used the power of water in his works, the majority of which are made in stainless steel, while beyond the motion that water offers he also moved on to the use of light in his new creations.

- 1973 - 'Diaphragm' and the studio in Paris

In 1973 he created the 10 m. long sculpture 'Diaphragm' or 'Panels of Merlin' that in 1973 was installed at the head offices of the insurance company "Astir" at Merlin Street in Kolonaki, Athens. The main features of the sculpture are geometry, rhythm and repetition of rectangles in alternating, different visual patterns.

In 1971, the exchange of their house and land in Psychiko for the building of a block of flats (antiparochi) gave George and Helen the opportunity to acquire in 1973 a small studio in Paris. The couple lived about half of every year in Paris for a decade, attending and participating in international events. The studio in Paris was kept by Zongolopoulos until 1998.

- 1976 - 'Lenses'

Apart from his mobile artworks, Zongolopoulos started creating sculptures with symbolic content. He used large magnifying lenses which he manufactured and brought from France, placing them in front of his sculptural compositions. The lens creates a visual playfulness in front of the sculpture as the artist invites the viewer to consider the object magnified. Characteristic works of this period are 'The Gifts', 'The Egg', 'Lens & Nest', etc., that he presented in solo and group exhibitions.

- 1977 – Zongolopoulos' retirement

In the same year Zongolopoulos held a solo exhibition at Campo Pisani where he presented the large-scale circular sculpture 'Spiral'. The exhibition was organized during the Venice Biennale in collaboration with the Numero Gallery.

Also that year, Minister of Culture Constantine Trypanis approved Zongolopoulos's retirement with recognition for his "outstanding services".

- 1978-1979 - Exhibitions in Paris and in Athens

In 1978-79 he participated in the group exhibition of 22 Greek painters and sculptors at the Grand Palais, and in 1979 he held a solo exhibition at the Zoumboulakis Galleries where he presented works from throughout his artistic career. Another solo exhibition followed at the Gallery Z + M in Thessalonica and one more exhibition at the Grands et Jeunes d 'Aujourd' hui in Paris.

- **The 1980s – prizes and sculpture in public spaces**

- The monuments for Klafthmonos Square and Gorgopotamos area

In 1981 George Zongolopoulos worked along with the famous architect Alexander Tombazis for the remodeling of the Klafthmonos Square in Athens. Their proposal received the first prize, winning the national competition, but their project was never realized.

In 1985 Zongolopoulos and Tombazis collaborated again, this time to create the 'National Resistance Monument of Gorgopotamos'. The proposal of Zongolopoulos was the plastic shaping of a symbol without melodrama. The sculptor depicted this symbol on an 18 m. high sphere formed from transparent vertically and horizontally intersecting metal lines. The sculpture also had a sound function, as in the center of the sphere were rectangular metal plates designed to ring as bells with the force of the wind. The two contestants' study again won the first prize, winning approval from the journalists and art critics of the time, but neither was this project ever finally implemented.

- 1988 - the Umbrella

In 1988 the umbrella appeared for the very first time in Zongolopoulos' artistic language. The umbrella, a familiar everyday object for the protection of man against nature's elements, is the visual

theme that was to preoccupy the artist for years to come. The first ‘umbrella sculpture’ was an umbrella floating freely in space, penetrated by stainless steel lines.

- 1989 - European Cultural Centre of Delphi

He created a mobile sculpture with water and stainless steel entitled ‘Shield’, which is placed at the European Cultural Centre of Delphi.

- 1991 - ‘Battle of Crete’

Zongolopoulos collaborated with the architect Alexander Tombazis for a third time. The project was the ‘Monument for the Battle of Crete’. They won first prize in the competition, but the sculpture was never realized.

- **The years 1990-2004 – sculptures in urban public space**

- 1993 - the ‘Umbrellas’ at the Venice Biennale

In 1993 Zongolopoulos took part in the Venice Biennale with a solo exhibition presenting the hydrokinetic (mobile with water) sculpture ‘Umbrellas’.

- 1995 - ‘Umbrellas’ in Venice and in Brussels

The year 1995 was a landmark year for the ‘Umbrellas’ of George Zongolopoulos. The sculpture ‘Umbrellas’ that would receive wide acceptance and recognition, was presented by the sculptor at the Venice Biennale in the year that the institution was celebrating the 100 years of its operation. A static array of floating umbrellas that are airily based on diagonal axes, the sculpture was selected to be placed at the entrance of the Venice Biennale on a floating platform. Admired by the many visitors, the sculpture gained great publicity worldwide.

In 1995 the hydrokinetic (mobile with water) sculpture 'Umbrellas' won the first prize at the European competition held for the installation of European artworks at the building of the Council of Ministers of the European Union in Brussels. The ‘Umbrellas’ was installed at the Cour d' Honneur (atrium) of the building, where it is still currently placed.

- 1997-1998 - ‘Umbrellas’ in Thessalonica and in Psychiko

In 1997 the ‘Umbrellas’ was installed on Thessalonica’s waterfront. That year Thessalonica was the European Capital of Culture. Loved by the Thessalonians, the sculpture became a reference point for the city. It is one of the most photographed sculptures in Greek public space.

A year later, in 1998, the artist created a similar sculpture for the Municipality of Psychiko, the Athenian suburb where he lived and created. The sculpture is placed at the main entrance of the Municipality of Filothei -Psychiko on Kifissias Ave.

In 2010 the Municipality of Filothei-Psychiko created the Open Air Glyptotheque of Psychiko - George Zongolopoulos Square, honoring the internationally renowned artist who was one of its first residents.

- 1997 - ‘Tel – Néant’

In 1997 his artwork ‘Tel - Néant’ (ie., to the beyond / chaos) travelled to the Venice Biennale, giving its own expression in human communication. The same artwork was exhibited two years later in the Wittenbergplatz in Berlin and in Weimar, to finally find its permanent place at the Head Offices of O.T.E. (Hellenic Telecommunications Organization) in the suburb of Maroussi in Athens.

- 1998 - ‘Olympic Circles’

The sculpture ‘Olympic Circles’ is a reference to the symbol of the Olympic Games, although the sculpture consists of six circles. The sculpture is placed in the National Gallery of Greece.

- 1999 - the ‘Column’ at the Venice Biennale and at Rizari Park

G.Z.: "Recently I created the ‘Column’, which is 21 meters high and has two moments, two meanings: one on the right and the other downwards. In the middle there is the light separator, with a line of a blue plastic."

This sculpture described above by the sculptor was presented at the Venice Biennale in 1999. The 'Column', made of stainless steel and fiber, has been located at the Rizari Park in Athens since 2001.

- 1999 - 'Atrium' at Syntagma Square

In 1999 Zongolopoulos created the sculpture 'Atrium' for the Attiko Metro station at Syntagma Square in Athens. The sculpture was created in situ in the huge opening (25 m. high and 8,5 m. diameter) made for the tunnel boring machine (TBM) used in the construction of the subway. The sculpture is visible and accessible from the Metro Station (underground) and from the Syntagma Square as well.

- 2001 - 'Five Circles' and the final participation at the Venice Biennale

With the hydrokinetic sculptural composition 'Five Circles', George Zongolopoulos had his last participation at the Venice Biennale. The same year the sculpture was placed at Omonia Square in Athens, where it stands until the present.

- 2001 - 'Olympic Circles'

He created the large- scale sculpture 'Olympic Circles' which was installed at the Athens International Airport "Eleftherios Venizelos". The sculpture is 15 meters high and weighs over 9 tons.

- 2001 - 'Irana', the last sculpture

In 2001 he created his last sculpture titled 'Irana'. The sculpture's name is derived from the Doric form of the name Irene. The sculpture was placed in 2010 at the Open Air Glyptotheque of Psychiko - George Zongolopoulos Square.

- 2002 - solo exhibition at a newly opened gallery

In 2002, at the age of 100, he inaugurated with a solo exhibition the opening of the Astrolavos Art Life Gallery in Athens.

- 2004 the George Zongolopoulos Foundation

In 2004 the sculptor founded the public welfare George Zongolopoulos Foundation, established at his residence in Psychiko. He bequeathed all his works to the Foundation, as well as the work of his wife, painter Helen Paschalidou- Zongolopoulou.

He died on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at the age of 103 and was buried in the cemetery of Kifissia.

- **The painter George Zongolopoulos**

George Zongolopoulos is internationally renowned as a sculptor. Less known is his extensive painting work. Alongside the sculpture the artist never stopped painting, and his evolution from realism to abstraction is apparent also in his paintings.

In his paintings there are the themes that also concerned Zongolopoulos in his sculpture, basic geometric shapes -circles, squares, lines, - as well as umbrellas, lenses, eggs and chimneys.

The George Zongolopoulos Foundation preserves all paintings bequeathed by the artist and in addition a multitude of sketches, drawings and architectural designs made in the course of his long life.