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MARIA KOMPATSIARI: THE BYZANTINE LEAD SEALS

Throughout the history of art and civilization there have always been objects, largely utilitarian in nature, that serve everyday needs and are meant to facilitate the activities of members of a society with a heightened cultural awareness. These articles of manual labor and technology were crafted by talented men and women for a specific purpose and do not necessary satisfy aesthetic criteria; they nonetheless express a certain view of the world and the citizen's relation to the power and role of the state.

Among such articles are the Byzantine lead seals or *molyvdovoula*that were used to certify the authenticity of documents. These small objects are notable for the micrographic design of images and scenes which they can bear (engraved or embossed words and shapes). For archaeologists they provide insight into the history of institutions, the evolution of iconography and language, and in general the cultural level that prevailed in the vast Roman and Byzantine empires.

What, then, could a contemporary artist have in common with these humble seals, which are usually foundin archaeological museums on the fringe of display cases dominated by works of

high aesthetic and great inspiration?

Even if,by definition,allhumanly fabricated objectsare a part and facet of culture, there are nonetheless rules and procedures that define the extent to which an object of study possesses “aesthetic properties” sufficient to promptthe search to reveal a “deeper meaning”.

How did our artist “see” these objects as artworks of such value that she devoted time to “reshaping” them? What triggered her artistic interest and inspired a series of works created with contemporary notions of art?

MariaKompatsiarihasindeed spent considerable time preparing the works in this series, whichat first brings us back to a distant past and its singular iconographic models and narrative.

Viewers will realize from the outsetthat they are confronted here with true works of art and that the Byzantine reference in the title is a pretext to render contemporary ideas; that the medieval symbols have been reshaped into abstractly inspired inner experiences; that the traditional iconographyharborspersonal musings ona range of standard themes;that the “mechanical”construction has been replaced by amanualone and sheerpersonal intervention (with the choice of material, the weaving, the threads and stitches); that a three-dimensional approach is fostered with the use of “foreign” materialsbut on the basisof a two-dimensional model within a predetermined frame; that the drawing is enriched with undecipherable hieroglyphic-like texts; that painting plays its own special role in realizing the works, that is, as objects that collaborate with sculpture on the basis of an architectural structure; that the decorative element gives a heightened chromatic feel to the works,relievingthe images from the reigning monochromatism and austere palette; that design, geometric shapes and images, words and texts, arabesques and othermorphic markingswork in concert to enhance the expressiveness of the works; that the stitching and other interventions of the artist create a highly original and strikingly visual allusion to the
mirinthoi,
the threads used to affix the seals to the documents they authenticated.

It is impressive to see an ancient subject with historic, cultural and factual references—and with an aesthetic dimension that escapes the contemporary viewer—transformed into an object of abstract artwith visual coherence, one that functions as a kind of esoteric narrative that can be read as an illustrated romance story. A work, in the end, distinguished for its expressive richness and pluralism, thanks to the diverse permutations offered by inspiration, knowledge

and technique.