

OPINION

# Creating the ‘George N. Papanicolaou Medal’ by the Academy of Athens: An interview with Professor of Sculpture Theodoros Papagiannis (Athens School of Fine Arts, Athens, Greece)

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*‘My ideal is not to become rich, or to be happy, but to work, to act, to create, to do something worthy of an ethical and strong man’*

[Τό ιδανικόν μου δέν εἶναι νά πλουτίσω, οὔτε νά ζήσω εὐτυχῆς ἀλλά νά ἐργασθῶ, νά δράσω, νά δημιουργήσω, νά κάμω κάτι τι ἀντάξιον ἐνός ἀνθρώπου ἠθικοῦ καί δυνατοῦ]

George N. Papanicolaou

**Abstract.** The ‘George N. Papanicolaou Medal’ is a brass medal commissioned by the Academy of Athens on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dr George N. Papanicolaou in 1983. It was created by Professor Theodoros Papagiannis, Professor Emeritus of Sculpture at the Athens School of Fine Arts in Athens, Greece; the medal presents Dr George N. Papanicolaou with his microscope. According to Professor Papagiannis, the medal was requested by Professor Nikolaos Louros, Emeritus Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Athens School of Medicine and it was created according to the ancient Greek style. The medal was given to all honored participants of the special ceremony organized by the Academy of Athens in May 13th, 1983, in the context of the 100 years from the birth of Dr George N. Papanicolaou. The ceremony was performed at the Central Hall of the Academy of Athens in

Athens under the auspices of the President of the Hellenic Democracy Constantinos Caramanlis. A copy of this medal is being exhibited at the ‘Museum of Contemporary Sculpture Theodoros Papagiannis’ in Elliniko at the Municipality of Katsanochoria close to Ioannina (Greece), as well as at the newly founded Institute of Paediatric Virology based on the island of Euboea, birth place of Dr George N. Papanicolaou.

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## 1. Introduction

Dr George N. Papanicolaou, who was born on the island of Euboea (Cyme, May 13th 1883), is the most significant Greek doctor in modern medicine (1-6). On 13th-15th May, 1983 (Fig. 1), the Academy of Athens celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Dr George N. Papanicolaou (6). The special ceremony was performed in the Central Hall of the Academy of Athens in Athens (Greece) under the auspices of the President of the Hellenic Democracy Constantinos Caramanlis. The organizing committee of this event was chaired by Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Athens Nikolaos Louros. On the occasion

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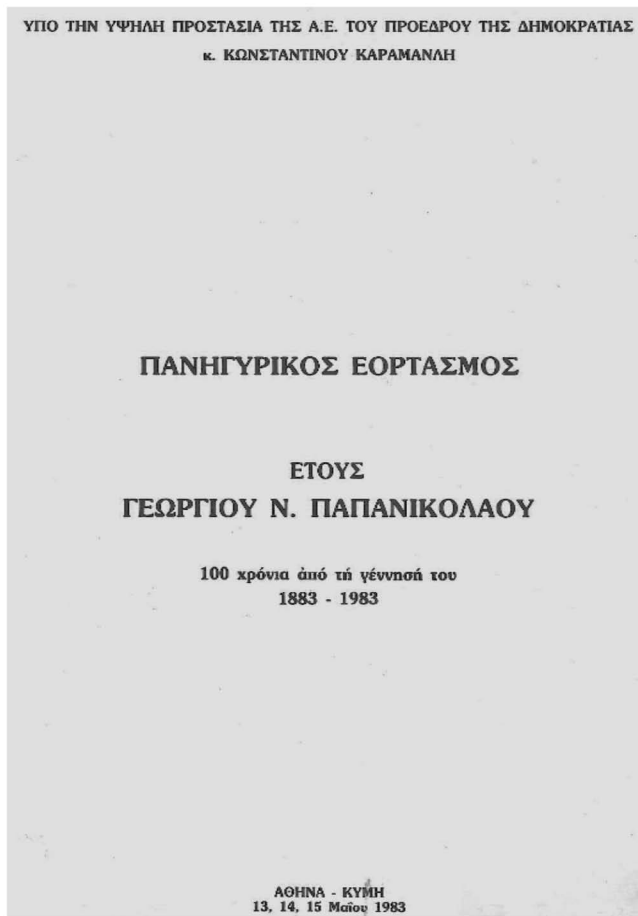


Figure 1. Celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Dr George N. Papanicolaou by the Academy of Athens on 13th-15th May, 1983.



Figure 2. The ‘George N. Papanicolaou Medal’ by the Academy of Athens (1983), which presents Dr George N. Papanicolaou with his microscope.

of this event, the Academy of Athens commissioned the ‘George N. Papanicolaou Medal’, which presents Dr George N. Papanicolaou with his microscope (Fig. 2). The imprinting of the face of Dr George N. Papanicolaou on this medal is

considered as one of the most successful, accurate and detailed sculpture presentations of the great doctor among all the existing sculpture works on Dr George N. Papanicolaou, worldwide. The medal was brass and it was created by Professor Theodoros Papagiannis, Assistant Professor of Sculpture, at that time, at the Athens School of Fine Arts in Athens (Greece). A copy of this medal is located at the ‘Museum of Contemporary Sculpture Theodoros Papagiannis’ in Elliniko, Ioannina (Greece), as well as at the newly founded Institute of Paediatric Virology based on the island of Euboea, birth place of Dr George N. Papanicolaou.

Born in 1942 in Elliniko, Ioannina (Greece), Professor Theodoros Papagiannis (Fig. 3), Professor Emeritus of Sculpture at the Athens School of Fine Arts is one of the most well-known modern Greek sculptors. He studied Fine Arts at the Athens School of Fine Arts next to Yiannis Pappas from 1961 to 1966, while in 1967 he studied ancient Greek Art and the Art of the Mediterranean Basin (7). He became Assistant Professor at the Athens School of Fine Arts in Athens, Greece, in 1970, while during 1981-1982 he attended the ‘École nationale supérieure des arts appliqués et des métiers d’art’ in Paris, France. In 1987, he was elected Associate Professor at the Athens School of Fine Arts. After retiring, in 2009, he founded the ‘Museum of Contemporary Art Theodoros Papagiannis’ in Elliniko, Ioannina (Greece).

Today, Professor Papagiannis is Professor Emeritus of Sculpture in the School of Fine Arts and Professor Emeritus at the University of Ioannina in the Department of Plastic Arts. His work includes busts and statues of prominent personalities, medals, coins and large sculptural compositions. His sculptures stand in a number of public locations in Greece and abroad, and are held in public and private collections of museums and galleries, including the National Gallery of Greece and the Presidential Palace in Athens (Greece). One of his most significant works is his sculpture ‘The Runners’, which was installed at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago (USA) in April 2011; the sculpture is 4.9-m-high and 12-m-long, and consists of ten individual statues of runners made of stainless steel approximately 57-mm-thick. He has organized various sculpture symposiums in Greece and Cyprus, and has cooperated with many European Fine Arts schools, particularly the Academy of Arts in Berlin (Germany) and the Brera Academy in Milan (Italy). To date, he has been awarded with many prizes in different competitions that he has participated. In 2015, he was honored by the President of the Hellenic Republic Mr. Carolos Papoulias with the Grand Commander of the Order of the Phoenix, while in 2017, the ‘10th High School of Ioannina’ was named after Theodoros Papagiannis. Recently, in 2019, he received by the Academy of Athens the Silver Medal of the Order of Letters and Arts. He lives and works in Athens, Greece. In the context of the forthcoming ‘6th workshop on paediatric virology’ organized by the Institute of Paediatric Virology (IPV) based on the island of Euboea (8), Professor Theodoros Papagiannis will provide an honorary lecture on ‘the challenge of creation in art and science’.

## 2. Questions and Answers

*Question:* Professor Theodoros Papagiannis, you are the creator of the ‘George N. Papanicolaou Medal’ by the Academy

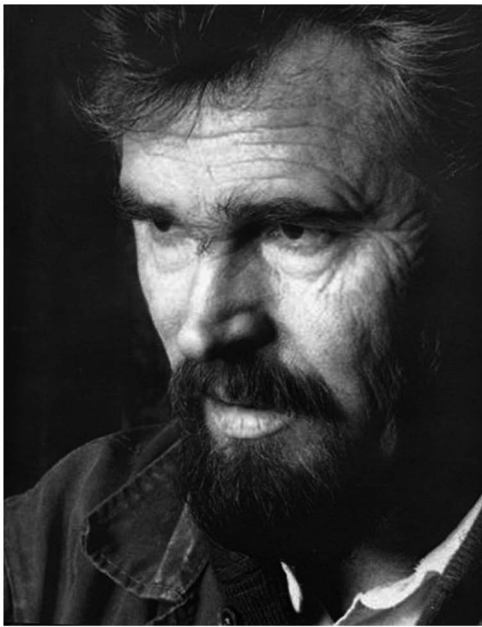


Figure 3. Professor Theodoros Papagiannis, Professor Emeritus of Sculpture at the Athens School of Fine Arts in Athens (Greece), creator of the 'George N. Papanicolaou Medal' by the Academy of Athens (1983).

of Athens in 1983 for the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Dr George N. Papanicolaou. Could you tell us about the story of this medal?

*Answer:* The 'George N. Papanicolaou Medal' was created in 1983 and was commissioned by the Academy of Athens on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of 'George N. Papanicolaou'. Professor Nikolaos Louros, Emeritus Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Athens School of Medicine and Member of the Academy of Athens at that time, had asked me to do so. Professor Nikolaos Louros, who in 1973 had served as president of the Academy of Athens, was the son of the famous Greek physician and politician of the last century, Konstantinos Louros. I remember that when I finished the medal, I presented it to Professor Nikolaos Louros at his house. He liked it very much and the only remark he made was about the microscope, which in the medal is depicted in front of George N. Papanicolaou. 'This is the old microscope!' he told me. 'We have to present the newest microscope in the medal!' However, on the photo I worked, Dr George N. Papanicolaou had the old microscope in front of him and I must say that I liked it more for the composition of the medal. Eventually, I created a second variant with the newest microscope and finally this became the base for the medal. The medal was printed in several copies, which were given to the honored guests of the event. It was brass and I have two copies in my collection in Ioannina; with great pleasure I would like to donate one of them to your newly founded Institute of Paediatric Virology, based on the island of Euboea, homeland island of George N. Papanicolaou.

*Question:* Thank you very much for this; This is a great honour, indeed! What style did you follow in this medal? What process does a sculptor follow when he is called upon to capture a particular human form?

*Answer:* The style I use is the ancient Greek style. I work negatively; that is, I make the disc in plaster, I design the composition and I start carving by removing material. I work negatively, I press clay and I see positively what I do and where it needs correction. This is repeated many times until I reach the final stage. I cast plaster on this model and take out the positive model and send it to the pantographer. There, they make the silicone model hard because the special pantograph machine will record all the details. A second needle records a reduction in steel next to the final matrix where the medals will be pressed. The plaster sample is in a special display case in the museum I created in Elliniko, Ioannina in Greece.

*Question:* In this medal, the imprinting of the face of Dr George N. Papanicolaou is considered to be as one of the most particularly successful, accurate and detailed sculpture presentations among all the existing sculpture works on Dr George N. Papanicolaou, worldwide. What is the secret to the success of this project?

*Answer:* The secret to any work of art is the artist's design ability and his capability to do it well. Especially the portrait wants special skills from the artist. Ultimately, it is a matter of the artist's talent and competence.

*Question:* How much does a modern sculptor look like or differ today from a sculptor in ancient times?

*Answer:* I have already explained to you some elements of the steps of the process that we are following today and which differ only a little from the process that a sculptor followed in ancient times. I have to say that we are few artists who deal with medals and coins. It's not an easy task! You need to be concentrated on the volume and give depth without actually having volume. You need to adjust the volume and space so that the work looks natural without altering the features of the face. Ancient coins are the great teacher and some of us have studied this field a lot.

*Question:* You are Professor Emeritus of Sculpture at the Athens School of Fine Arts in Athens (Greece). Is sculpture an art, a technique or a science? How are all these combined and taught?

*Answer:* Now you are making it difficult for me. Art, in my opinion, is a technique and a science. Primarily, however, it is a gift from the Muses. Their combination produces a good result, without this being absolute. Surely, there are artists who deny this position. Instinct and emotion, the accomplished effort have created masterpieces that we cannot explain. Belief in a purpose or a God often elevates things and makes them almost inexplicable with the logical process. A work addressed to God or the Lord could not be presented if it was not perfect, or if the artist hadn't exhausted his potential. Things are very different today. Other values have taken their place. Impression, easy solutions and minimal effort dominate. We see the results. When Picasso confesses that 'we can't stand any comparison with the old artists', what can I say? This does not mean that significant projects are not being produced today.

*Question:* You mentioned earlier the 'Museum of Contemporary Sculpture Theodoros Papagiannis' that you have created in your hometown, Elliniko at the Municipality



of Katsanochoria close to Ioannina. What is this museum and how was it created? How difficult was this task?

*Answer:* The task was difficult, indeed. It could also be a step into the void. In the cities, the museums in our country are going through a crisis. Nevertheless, 10 years now that it is operating, I can say that it is something important for the region. Our actions and exhibitions have a positive response from the public with very flattering comments. Beyond personal ambition, which is hidden from anyone who creates a museum, the creation of the museum in a village housed in a stone-built, rare and large primary school, in which I attended, had multiple goals. Firstly the decentralization, secondly the development of a region that is slowing down, thirdly I wanted to house some projects that talk about this place and came out of my memories and experiences. It thus became a culture cell. Some of our actions have made it unique. In addition to the 200 sculptures and drawings that it houses, the 7-acre yard became a sculpture park and every summer we invite sculptors from Greece and abroad, who create a sculpture for our collection. We created a 5 km route from the entrance of the village to the historic monastery of Panagia Tsouka with sculptures. The cafes of the village are galleries decorated with the portraits of the villagers that I have been designing for years. The museum highlights the benefits and timeless value of education. There is also a unique collection of medals and coins. It was created on September 7th, 2009 - just 7 days after my retirement from the Athens School of Fine Arts, where I was a teacher for 39 years.

*Question:* We are a group of young paediatricians who since 2007 have created the Paediatric Virology Study Group (PVSG) aiming to study a new branch of Paediatrics, the subject of Paediatric Virology. We would like your advice for young people, and especially young scientists, today in Greece of the crisis.

*Answer:* I would like to congratulate you for your effort and wish you courage to continue your work successfully. I am sure you are struggling with many difficulties! I remember three letters from Dr George N. Papanicolaou shown to me in New York, USA, by a Greek-American who had correspondence with Dr George N. Papanicolaou. How bitter they were for the difficulties he had gone through here in Greece! Until he arrived at his research center at the Cornell University, where he remained for 47 whole years. In our country, we often make what seems easy to be difficult. As a teacher, what I realized for many years was the discounts we made on education, while we were constantly talking about 'upgrading'. Try. Few people succeed. The majority of people are pulling down. Follow the great Euboean Dr George N. Papanicolaou. Dr George N. Papanicolaou shows us all the way...

*Question:* Thank you for this great honor and we wish you all the best in your art. We look forward to your honorary lecture on 'the challenge of creation in art and science'.

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## Authors' contributions

All authors (INM, CK, AP and DAS) contributed equally to the conception and design of this manuscript, wrote the original draft, edited and critically revised the manuscript, read and approved the final manuscript.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

## Patient consent for publication

Not applicable.

## Competing interests

INM and DAS are co-founders of the Institute of Paediatric Virology (IPV). CK and AP declare that they have no competing interests. DAS is the Editor-in-Chief for the journal, but had no personal involvement in the reviewing process, or any influence in terms of adjudicating on the final decision, for this article.

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