

As the 39th Greek Festival of Sydney is commemorating 200 years of the Greek War of Independence, I am honoured to have been invited by the festival committee, alongside artist Phillip George, to produce artworks based on this theme. Researching historical events for this project, I was immediately inspired by the story of the Dance of Zalongo, a story my father used to tell my sisters and I when we were children.

The story originates in Souli, a small mountainous settlement 73km southeast of Igonumenitsa in northwestern Greece, Epirus. Its inhabitants, the Suliotes, who lived in fortlike villages in the mountains, established an autonomous confederacy dominating a large number of neighbouring villages in the remote mountainous area of Epirus, where they could successfully resist Ottoman rule. They fought successfully from 1790-1802 against Ali Pasha, the Turkish governor of Ioánnina. In 1803, however, Ali Pasha massacred many of them after concluding a false truce. Following this defeat, the remaining Souliotes were forced to move to other parts of Greece. Many of them later became freedom fighters under their leaders Markos Botsaris and Kitsos Tzavelas, during the Greek War of Independence of 1821.

During the Souliote War in December 1803, the Souliotes began evacuating Souli after their defeat by the forces of the Ottoman ruler, Ali Pasha. It was during this evacuation, a group of around 60 Souliote women and their children were trapped by Ali's troops in the mountains of Zalongo. In order to avoid enslavement, rape, and murder, the women threw their children first and then themselves off a steep cliff.

According to legend, they jumped off the precipice one after the other while singing and dancing. Despite the fact that some historians doubt whether there was any actual dancing and singing during this tragic event, the self-sacrifice of the Souli women in order not to fall into the cruel hands of the Ottomans is indisputable. The Dance of Zalongo is a popular traditional Greek folk song and dance, dedicated to the women of Souli, which is sung and danced throughout Greece to this day.

“dance expresses the unity of love and death, one of the deepest existential paradoxes.”

*Excerpt from “Imaging Suli” Janion, Ewa Róża*

The tragic incident soon became known across Europe and inspired many artists, writers and musicians. At the Paris Salon of 1827, the French artist Ary Scheffer exhibited two Romantic paintings, one of which was entitled *Les Femmes Souliotes*. I began my body of work by referencing and reappropriating this exact painting, in order to find an anchor to inspire subsequent works in the series.

Ary Scheffer's painting is quite romantic and subdued. The women are portrayed as scared, helpless, praying and in despair, there is no reference to their violent act of self destruction with their children, nor of their bravery and defiance. I wanted to focus my paintings on that single act of leaping and falling to their death in order to gain freedom. I wanted to paint their moment of descent, how it must have felt to experience such a final release of life by choice and circumstance.

I also wanted my depictions of these women to be contemporary, which I hope infuses the story with a greater sense of gravitas. It was the act of self sacrifice in this manner that struck me. I wanted to focus on that, figuratively alluding to this freedom from persecution. I also wanted to draw attention to the physical reality of falling, how this act visually and metaphorically represents a duality of both freedom and death; or freedom as death and how the image of bodies falling is so closely aligned with dance. Some of the figures in my paintings display a sense of calm resolve during this act of self-sacrifice, others are powerful and resolute, whilst some are more violent.

This legend is said to have been the catalyst for the revolution and revival of Greece itself, therefore the symbolism of women leaping into the abyss, is loaded with meaning.

“The Greek versions of the legends of Suli should be understood in the context of the formation of Greek national consciousness. When the Kingdom of Greece was created, the need to develop a national ideology that would reconcile the contradictory aspirations of the fragmented society became urgent. The legends of Suli were used for this purpose. First, like other legends, the Suliotes’ brave deeds testify that the Greeks are an exceptional and unique nation. Thus, they favored self-affirmation, a crucial element in constructing a national identity. Second, they served as evidence for the theory of the unity of Greek civilization from ancient times to the present day.

The idea that there is a historical continuum between Ancient Greece, the Byzantine Empire and the modern Greek state was supported by the legends of Suli, presented as the missing link in the historical process of the evolution of the Greek people. According to this view, the Suliotes are a sort of reincarnation of the Spartans, while their heroic deeds prove that the Greeks are descendants of their illustrious ancestors.”

*Excerpt from “Imaging Suli” Janion, Ewa Róza*

Continuing the tradition of artists being inspired by this extraordinary legend, I hope to have delivered a further representation or link with the past within a contemporary context, thus bridging my Greek heritage with history, or more poignantly “her-story”.

Women biologically have the power to give life and in this instance, the power to take life away from capture and persecution. This was the ultimate sacrifice for their country and a precursor to the Greek War of Independence that followed. The death of the Souliotes paved the way for the re-birth of a nation.

I’m honoured to have been invited by the Greek Festival of Sydney to present this project and grateful to have been awarded a Southern Tablelands Arts Micro Grant toward producing it.

MARGARITA GEORGIADIS 2021

### Dance of Zalongo

Farewell poor world, Farewell sweet life, and you, my poor country, Farewell forever	Έχε γεια καημένη κόσμε, έχε γεια γλυκιά ζωή Και 'συ δύστυχη πατρίδα έχε γεια παντοτινή.
Farewell springs, Valleys, mountains and hills Farewell springs And you, women of Souli	Έχετε γεια βρυσούλες λόγγοι, βουνά, ραχούλες Έχετε γεια βρυσούλες και σεις Σουλιωτοπούλες
The fish cannot live on the land Nor the flower on the sand And the women of Souli Cannot live without freedom	Στη στεριά δε ζει το ψάρι ούτ' ανθός στην αμμουδιά Κι οι Σουλιώτισσες δεν ζούνε δίχως την ελευθεριά.
Farewell springs, ...	Έχετε γεια βρυσούλες ...
The women of Souli Have not only learnt how to survive They also know how to die Not to tolerate slavery	Οι Σουλιώτισσες δε μάθαν για να ζούνε μοναχά Ξέρουνε και να πεθαίνουν να μη στέργουν στη σκλαβιά.
Farewell springs, ...	Έχετε γεια βρυσούλες ...