

2022 IRC Scholarship Report

Study Tour to Athens, Greece June 27th to July 2nd, 2022

Recipient: Elizabeth Meinke

I am honored to be the recipient of the ARLIS/NA IRC scholarship permitting me to attend the Study Tour to Athens, Greece the final week of June into July of 2022. Of course, visiting Greece is a dream come true for anyone, particularly for someone interested in art, architecture, and history. One of the most intriguing aspects of Greece is the “layers” of history, not just physically in an archeological sense, but the immensity of time the country and the culture have experienced. The Greek people and culture are the true treasure. I’ve always had positive experiences interacting with people during international travel, but the Greek people are truly the most endearing. I’d be remiss to not mention the gorgeous natural climate and landscape as part of the appeal. Perhaps it’s because I live in a cold and often overcast climate, I get very excited to see a pristine blue sky dotted with olive, citrus, and pomegranate trees.

Periods in history like Antiquity, Classical, Byzantine, and Ottoman are preserved in Greece, yet Greece is a thoroughly modern country and culture. This is not a surprise, however, the exploration of Greek history often ends around the fifth century BCE in North American curriculums. We tend to fetishize it as a place of architectural columns, fantastic myths, and as the creator of democracy. Unfortunately, this does not provide for the most comprehensive understanding of Greece. The opportunity provided by this scholarship and trip exposed me to a more complex understanding and appreciation of Greek culture. At its best intentions, this is what international travel exchange provides.

I’d like to thank the organizers of this Study Tour for a fantastic itinerary and trip. Their care and dedication were apparent in connecting members of ARLIS/NA to information and cultural institutions and colleagues in Greece. This collaborative connection is the purpose of these Study Tour trips. A tourist traveling independently, even the mighty librarian tourist, would not be able to have the access, time, and/or connections to visit all these institutions. If this Study Tour to Athens did not exist and I were lucky enough to travel to Greece, I most likely would have visited Athens for a day or so to see the Acropolis and a museum, then headed to the Greek islands. The schedule of this Study Tour kept me in Athenes and provided the unique opportunity to meet with information and cultural site interpretation professionals and tour workshops dedicated to preserving material culture. These experiences expanded my definition of what information repositories are and can be. I would not say there was a favorite site because every site the Study Tour visited was so different and unique. Each site was staffed and operated by truly dedicated information and cultural heritage professionals and purveyors. I can’t thank these individuals enough for their time, insight, and graciousness.

The Study Tour attendees and guests got to know each other over drinks and dinner on the evening of Sunday, June 26th. Not only does the Study Tour format make for professional connections, but the friendliness of this group made the entire trip even more enjoyable. My thanks for the conversations and the kindness from each one of the Study Tour attendees and guests!

Monday, June 27th

The first full day of the Study Tour started at the archeological site of the [Athenian Agora](#) (managed by the American School of Classical Studies) with a fascinating tour led by the Dir. of Archeological Digs, Prof. John Camp. Once in the museum, an exhibit on Edward Dodwell's drawings of Athens was of particular interest. After a lunch break and the discovery of Greek espresso freddo (the official drink of the Athens Study Tour 2022), the afternoon brought the Study Tour to the [ELIA Hellenic Literature and Historic Archive](#). Here, the dedicated staff shared their diverse collection representing 19th and 20th-century Greek history and culture. After the tours, the staff of ELIA graciously treated the Study Tour to refreshments on a rooftop terrace.



Image right: ARLIS/NA Study Tour at ELIA

Tuesday, June 28th

The next day brought the Study Tour to the library of the [Athens School of Fine Arts](#). A topic of conversation with the gracious library staff was student engagement, certainly a universal topic! This site is an excellent example of a place that a tourist would never see. The school is in a former industrial complex and the buildings are enhanced by fantastic politically themed murals created by the students. After this visit, the Study Tour ventured onto the charming [Mentis Passementerie](#). Mentis makes ornamental trimmings like ribbons and tassels by hand or using machinery dating from the Industrial Revolution to the mid-20th century. They operate both as a museum and as a commercial entity, this model permits that their craft is preserved. The staff at Mentis kindly surprised the Study Tour with Greek wine and cheese under the shade of a mulberry tree in their courtyard, wrapping the day.



Image left: Machinery at Mentis

Wednesday, June 29th

This day brought the Study Tour to the [National Library of Greece](#) located in the impressive Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center building designed by Renzo Piano. The tour was enthusiastically led by Reference Librarian, Gregory Chrysostomidis. Though the surroundings were spectacular the real treasure was the programming and public engagement the National Library of Greece achieves. Midday the Study Tour was onto the artist archives and library of the [EMST-National Museum of Contemporary Art](#), with plenty of time to view the dynamic exhibition spaces. The final stop of the day was to the delightful [Valsamakis Ceramics](#). The site was the family home and workshop of prominent 20th-century ceramic artist Panos Valsamakis (1900-1986). The site still operates as a workshop and contains Panos's archive of patterns and drawings. This visit was truly splendid, the Study Tour group sat in the family living room to hear the dynamic story of the Valsamakis family and their plans for preserving their legacy. The day concluded with lemonade, wine, appetizers, and delightful desserts in the backyard of the Valsamakis's home.



Image right: Study Tour in the Valsamakis's home

Thursday, June 30th

Thursday began at the [Library of the Hellenic Parliament](#), overlooking bustling Syntagma Square (Constitution Square). This collection was created to serve the MPs concerning parliamentary affairs with resources like minutes. However, the collection is open to and heavily used by the public. The Study Tour was led through an extensive exhibit about the creation of the modern Greek state and had a chance to peek into an active parliamentary session. The next stop was the library at the [Byzantine Museum](#). It is a small library meant to serve the needs of the museum staff and student researchers. Like most libraries, they discussed their need for more space for stacks and collection management functions. Many on the Study Tour stayed to enjoy lunch at the Byzantine Museum's garden terrace. The final stop of the day was at the library of the [Benaki Museum](#), housed in the grand former home of the museum's founder Antonis Benakis. After the library, there was plenty of time to explore the exhibits and have a drink on the museum's rooftop terrace. (If you haven't noticed terraces, particularly rooftop ones, are a thing not to be missed in Athens!) The scope of the Benaki Museum is Greek history and culture, and it achieves this well. The collection spans Ancient, Classical, Byzantine, Ottoman, and special exhibits like *John Craxton: A Greek Soul*. The concept is a national identity for Greece. Particularly given that this museum was founded less than a decade after the tumult of the Greco-Turkish War that ended in 1922, an important event, like the Debt Crisis of 2009, that still permeates Greek life and culture.

Friday, July 1st

Friday started with a fantastic visit to the [American School of Classical Studies](#). First was the [Gennadius Library](#) which supports the work of researchers with collections that includes travel logs, sketchbooks, costume books, and maps. Then, the Study Tour was hosted by the Director of the American School, Jenifer Neils, for coffee and cookies to learn about the American School's programs and dig sites. Director Neils's dog, Atticus, joined the group, jumping onto sofas and laps hoping for a pet or cookie crumbs! Next, the Study Tour explored the [Wiener Laboratory](#). Everyone was impressed with the methods and technologies used to analyze excavated specimens.

Image below: Study Tour in front of the Gennadius Library



The final stop of the day was a tour at the [Acropolis Museum](#). (Many on the Study Tour visited the actual Acropolis early Tuesday morning to beat the heat.) Opening in 2009, this museum was built as a home for the yet-to-be-returned marble pieces from the Parthenon. The museum does an excellent job of establishing the context and arrangement of the buildings on the Acropolis. The day was wrapped with a lovely evening reception on the museum's terrace. *Eis to epanideín, Athína!*

Some on the Study Tour went on to spend a sunshine-filled day on the island of Hydra on Saturday, July, 2nd and some began their long journey home. Overall, this journey of a lifetime led me to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Greek culture and history. It fostered connections with Greek cultural and information institutions and inspired my professional practice and ambitions.

Image below: Acropolis Museum terrace on the evening of the Study Tour's final reception

