

# GREEK DESIGN & DECORATION



THREE CENTURIES OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Dimitris Philippides

# *Greek Design & Decoration*

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By Dimitris Philippides

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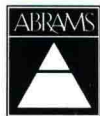
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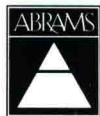
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## FOREWORD

Upon completing *Greek Traditional Architecture*, a series in eight volumes whose publication, covering almost all of Greece, lasted a total of twelve years (1982-1993), we perceived the need for a new series whose central theme would be the decorative arts.

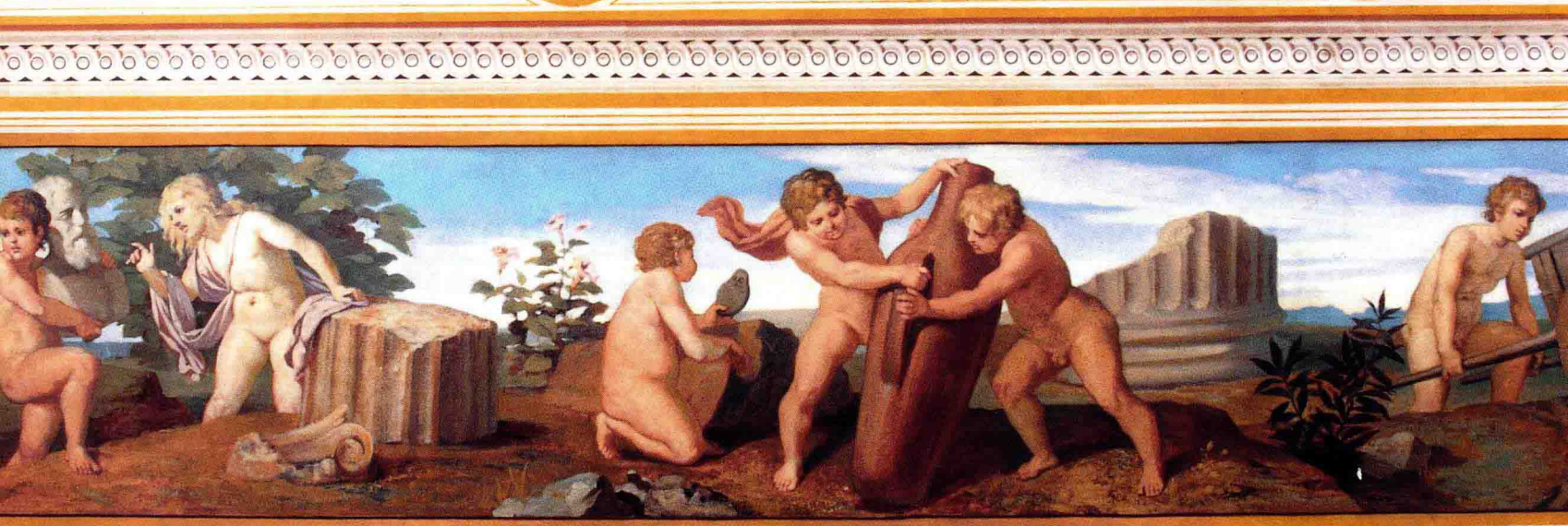
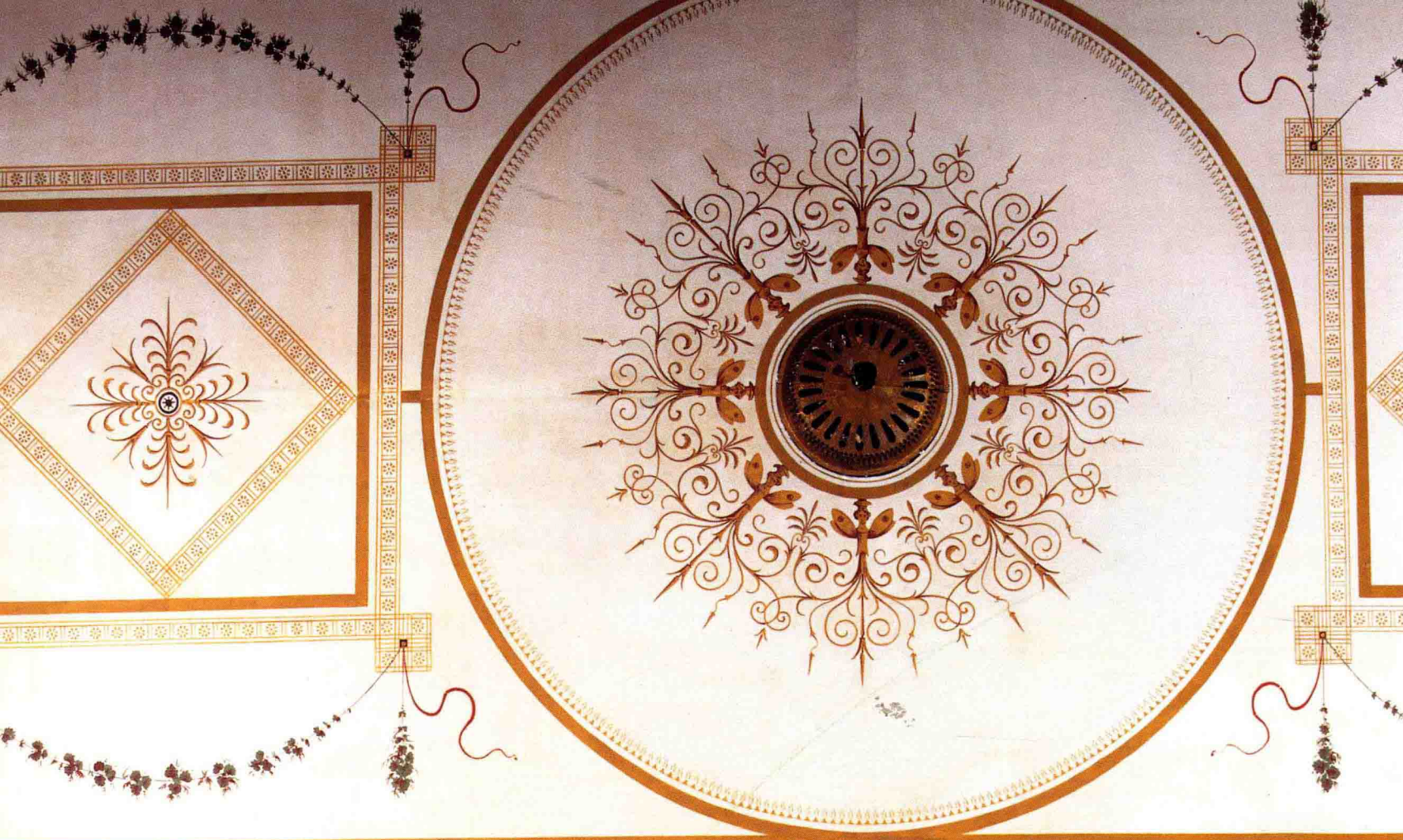
After Professor Miltos Garidis' *Decorative Painting: The Balkans and Asia Minor, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1996), we now present *Greek Design and Decoration, Three Centuries of Architectural Style*, by Professor Dimitri Philippides.

This book deals specifically with the decorative arts which accompany architecture. It introduces one to superb wall-paintings and reliefs executed on plaster or wooden surfaces from traditional and neoclassical mansions as well as more modest houses or even rudimentary huts in various parts of Greece.

The dynamism of vernacular decorative art, which flourished during the period of Ottoman rule, had a perceptible impact on the neoclassical style imported into Greece from Western Europe. The outcome was a period of intermingling with a wide range of stylistic variations. The objective of this book is to record the best examples of authentic traditional and neoclassical decorative art in relation to the architecture they adorn, while at the same time recognising the equally important transitional art which co-existed with the official neoclassical style down to the 1920s.

This volume is the result of five years of research and much more time spent in travels around the country. It will serve both foreign and local readers as a source of information and appreciation on the astounding wealth of decorative arts in Greece.

The publisher





To incorporate the material of decoration into a general outline of art could be a dangerous undertaking; equally, to disregard its mere existence would certainly be damaging. The consequences of our approach will be revealed gradually as we wander through the wonderful "forest of symbols" awaiting us. Spanning over several centuries, from the fall of the Byzantine Empire (1453) to the 1940s, the subject of decorative arts in Greece has long been ripe for study. In practice, however, these arts have constantly been ransacked or blatantly imitated. Wherever we look, we come across fossils, survivals, transpositions and mutations. In an effort to examine decorative arts in their architectural context, several myths have been constructed, since, as is by now admitted, any study of the past unavoidably bears the marks and limitations of its contemporary thought. Our task here consists of primarily acknowledging the existence of such myths, which has so far been ignored, while at the same time subverting established conventions concerning the role of decoration in architecture.

*PART ONE*  
***LIMITS AND  
DEFINITIONS***



## Five Myths

### The new cultural departure

The seemingly endless round of discourse (articles in local newspapers and magazines or in scholarly journals and books) and of action (festivals and exhibitions, the establishment of museums) regarding traditional cultural phenomena in Greece, although often fragmentary, short-sighted, verbose and naive, is an eloquent indication of a touching interest in these (ills 1, 2).

This unswerving interest has been a cultural constant in modern Greek society. When, after the struggle for liberation from Ottoman rule (1821-1827), the modern Greek state was established along European lines, it addressed itself with equal zeal to modernisation through europeanisation and to ethnocentrism by means of links to the country's historical past. These were far from simple tasks, since a bridge had to be built across the distance between early antiquity and the most recent period of Ottoman rule, which had lasted four hundred years (from the fifteenth century to the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1821). The distance was not only a chronological one; above all, it was a matter of culture. Nor was it simple to identify antiquity with Byzantium. Inevitably, the undertaking triggered a profound crisis of national identity which manifested itself in a whole host of contradictions. Seen from the outside, the crisis took the form of the vision of reconstituting the Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople as its capital, a vision which guided Greek foreign policy down to about 1920. Related, as it was, however, to historical circumstances, this national vision followed a different course. There were, as a result, centripetal tendencies which accentuated local vernacular culture, sometimes in conjunction with an equally powerful trend towards identification with international developments. In architecture, and in the decoration that accompanied it, these contradictions and shifts had a direct and perceptible impact over time. To give only one typical example, the culture –as manifested in art– which flourished in the traumatic Ottoman period was at first despised and its traces deliberately eradicated as reminders of painful enslavement. Later, however, towards the end of the nineteenth century, that same art was idolised as the sole authentic manifestation of Greek creativity. The change was clearly reflected in the terminology used: the art of the period of Ottoman rule

ceased to be called "Turkish", and was now referred to as "post-Byzantine".

The truth of the matter is that the selection and use of certain terminology is always an accurate indicator of existing contradictions and conflicts. Those who have worked in the sphere of recording cultural phenomena connected with decoration in recent Greek history –that is, of the traditional culture of the Ottoman period– have always used "art" along with various explanatory epithets wherever they drew the dividing line in the wealth of the past: folk art, traditional art, anonymous art. They have used these categories all-embracingly, to cover everything from architecture to the implements of farmers and shepherds, local costumes, and embroideries. Now many students of the subject are prepared to accept that "folk art" is too conventional in its significance in these cases, but, unfortunately, its use has been established and it would be considerably difficult to change it now.

The hundred and fifty years or so over which scholars have worked intensively on tradition in Greece –from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day– have proved a long enough period to establish and cultivate beliefs about traditional art which even today look unshakable. I shall now examine the five principal myths by which the approach to tradition is determined today.

The first basic error is to cut folk art off from its natural sequence, that is, from the period immediately after the liberation of Greece in 1827, at which point, allegedly, life acquired a different savour. Such dividing lines are hard to conceive; one cannot possibly see the local tradition on one side, and on the other imported (and thus suspect, or even hated) neoclassicism, or, to put it another way, the folk tradition set off against the official (learned) tradition, without any link between them. Much was contributed to this state of affairs by intense national chauvinism and the need to eradicate traumatic memories of earlier periods in which Greek territories had been under foreign occupation. The polarising construct produced may have been essential when the national consciousness was being established in the early nineteenth century, but to obstinately persist in maintaining it later is testimony to the presence of a problematic ideology.

Now it is time that the above myth was abandoned. The periods before and after the liberation of Greece should be seen as continuous and uninterrupted: after all, traditional buildings were being constructed almost until World War II, often in parallel with neoclassical structures and in various types of cross-breeding with

1

The Manousis mansion,  
Siatista

*A bucolic scene; detail from a  
wall-painting on the first floor.*

2

The Natzis mansion, Kastoria

*Little panel from a cupboard  
door in the formal parlour on  
the second floor.*

3

Dellagratsia (Poseidonia),  
Syros

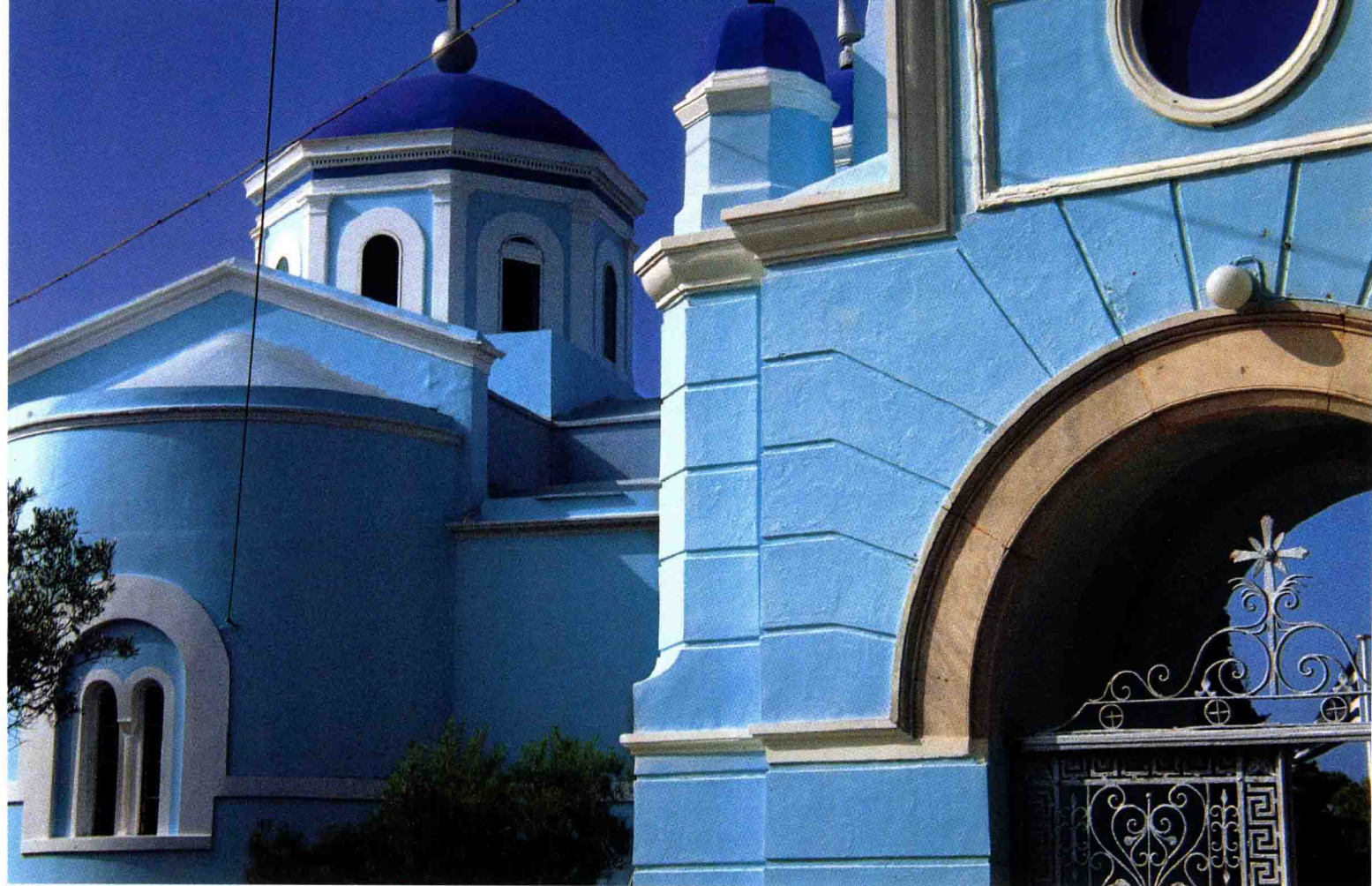
*The use of bright colours  
for the buildings of the church  
of the Cross gives them unity  
of decoration. Their morphology  
and colour-scheme are the  
outcome of strong classicising  
influences.*

4

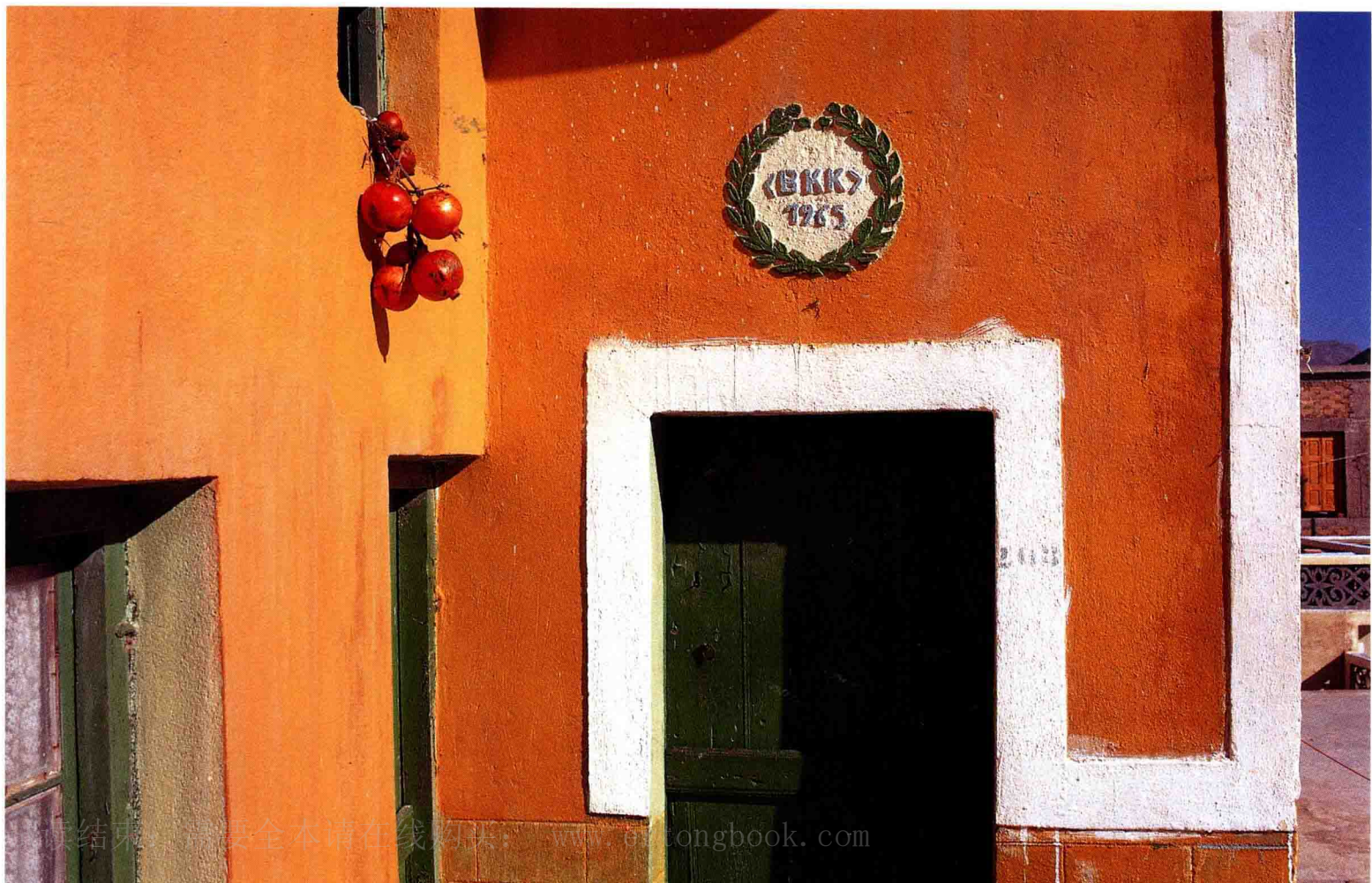
Olympos, Karpathos

*Detail of a house entrance,  
with the ingenious use of a white  
band protruding slightly from  
the plastered elevation. Here the  
memory of classicism, though  
distant, is still perceptible.*





3



4