

**“Alone or Unique? Diversity and Racism”**  
**Exhibition Inauguration, NGO project**  
**31<sup>st</sup> October 2015**

**Statement by the Ambassador of Norway Jørn Gjelstad**

**Museum of Greek Children’s Art, Plaka - Athens**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here today at this very unique museum dedicated to Children’s Art, inaugurating the exhibition “*Alone or unique? Diversity and racism*”. This exhibition calls for alertness and engagement as regards one of the most important political issues we are confronted with today.

This exhibition is part of a project funded by the EEA Grants thus supported by Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein. It aims to raise awareness and to develop critical thinking on the issue of racism to museum visitors of “all ages”.

Workshops and educational programmes dealing with the subject, invite children from pre -school to primary school ages to approach the issues, adding to the value of the exhibition itself.

Painting comes natural to young children. It is a way they visually communicate their ideas and conceptions about themselves and their world. They discover and build their own styles of expression. We have all witnessed the transformative impact art has on children’s creative thinking, cognitive development and ability to connect. Their works reflect not only empathy or emotional expression, but also freethinking and intuitive understanding. They can be tools for all adults. We all need their artworks for both inspiration and direction. Children see the

world with a fresh perspective. Their artistic language is direct, uncompromising and revealing. We can all learn from that.

The Museum of Greek Children's Art in Plaka has a strong relationship with Norway. This goes back more than two decades, when the founders of the International Museum of Children's art in Oslo, Rafael and Alla Goldin, played a significant role by "planting the seed" (idea) that led to the establishment of this museum. In honour of this endeavor, the museum was added to the list of the very few worldwide museums that exhibit exclusively art works created by children.

I am both proud and grateful that the Museum's connection and collaboration with Norway is still equally strong. Thus, the current director of the International Museum of Children's art in Oslo participated last year at the 20 year celebration of the Greek Children's Art. Even more important is the inclusion of several art works from the museum in Oslo in the current exhibition.

**Diversity and racism is the issue and constituting element of this exhibition.**

Please allow me to comment briefly on this most important issue.

Racism consists of ideologies and practices that both cause and justify the unequal distribution of rights and resources among different racial groups. To be concise: racism is treating someone differently because of who they are in terms of race. Racism strikes at the very heart of the human being. It is a malpractice that is often based on social misperceptions of biological differences. It can take the form of social actions, various practices, and even comprehensive political systems. This ideology considers different races to be superior or inferior to each other, based on the distorted view that members of different races share different abilities or qualities and should therefore be treated differently.

European history tragically shows that it has been far too easy to deny a person fundamental human or civil rights if that person is considered to be of “less value than yourself”, or belonging to a group allegedly considered to be a threat to society.

We should never stop asking: Why and how does this happen? Who are entitled to make such a judgement?

At the heart of all forms of discrimination is prejudice based on concepts of identity. This often leads to conceptual simplifications, ignorance and even hate.

Let me at this point quote the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.  
**All human beings - not some, not most, but all**".

We should all bear this well-formulated but obvious punchline in mind.

This message signals unequivocally that everybody should take pride in who they are. We are all unique human beings; we are all different; but at the same time we are also equal. Pride should be the celebration of human diversity and the inalienable right of everyone to be included in the society on the principle of equality.

Through the last years we have witnessed that racism has increased, nourished by xenophobic responses to immigration and the concept of “us and the others”. Instead of presenting an “equation with multiple knowns”, these people are raising walls founded on distorted values. Such practice fosters exclusion and a culture of intolerance.

Children have by nature no racist inclination. Nor are they born with disparaging assumptions about other people in any definable group.

On the contrary, children have a keen inborn sense of justice. They protest loudly when they or someone else is being treated badly. This sense of justice runs deep. This is why I believe that working through art expression on this issue with children is an investment to the future generation. They could help us all in making the “word” racism become a term belonging to the past.

Norway are taking a strong stance against racism, discrimination and intolerance. We are using the EEA and Norway Grants as a tool both to raise awareness of the issue and its risks for democracy. Our goal is to promote tolerance and multicultural awareness. Challenging intolerance and promoting democracy, fundamental rights and equality are core values of the Grants.

Changing the social norms that feed discrimination and intolerance requires close cooperation with local partners. Working in tandem with civil society is key. It’s empowerment is of strategic importance if progress on important social issues are to be made.

Thus, NGOs are our strategic instrument in combatting discrimination and intolerance. By joining our efforts, we will through our NGO programme contribute to a required transformative change within a crucial part of this society.

Since 1992 Norway Iceland and Liechtenstein have provided funding to reduce social and economic disparities and to strengthen bilateral relations in 16 European countries. The amount made available for this period of 2009-2014 has been €1.8 billion, with Norway contributing more than 95% of the total funding.

For Greece we have set aside €63.4 million. Of this, €7.3 million is dedicated to supporting the country's civil society by establishing the first ever Fund for NGOs in Greece, in order to empower civil society and enhance contribution to social justice and democracy.

In addition to the core areas of support, the Donor States have given priority to what we call "Horizontal Concerns". These are cross-sectorial topics of particular importance to us such as hate speech and crime, extremism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, violence against women and human trafficking. The cross-cutting issues are good governance and gender equality. Both the horizontal concerns and the cross-cutting issues have been addressed in the open calls and projects to that ends have so far given impressive results.

These issues are also included in other programs that are implemented in Greece, such as supporting the country's efforts to handle the influx of asylum seekers and irregular migrants and providing support services to vulnerable citizens.

For my part, I am very proud that my country, Norway, has been a part of this effort and I can assure you that we will not stop here.

I am therefore happy to inform you that the allocation to Greece will be almost doubled for the next funding period for 2014 to 2021, to approx. euro 120 million. This demonstrates the strong preference donors are giving to Greece.

In closing, I wish to congratulate the Children's Art Museum and all its dynamic and capable collaborators for the excellent implementation of this project and for our past and future cooperation.

Finally, many thanks to the Bodossaki Foundation for managing our NGO Fund so effectively and professionally.