

## ARTS

# Greece of days gone by

Robert McCabe's solo photography exhibition at the Citronne Gallery on Poros

BY ALEXANDRA KOROXENIDIS

When American photographer Robert McCabe first visited Santorini in 1954, he and his brother were the only visitors on the island. McCabe clearly remembers this from his annual travels throughout Greece, which occurred at a time when the country was still untouched by tourism. McCabe's Greece is nowadays long gone. It survives as an archetype, a romanticized image of a poor but unspoiled country with natural beauty, a rich cultural past and a varied, indigenous tradition, all harmoniously tied together.

It is this archetypal image that the black-and-white photographs of Robert McCabe from the 1950s and 60s, currently on display in the artist's solo exhibition at the Citronne Gallery on the Saronic island of Poros, have captured – at least in the eyes of most contemporary viewers. The roughly 50 images on view offer a tender perspective as well as an important documentation of Greece, its islands and its people. As Tatiana Spinari-Pollali – owner of the gallery and adjunct professor of art history at Boston College – rightly notes, the images are neither a sentimental nor a stereotypical image of Greece but a “personal visual diary in which the documentary and the aesthetic become one” and where “classicism and clarity” are strong elements.

McCabe experienced all the changes brought on over the years by development. But he was lucky and adventurous enough to have discovered Greece before change occurred. He was an undergraduate student at Princeton when he first visited Greece. Together with his brother they had planned a “grand tour” itinerary that was set to end in Egypt. Captivated by Greece, McCabe and his brother canceled the rest of the trip and spent the remaining time visiting the Greek islands. Back home from that first trip, McCabe tried to switch to Princeton's Department of Classics. Because Latin was a prerequisite, he remained in the English Department but completed a thesis on Lord Byron and Greece and used some of his photographs as illustrations.

Although he has traveled extensively around the world, McCabe says that Greece is the place he knows best. Since that first visit, he has returned every year. Greece is now practically his second home. In fact, for the past 12 years or so, McCabe has spent half of the year in Athens, at his home in Plaka, along with his Greek-born wife.

“Literally from the first day I came to Athens, I felt at home in the city, although very few people spoke English then, or French,” McCabe told Athens Plus.

Yet his travels in those early days were far from easy. “I remember on that first trip, traveling from Rhodes to Siteia via Kassos and Karpathos. It



'Alonissos, 1963: Young Restaurant Hand' (50x50 cm)



'Thera, 1955: The Aegean in port below Fira' (50x50 cm)



'Sounion, 1955: At the Temple of Poseidon' (30x30 cm)



'Thera, 1955: Sunset from Fira' (50x50 cm)



'The Aegean, 1955: Deck Class Aboard the Despina' (50x50 cm)

**Untouched**  
McCabe was inspired by the indigenous cultures of the Greek islands



'Kassos, 1965' (30x40 cm)

was a 23-hour journey on a tiny boat called Dodekanisos, which actually sank the following year in a storm on the same run,” he recounted.

The next year, McCabe went on a tour of the Peloponnese with British archaeologist and professor Alan Wace – a couple of photographs from that trip are included in the exhibition. But the islands were probably the places he loved the most.

“They were untouched cultural islands that had grown up isolated from the other places and had developed their own characteristics. I found this to be fascinating,” McCabe said. “One would often stay at the local people's homes or small guesthouses. I remember how the mayor of Ios had given his bed to one of the people traveling with us and slept on the floor. And what an architectural jewel the Hora [main town] of Ios was.”

Tourist development minimized the options he once had. “Greece was a stable platform for so long. The changes that occurred are almost unimaginable to me. They happened at different rates in different places.

a professional career in venture capital financing, photography was a vocation he undertook when he was just a child. “My father gave me a Rolleiflex camera when I was 4,” he told Athens Plus.

Because his father was president and publisher of the New York Daily Mirror, then the second-biggest selling newspaper in the United States, McCabe was exposed to news photography from an early age. The images in Life magazine, National Geographic (which asked him to take photographs of the Greek islands in 1957) and US Camera Annual trained his eye for photography.

McCabe worked in black-and-white photography but also used color starting in 1957; he all but completely switched to color in the 80s. Although trained in classical techniques, he has been using digital photography for the past seven years or so.


Over the past three years, McCabe has been working on a series focusing on a particular area of New York's Central Park. There are plans for a forthcoming publication on the work. The photographer's most recent plan is the documentation of an archaeological site in Greece. Another idea is a series based on the life of McCabe's Greek artist-friends in Paris.

Although McCabe has produced a large body of work, he has not shown his work extensively. The exhibition on Poros should be noted as his first exhibition in a commercial space in Greece. The only other was a show held in 2009 in Paris, in the context of the Mois de la Photo event.

A book titled “Greece: Images of an Enchanted Land, 1954-1965,” now in its fourth printing, was published in Greece by Patakis. Images from McCabe's trip to Havana in 1998 were also published by Patakis in 2007 and so was a selection of photographs from his trips in the United States, Europe and Antarctica. (There are also international publications on McCabe's work.)

A large portion of his work has still not been published or shown. This includes portraits of Greek people whom McCabe met during his trips in the mid-50s, a series that the artist would like to exhibit as a whole.

Some images of everyday people are included in the Poros exhibition. Photographs of a celebration following a baptism on Myconos, the image of three young girls in Epirus and of family and friends traveling on a ship's deck evoke a bygone Greece. They are a valuable documentation of the past that helps the viewer see present-day Greece in the broader context of 20th-century history.

 Robert McCabe's solo exhibition at the Citronne Gallery (tel 22980.22401) on the seafront in the main town of Poros runs through May 12.

But I am sure that one can still find places and villages in Greece that are untouched by tourism,” McCabe said.

Though McCabe cannot find the local cultures in the places he originally visited and that had so inspired him, he still takes photographs of Greece. In the 1980s and 90s, he produced a series on the island of Patmos, where he has a summer home, which he plans to exhibit on the island, probably next year.

### Early beginnings

Although McCabe did not make a living out of photography and opted for