

Floral muse

Ben Lerwill meets
Athens-based British art
dealer Jill Yakas, co-founder
of the Mediterranean
Garden Society

IN the autumn of 1976, an eye-catching poster began appearing on the streets of Athens. Emblazoned with a red London bus, it announced an exhibition of limited edition original prints by UK artists at the British Council. The works being shown—which included prints by David Hockney, Patrick Caulfield and Eduardo Paolozzi, as well as young up-and-coming artists—attracted large numbers of collectors, students and expats. For burgeoning Bristol-raised art dealer Jill Yakas, who was organising the show not long after moving to Greece, it was quite a coup.

More than 45 years and many exhibitions later, Ms Yakas still lives in a book-filled house in the leafy Athens suburb of Kifissia. As well as retaining her passion for art, she is the long-term treasurer of the Mediterranean Garden Society, an international organisation of which she was a founder member. Lest you think her British Isles roots have dried, however, she's also a devoted fan of beans on toast, Guinness (but only at lunchtime) and *Fawlty Towers*. Her story is a fascinating one.

'Greece never does anything by halves,' she tells me from her home, smiling, as her Greek harehound rescue, Henrietta, rests by the late-winter fire. 'I like the spontaneity of the culture. The Greeks have their own way of doing things and, over the decades, I've had wonderful working relationships with so many of them. I found them to be flexible and helpful and they would often go the extra mile for me.'

Spontaneity—and serendipity—have figured prominently in her own life, too. Moving from Bristol to London as a young woman, she worked in various City temping jobs before, during the Swinging Sixties, she fell in love with a first-year architecture student from Greece. Before long, she was spending her summers with him in Athens and the as yet 'undiscovered' Mykonos and Hydra, once driving right across Europe in a duck-egg-blue Morris Minor convertible. By the early 1970s,



Shining example: the Sparoza terrace in Athens is home to some 1,000 species of plants

they were married and living in Athens. Her involvement in the art world had been triggered back in London, when she purchased an abstract silkscreen print by artist Robyn Denny. Through this, she became friendly with two young art dealers in Kensington, who suggested she take works back to Greece on consignment. 'My response was "but I know nothing about art", to which they replied that, as I had chosen a work by Denny, I obviously had a good eye,' she remembers. 'I bought a large black portfolio, brought over a number of works and set about selling them.'

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Three exhibitions at the British Council followed—and that was only the start. When she and her husband split in 1982, she used the freed-up space in their rented Athens home to open a gallery. She specialised in work by British and American artists, such as Hilary Adair, Delia Delderfield, Scotty Mitchell, Cherry Pickles and William Pownall, whose works celebrate the tones and landscapes of Greece. 'They see things differently,' says Ms Yakas. 'It sometimes needs an outsider's eyes to re-create what the painter John Craxton called Greece's "luminous air"—I like that description.'

Art, however, is only one of the major forces in her life. In 1994, she became one of the founders of the Mediterranean Garden Society, aimed at helping keen gardeners adapt to the sometimes unforgiving temperatures and soils

of Mediterranean-climate regions. The society started life with 20 members and now has 1,250, spread across more than 35 different countries. 'It's about what we call water-wise gardening,' she says. 'British members often join because they have a second home in a Mediterranean country. The questions most often asked are about olive trees and how to prune them.'

She talks with enthusiasm of the society's showpiece, Sparoza, also on the outskirts of Athens, where nearly 1,000 species of plants are in the collection, from pomegranate trees to pink trumpet vines. Her own garden, which she describes as 'more of an Anglo-Hellenic garden—it has box hedging and pansies', is another labour of love. She uses it to host traditional afternoon teas, complete with scones, cream, strawberries, Victoria sponge cake, and Pimm's at sunset. 'I had 120 people here for the Queen's jubilee,' she recalls. 'I'm part of a choral group with Greek and international members, so we always provide musical entertainment.'

On the subject of cross-cultural exchange, Ms Yakas is also keen to point out how many 'brilliant' Greek dogs are in need of good homes—potentially in Britain. 'Many are dumped by hunters because they're gun-shy, or because they have out-served their usefulness' she says. 'It's a matter close to my heart.'

Does she still enjoy returning to the UK? 'I do. I still come over occasionally to see my family and friends and go to galleries. But I find it a bit difficult,' she admits. 'I don't like all the yellow lines everywhere. Don't do this. Don't do that.' Then she laughs. 'You know, we don't have so many rules and regulations here in Greece, but we get on fine.'

For more information, visit www.jillyakas.com, www.mediterraneangardensociety.org or www.greekanimalrescue.com