

“OUR DEDICATION TO SERVING SOCIETY IS BOUNDLESS”

ANDREAS C. DRACOPOULOS

Present in Athens, New York, and Monaco, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation has been active since 1996 in the fields of culture, health, education, and social welfare. Its Co-President shares an ever-busier agenda with us.

By Béatrice Brasseur.

He was nicknamed “the Golden Greek.” Stavros Spyros Niarchos (1909-1996) was one of the richest people of the 20th century: a shipowner (his fleet was the largest in the world and he launched the first supertanker), an art collector (from El Greco to the Impressionists and Pablo Picasso), owner of racehorses, spectacular yachts, and fabulous properties around the globe—including the Hôtel de Chanaleilles in Paris and the island of Spetsopoula, west of Hydra. Married five times and a figure of the international jet set, Time magazine even featured him on its cover.

At his death, his fortune was estimated at \$5 billion. Twenty percent was bequeathed to the foundation that bears his name, now co-chaired by his sons Philip and Spyros Niarchos and his nephew Andreas C. Dracopoulos. With the requirement that at least half the funds distributed go to Greece and the rest to the world, Stavros Niarchos ensured a lasting impact both locally and globally. This impact spans four main areas: arts and culture, education, health and medicine, and social welfare. “I often asked my uncle why he hadn’t created the foundation during his lifetime,” confides Andreas C. Dracopoulos. “He simply didn’t have the time to do it well, and giving money isn’t enough to be of use.”

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation took time to learn its craft, consulting other major global foundations. “In thirty years, philanthropy has evolved a lot in a world that has become much more complex, with ever-increasing needs. And everyone knows now that you can’t expect everything from a government. The answer must be a collective one,” analyzes Andreas C. Dracopoulos. “Basically, there is the public sector (the government for policy) and the private sector (companies for profit). These are the two main pillars of society. Then there is philanthropy, whose sole objective should be to help—not to fix, nor to replace—but to facilitate the actions of the public and private sectors.”

\$3.9 billion distributed

In three decades, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation has distributed more than 5,600 grants to NGOs in 136 countries, totaling \$3.9 billion. Unsurprisingly, it is in high demand. “We accept less than 10% of applications. We review them all with the same respect, regardless of their scale. The first question is: what value will this project bring to society? The second: are its proponents ethical, professional, and committed enough for it to succeed? And then comes the hardest part—not just deciding why we might say yes, but wrestling with how we could ever say no to projects that meet those standards (need to prioritize). We demand a lot of our own teams when we do this work: we are fortunate to do it, so we have the responsibility to do it as well as possible,” explains the co-president. “Our method, from the start, is to listen to those who know, to those who have needs, and to build connections. One example: the COVID-19 crisis—during which we made \$100

million in donations across 50 countries—led us to focus on infectious diseases and mental health.

This is a global problem. Hence our Global Health Initiative (GHI), which has become our main priority with a budget exceeding \$1 billion.”

Thanks to the GHI, three fully equipped new hospitals will be delivered this year to Thessaloniki, Sparta, and Komotini and given to the Greek state. They ended up costing more than anticipated. But for Andreas C. Dracopoulos, “the end justifies the means, and sometimes the means must justify themselves to achieve the end. Our commitment to supporting public health is unwavering, even in an especially challenging global context. Our resources are not unlimited, but our dedication to serving society is boundless.” The GHI includes about thirty projects in total, such as the implementation of medical training programs, providing cutting-edge equipment, and donating air ambulances. The foundation also funds three New York partners: The Rockefeller University, to curb infectious diseases; Columbia University, to advance genomic precision psychiatry; and the Child Mind Institute, for mental health. Barcelona’s pediatric hospital and anti-cancer centers in Jordan and the United Kingdom, also receive support. “We always try to foster collaboration among all these actors.”

A cultural Center by Renzo Piano

In the realm of the arts, the major gift made to Greece remains the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, amounting to \$861 million, which is the largest single grant ever made by the foundation. At its inauguration in 2017, Andreas C. Dracopoulos stated: “Athens, the cradle of civilization, now has the facilities needed to be a major player in the educational and cultural sphere of the 21st century.” This is a 170,000-square-meter complex including the National Opera and the National Library within a 21-hectare park of century-old olive trees, with views of the sea, the Acropolis, and Piraeus—a green lung in southern Athens. The foundation continues to support the National Opera, enabling it to forge co-productions and partnerships with leading cultural institutions (the festival of Aix-en-Provence, the Paris National Opera, the Salzburg Festival, the Royal Opera House in London...), to organize world tours, and to invite international opera stars to its stage.

The cultural center and the three new hospitals were designed by the renowned Renzo Piano. “An incredible person and architect,” says Andreas C. Dracopoulos. “We became friends, we see the world in a similar way, and that aligns with the foundation’s motto: ‘Humanity at the core.’” This motto is present in all projects, from the smallest to the most imposing: from the Athens library to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library within the New York Public Library, and even the renaissance project for the tiny village of Vamvakou in the Peloponnese (a place of origin for the Niarchos Family). “In Europe, many villages are dying. Young people asked us for help to revive this village—rebuilding the houses, opening it up to tourism, recreating an economy... It’s an important issue for our aging continent.”

The year 2026 will mark the 30th anniversary of the foundation. The Nostos Festival will be its centerpiece, at the cultural center in Athens. “We launched it in 2012, at the beginning of the Greek crisis, as a platform for meetings, exchanges of ideas, and mutual aid. It has become an annual event and requires a lot of commitment. Barack Obama came to speak there in 2023. The next Nostos will last a full week, from June 21 to 28,

2026, and we will invite all our beneficiaries and partners. There will be visits to all the sites to which the Foundation has contributed. For the major conference, we have set up a committee of twenty young people of all nationalities, who will help us formulate the agenda. This is a first. We need their ideas for the future. They must get involved. Life moves much faster today, and as I tell them: ‘You won’t be young forever. So you have the opportunity now, while you’re full of ideas, to really help shape your own future.’ In this way, they will help us help them.”