

Sacred Groves of Competition

In her exhibition of photos of the sites of the Pan-Hellenic Games, photographer Karen Vournakis honors the beauty of ancient sports.

by Sara Field



Sacred Grove - Nemea
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The Pan-Hellenic Games, the inspiration for the Olympic Games, were established around 776 BC. Once a year, Greek athletes gathered at different sites and competed for a venerable prize -- an olive wreath. The games were about politics as well as sports: it was an annual opportunity for the many warring cities of Greece to call a truce, come together in amenity, and watch athletes perform to honor the gods.

Karen Vournakis, an anthropological photographer, visited the four premier Pan-Hellenic Games sites, and captured them as they stand today. Her photos are currently on display at the Griffin Museum of Photography, in an exhibit entitled "Sacred Groves: Ancient Greek Athletic Sites - Olympia Delphi Nemea Isthmia."

Wbur.org producer Sara Field spoke with Karen Vournakis.

Sara Field: What drew you to this subject for a photographic exhibit?

Karen Vournakis: For the past 35 years I have had an interest in Greece, particularly its archaeology. I've visited archaeological sites in my attempt to understand aspects of Greek art and history. Most ancient sites are located in special places, usually in difficult terrain that challenged the Greeks who built the imposing citadels and fortresses there. Mycenae, Delphi, and Knossos are of great interest to me because they are areas haunted by the past: much current Western philosophy and science originated in these places.

SF: What have you learned from these ancient sites?

KV: By photographing these places, I try to understand what the Greek spirit means in artistic terms. Among my favorite sites is Knossos, the Minoan site on Crete, primarily because the Minoans exhibited a wonderful sensibility in the use of color and design. Their understanding of the flora and fauna of the region and their ability to incorporate these images into their fresco and pottery designs particularly appealed to me. This "art" seemed to reflect what was in their everyday life and revealed their aesthetic sensibility.



Tunnel to Stadium from
Sacred Road - Nemea
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SF: Was your interest related to athletics at all?

KV: When you study ancient Greece, you see a lot of pottery and frescos on which Greek artists illustrated the life of the gods, mythological and war themes and sports competitions -- all were a vital part of ancient Greek life. So I became aware of the importance placed on public competition via sports. The return of the Olympic Games to their homeland in the

summer of 2004 gave me the opportunity to celebrate the Greek spirit by [photographing the ancient sites](#) where the original Pan-Hellenic Games were held.

SF: Did the Pan-Hellenic games, like today's Olympics, indulge in advertising?

KV: The games were religious and patriotic festivals attracting people from all over Greece. After the competitions and sacrifices to the gods, the winning athletes were crowned with wild olive wreaths. Then the party began with much feasting. There probably were fans that promoted their athletic heroes by displaying their names or writing poems about them.

SF: How did you take these photos?



KV: I decided that my approach here would be more direct than in my previous work, in which I hand-painted the images, which takes a lot of time. I have developed a unique technique of layering oil, aquamarine crayons and pencils applied directly onto a black/white photograph that had been processed on fiber-based paper. The mixed media approach transformed the black/white prints into full color. It was a very interpretative process that allowed my color sensibility to play out within the images.

Starting Line - Footrace -
Isthmia

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[In these photos of Greek sites](#), I used black and white film and then made large Iris photographs that were sepia toned, giving them an ancient feel. I find the black/white images more dramatic and abstract, more in keeping with the timeless nature of the ancient athletic sites themselves.

SF: What guided your choice of images?

KV: Photography to me is about selection. I select something of interest (at least to me) from our chaotic world by using design and composition. The viewfinder of my camera is a "window" into the world. I crop within the camera rather than try to reconfigure the image in the darkroom to make improvements. It involves spending a lot of time looking at the scene in front of me before I snap the shutter to take a picture. You'll also notice there is a black border around the edges of the images. This tells you that I printed the photograph using the full negative. It is about how I see the world. I'm very interested in the organization of the picture plane. It will either make for a strong image or a weak one.

"Sacred Groves: Ancient Greek Athletic Sites - Olympia Delphi Nemea Isthmia" is on display at the [Griffin Museum of Photography](#) in Winchester, MA **through August 20, 2004.**

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