

Sofia Xanthakou

The ambitious designer bringing fresh ideas to one of the world's oldest cities.
Athens

"I'm a young architect so my work still feels fluid," says Sofia Xanthakou, the founder of Athens-based practice Local Local. "There's room for exploration." Prior to setting up her own office in May 2025, Xanthakou studied at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and the Pratt Institute School of Architecture, before working for firms in London and New York. "In big offices, you can only be in charge of a small part of a wider project," she adds. "In Athens, I work across a variety of projects, from residential and commercial to something totally different, such as a university building or a hospital."

Xanthakou and her four-strong Local Local team have completed the design of Melas Martinos art gallery in Athens' Monastiraki neighbourhood. Another project consisted of the renovation of a 19th-century townhouse in Plaka. "It's important to observe the site of a project, to understand its history," she says about her approach to new commissions. "I'm not a loud person and want things to be refined. I like it when people enter a space and don't necessarily understand what is old and what is new. It means that a project is well rooted." To achieve this, Xanthakou works with local materials and craftspeople.

As an architect operating in one of the world's oldest cities, Xanthakou spends a lot of time contending with Greek bureaucracy – something that she says requires equal parts tenacity and patience. "It's hard to know which rules to obey and which are the most current – and obtaining permits is exhausting," she says. "But creating something unique within these restrictions is an interesting challenge. And the wait for permits allows us the time to design carefully."

The ambitious Xanthakou is poised to help transform her home city and beyond, with projects under way in the capital as well as in the mountains of northern Greece and the country's islands. "It's not that I don't want to do things as they have been done in the past but it's good to spice things up." — GCH



José Luis Barquero

The Spanish painter captivating collectors and causing a stir.
Barcelona

In the salons of Barcelona, there's a growing buzz around José Luis Barquero – known simply by his surname on the nameplates at Galeria Mayoral, a respected Catalan gallery that acts as his local agent. Contemporary art dealer and philanthropist Carmen Thyssen was an early advocate and Barquero's works are now on the walls of canny collectors in London, Paris and New York. From his studio in the industrial neighbourhood of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, the 28-year-old graduate of London's Central St Martins and Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona paints large-scale canvases of human figures in abstract spaces. Some find them haunting but Barquero insists that his work is optimistic.

"These figures might not have a fixed gender – they're somewhere in between – but they have intention, a sense of purpose," he says. "Even if they're struggling, they're moving forward."

Barquero tells Monocle that, for him, living and working in the same space is a crucial part of producing original ideas. "The short distance between my bed and the studio is important," he says. "I can start working without rationalising anything. The ideas are raw, not yet shaped by the day. I also keep my library close and take reference from my books. There's a dialogue between what I read and what I paint." Literature also offers refuge when painting becomes too much. "When I need a break, I go to the books and then back again."

Travel is another important influence on his work. "Barcelona is my base but I'll spend a few months in New York and Paris this year," he adds. "Travel opens you to completely different environments with unfamiliar inputs. Though social media connects artists globally, it's not the same as living in another city. Going to places brings new colours, forms and ways of working. You see how other artists approach things and it pushes you out of your comfort zone." — ST

Where to see Barquero's paintings

Barquero is in New York between June and August under the Cabin residency programme at the Kevin Kramer Gallery before returning to show at the Mayoral Gallery in Paris later in 2026.

