

Nikos Velmos
(1890 – 1930)
Drawings

Curated by Galini Notti

January 29—March 12, 2023

I had never heard of Nikos Velmos. The truth is that I still don't know him, and I ignore many things about his life and his work. I discovered his drawings during the time I was responsible for the care of the American College of Greece Art Collection. I first saw them on the website – 438 drawings with pencil, charcoal or ink on paper, donated by the collector Takis Efstathiou. When I finally saw them in person, their strength was even clearer as I could grasp their size, their materiality, the intensity of the lines. They were vivid and fragile. Since then, I've wanted to make an exhibition.

Many years have passed since that first encounter but they always surprise me and give me joy. Every time I take them out of their archival boxes I discover something new. This exhibition presents a selection of Velmos' drawings from the American College of Greece Art Collection. It has been a difficult and rather instinctive personal choice. They are all noteworthy. Their power lies in their simplicity and expressiveness, in the love with which he approached everything he drew. He wrote "Art comes from the experience of life"¹ in a text about the actor and director Thomas Economou. These drawings communicate his point of view on life. They depict his epoch, Greece after the Asia Minor catastrophe, people who are gone and places which have changed. Yet the drawings express something enduringly human. They are both historical and contemporary.

I searched to learn who he was. Nikos Velmos, pseudonym of Nikos Voyatzakis, was born in Plaka in 1890, and spent his life there. He was a self-taught artist with a varied, critical, subversive and socially engaged approach to art and politics. He was involved in theater and literature as well as painting. In 1926, he founded the journal *Frangelio* (The Scourge) in which he criticized the hypocrisy of his era and included his own literary work along with

that of many noteworthy poets and writers. In 1927 Velmos began a supplemental publication called *Filla Technis* (Art Papers) of *Frangelio*. *Filla Technis* were either monographs of Greek and international artists' work, such as El Greco, Beethoven, Yiannoulis Chalepas or issues focusing on themes such as the work of self-taught artists. The publication of *Frangelio* lasted until 1929. In addition to the texts he produced for these publications and other newspapers and magazines, Velmos also wrote poems, prose and poetic monologues such as *Dio Agapes* (Two Loves), which was published with original woodcuts by Angelos Theodoropoulos, and *Stagionoros* (At Mount Athos) which was illustrated by Polykleitos Rengos and describes his journey to Mount Athos. He also wrote studies on theater, and adapted and translated plays and poems in demotic language, such as *Poimata D. Paparigopoulou metafrasmena sti dimotiki* (Poems of D. Paparigopoulos translated in Demotic).

In 1928 Velmos opened an art space on the ground floor of his house, at 21 Nikodimou street in Plaka, which he named Asylon Technis (Art Shelter). The domestic space was adapted to this purpose by the architect Konstantinos Kakiouzis and by the painter and decorator Johan Romanos.² Through Asylon Technis, Velmos organized exhibitions of established artists such as Yiannoulis Chalepas and Dimitris Galanis, as well as educational exhibitions on artists such as El Greco³, and also exhibitions of self-taught artists like himself. Yiannis Tsarouchis first exhibited in Asylon Technis in the self-taught artists exhibition of 1928. Asylon Technis didn't serve commercial but artistic purposes⁴— if some works were sold the money was used either to support artists or for the realization of other artistic activities. These exhibitions aimed at the recognition of important yet overlooked artists and opposed the academicism of the era. Velmos felt that self-taught artists had something original in their expression that

¹ Nikos Velmos, "Thomas Economou", magazine *Frangelio*, n° 14, 19 March 1927, p. 3. Reprinted

in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 19-20-21, November 2016, p. 55.

² Kimon Theodorou, *O Velmos kai oi Ekthesis sto Asylon Technis* (Velmos and the Exhibitions at Asylon Technis), Farfoulas, Athens, 2021, p. 57.

³ The exhibition of El Greco included print reproductions as well as copies painted by renowned Greek artists.

⁴ Nikos Velmos, magazine *Frangelio*, September-December 1928.

Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 22-24, October 2019, p. 87.

had not been altered or distorted by other influences. Moreover, many of them did not have a chance to show their work as they were poor and painted alongside other jobs they were doing for a living. One example of this was Thanasis Kalantzopoulos, an orphan who worked in a tavern at 10 Armodiou street, next to Varvakeios market⁵. This spirit of rebellion against academicism and his interest in other kinds of art apart from the narrow established path is expressed also in his love and study of folk art.

Nikos Velmos' wide range of passionate interests were expressed through the exhibitions of Asylon Technis. He admired Chalepas and contributed to the "resurgence of interest for his life and work".⁶ He organized an exhibition of Chalepas with 112 drawings that the sculptor gave him when he visited him on Tinos as well as 3 plaster draft models⁷. Chalepas designed a cover of *Frangelio* and the sign of Asylon Technis was engraved with his drawing. The tomb relief portrait of Velmos on his grave at the 1st cemetery of Athens is also Chalepas' work. Velmos was an admirer of funerary sculpture and loved the 1st cemetery where he used to take walks with his friends, even at night. In 1928 he exhibited prototypes of funerary monuments by Evangelos Vrettos and praised the funerary sculpture of brothers Fitali in *Frangelio*. In 1929 he presented K. Metallidis' photographic exhibition of artistic monuments in the 1st cemetery of Athens. He loved Athens. Even one century ago he saw the city changing rapidly; he became interested in the facets of Athens that were being lost and in 1929 he organized the exhibition of *Palia Athina* (Old Athens), though its publication came out after his death. In addition to exhibitions, Asylon Technis hosted conversations on artistic and sociopolitical issues. It became a hub for the most prominent art personalities of this period such as Stratis Doukas, Fotis Kontoglou, Spyros Papaloukas, Aghinor Asteriadis, Giulio Caimi and Dimitris Pikionis – the avant-garde of the time, who paved the way for the forthcoming generation of the 1930s.

As a child Nikos Velmos was involved in petty crime and went to jail for a short period. These early years are recounted in the book *Istoria enos paidiou* (Story of a child), which was also published in series in *Frangelio*. He willingly escaped from this life and turned to the theater. As an actor, he played with several troupes and traveled to many places. He soon met Thomas Economou and entered his troupe. This acquaintance was decisive for the trajectory of his life as Thomas Economou became his teacher, assisted him in his self-education and introduced him to Shakespeare whom he studied and adapted into demotic language. Velmos' work contributed to Shakespeare's establishment in Greece in the 1920s⁸. His own pseudonym comes from a paraphrase of Shakespeare's name, William, which becomes Velmos. At Asylon Technis he organized an exhibition on Shakespeare and the first publication of *Filla Technis* included an adaptation of the work *Antonios and Cleopatra* by Velmos, edited by Stratis Doukas, with woodcuts by Spyros Papaloukas⁹. Apart from the troupe of Thomas Economou, he also acted with Marika Kotopouli and Kyveli. In 1917 he founded "Morfortikos Thiasos" (Cultural Troupe) which in 1918 in Thessaloniki was renamed "Stratitotikos Thiasos"¹⁰ (Troupe for the Army) as it was performing for the soldiers of the Macedonian Front in the World War I.

Nikos Velmos considered art, politics and life as a whole. In this sense, his practice was very close to the concerns of the modern movements. Art and life were interrelated for him and he didn't distinguish between artistic fields. He believed that "the work is a reflection of life"¹¹ and in his text on Rodakis' house on Aegina island, which he believed to be a unique sample of folk architecture, he wrote "the work of art or of life, rests on us and derives from our concept of our epoch"¹². Velmos relied on self-organization and the contributions of his friends. He was hands-on and created a framework and a network for the recognition of the people and the works he considered noteworthy but marginalized.

⁵ Anastasios Drivas, "Aspoudachtoi Kallitechnes: O Mikros Zografos Thanasis Kalantzopoulos kai ta Schedia tou" (Self-taught Artists: The Little Painter Thanasis Kalantzopoulos and his Drawings", magazine *Frangelio*, n° 25, 4 June 1927, pp. 1-4. Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 19-20-21, November 2016, pp. 93-96.

⁶ Nikos Logothetis, "O Velmos kai to Asylo Technis" (Velmos and Asylo Technis), magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 22-24, October 2019, p. 181.

⁷ Dimitris Pavlopoulos, "O Velmos me ti matia tou Nikou Logotheti" (Velmos seen by Nikos Logothetis), magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 19-20-21, November 2016, p. 216.

⁸ Dimitra Dalpanagioti, *The Translation of William Shakespeare's Plays and the Changing Concept of Womanhood in Greece (1875-1955)*

(Doctoral Thesis), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2020, Retrieved from: <http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/files/GRI-2020-28935>, access 13/1/23

⁹ Kimon Theodorou, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁰ Nikos Logothetis, *Nikos Velmos (1890-1930). O yios tis apoleias* (Nikos Velmos (1890-1930). The son of loss), Farfoulas, Athens, 2016, p. 26.

¹¹ Nikos Velmos, "Kallitechnikes Moutsounes" (Artistic Smackers), magazine *Frangelio*, June-July-August 1928, p. 73. Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 22-24, October 2019, p. 73.

¹² Nikos Velmos, "Liges Grammes gia tin Aigina kai gia to Spiti tou Rodaki" (Few Lines about Aigina and the House of Rodakis), magazine *Frangelio*, September-December 1928. Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 22-24, October 2019, p. 94.

He didn't seek to gain renown through his actions but was interested in defending his ideas against all forms of authority. He took the side of the poor and weak. He was a particular amalgam of anarcho-Christian values. He believed in love, in the support of others and denounced all forms of injustice or abuse from the Church or political powers. He wrote: "Hate your homeland and the rich! And like that you shall love all the homelands on Earth but also all the poor of the world!"¹³ All his life was a battle for a fairer world. He was appreciated for his work, but he was not embraced by society because of the severity of his criticisms as well as his homosexuality which he had the courage to imply in *Frangelio*. The difficulty of his life was softened by his relationships, for instance his friendship with Stratis Doukas had been supportive and salvaging.

Nikos Velmos was triggered to start painting by the poet Tassos Drivas¹⁴. Velmos writes in one of his drawings "My first sketch – 1927." However, according to Nikos Logothetis, who studied his life and work, he first began drawing in 1926¹⁵. Many of his drawings were used as illustrations for *Frangelio*. He painted the people close to him, his friends – many of whom were contemporary intellectuals – everyday people, the poor and the outcasts whose hardship he felt. He also painted landscapes, trees, animals, decorative patterns, set designs, theatrical scenes, and saints.

The current exhibition's work is comprised of many people and places – taverns, graveyards, the house of Rodakis in Aegina, Panormos in Tinos where he went to meet Chalepas, Athens, and Mount Athos. It approaches the drawings of Nikos Velmos as contemporary work. It is presented at Radio Athènes in Plaka, which is very near Nikodimou street, where Asylon Technis used to be.

Nikos Velmos died in 1930, at the age of 40.

There are so many things I don't know about Nikos Velmos. I wouldn't say that the drawings presented in this exhibition are the most representative, significant or the best, but only a selection. Several researchers have studied his work. I would like to thank the scholars of Nikos Velmos who helped me personally: Socrates Loupas for sharing his knowledge and being always willing to answer my questions and Diamantis Karavolas for the material he helped me access. Special thanks to Aristide Antonas and ASFA for lending us one of the vitrines of *Vitrines Project* (2017) especially designed for *Documenta 14*. The exhibition is happening thanks to the trust and support of the Frances Rich School of Fine and Performing Arts at Deree – The American College of Greece and Radio Athènes. I would like to particularly thank Dr. Katerina Thomas, Effie Halivopoulou, Ioanna Papapavlou, Niki Kladakis, Takis Efstathiou and Helena Papadopoulos. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dessy Griva, Christos Chryssopoulos, Eleni Vei, Elizabeth Van Loan and Kostas Roussakis.

– Galini Notti

¹³ Nikos Velmos, "Koinoniko Vivlio" (Social Book), magazine *Frangelio*, n° 27, 18 June 1927, p. 3. Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 19-20-21, November 2016, p. 101.

¹⁴ Nikos Velmos, magazine *Frangelio*, n° 47, 5 November 1927, p. 3. Reprinted in the magazine *Farfoulas*, issues 19-20-21, November 2016, p. 183.

¹⁵ Nikos Logothetis, op. cit., p. 80.

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The exhibition *Nikos Velmos (1890-1930). Drawings* curated by Galini Notti is being presented at Radio Athènes in collaboration with the Frances Rich School of Fine and Performing Arts at Deree - The American College of Greece. It presents a selection of Nikos Velmos's drawings from The American College of Greece Art Collection, which includes 438 drawings donated by collector Takis Efstathiou. It is the first time that part of Velmos' drawings is being exhibited 93 years after his death.

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Galini Notti (b. 1980) is a curator who lives and works in Athens, Greece. In 2020, she curated the show *Statues that don't move, don't speak, don't laugh* in three public squares in Athens. She has also curated one of the "Top Tens" for the project *Shadow Libraries: UbuWeb in Athens* at Onassis Cultural Centre, the exhibition *Survey* in the context of Art-Athina 2017, co-curated the show *(Im)material Gestures* as part of the project PIIGS _An Alternative Geography of Curating at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, curated the exhibition *Overseas* at The American College of Greece in Athens and the show *Fireworks out of Season – Riviera* at the Riviera open-air cinema in the Exarcheia neighborhood of Athens.

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The American College of Greece Art Collection (ACG Art Collection), is an organic part of the educational mission of the College and is the result of diligent support of emerging and established artists – the majority of them of Greek origin – and of donations and bequests. It is an extensive collection of fine and decorative arts which numbers approximately 4,500 artworks of various media and objects from Antiquity to the present. The majority of the works of the collection are on permanent display in the interior and exterior spaces of the college premises. During the annual exhibition, which is held as part of the annual Arts Festival at the ACG Art Gallery, invited artists and curators are encouraged to explore and make use of the collection. The collection is accessible to academic researchers, students, art professionals and the general public, and serves as an educational and research platform.

