

The mental illness of Yannoulis Chalepas

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Abstract

When looking into and analyzing the life of Yannoulis Chalepas, one comes to the realization that he was one of the most significant figures of modern Greek art. Even though life was filled with tragic events and he suffered from mental illness, this did not have a negative impact on his artwork. It was his unique talent that provided him with worldwide recognition as one of the most exemplary artists of modern Greek art. Yannoulis Chalepas must have had a particularly strong personality, and an apt example of this is that despite the negative stance of and pressure from his family, he still chose to follow his great love, the profession of his forefathers, sculpting. In fact, his artwork and his persistent efforts with this art, will be a form of psychotherapy, a systematic form of self-healing, which is unique in the history of psychiatry and will lead to the creation of his numerous masterpieces, which in turn, will make an everlasting, eternal imprint on Greek artistic history.

Keywords: History of psychiatry, Yannoulis Halepas, mental illness, modern greek art, sculpture, psychotherapy.

Introduction

When one begins to study the life and artistic work of Yannoulis Chalepas, one comes to the realization that he was one of the most prominent figures of modern Greek art. This is Yannoulis Chalepas. This is evident from his artistic works, which comprise some of the most important masterpieces of modern Greek art. He was one of the leading Greek artists, worthy of continuing the artwork of Fidia and Praxiteles. Chalepas lived in solitude, spending fourteen years of his life in the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, experiencing the exclusion and mockery of many of his peers, fellow citizens at Pyrgos on the island of Tinos, and even his own relatives.

His unique personality, his idealized fictional, yet difficult life, and the tragic fate of an artist suffering from mental illness, who loses his sanity, but somehow, towards the end of his life, makes a dynamic comeback to his artwork, renders him as one of the most famous and renowned sculptors of modern Greek art [1].

The life, and importantly, the sculptural artwork of Yannoulis Chalepas, is a “slap in the face” to classical psychiatry, which professes that schizophrenia leads to the complete degradation of the mental activity of the patient. His artwork of is ample proof of the healing power of art [2].

The respected image of the bearded and elderly Yannoulis Chalepas brings to memory the associated image of yet another significant figure of modern Greek literature, Alexandros Papadiamantis, who, with his literary masterpieces, significantly embellished Greek literature. Yannoulis Chalepas and Alexandros Papadiamantis both succeeded not only in surpassing expressive and linguistic obstacles and restrictions, but also in proving that a real artist is able to “breathe life” into a tool of expression that otherwise long seemed lifeless and somewhat fossilized. Both artists sculpted or “carved” their work using a “canvas”, which could have, *a priori*, stripped them of any form of originality or creative impetus. This is due to the fact that the latter used the inflexible wording of the then official language of Greece, the “katharevousa”, of which he had extensive knowledge, and that the former was inspired by and integrated into his work, the lucid style of academic neoclassicism [3]. Over

the years, a number of studies have been written on the Artwork and Projects of Yannoulis Chalepas. Books, as well as monographs on the life of the glorified sculptor of Tinos have been published, with the aim of shedding light onto the life of the artist and on his artwork. Herein, as presented below, we aim to focus on the reasons behind the mental illness of Yannoulis Chalepas (he was a mental patient for 50 out of the 84 years of his life), and will discuss how this illness may have affected his artistic work.

Biographical details of Yannoulis Chalepas.

The renowned Greek sculptor, Yannoulis Chalepas, was born at Pyrgos on the island of Tinos in August 1851. He came from a family of marble hewers in Tinos, the work of whom can be found in Churches, household lintels and family tombstones throughout the country. His father, was the marble hewer, Ioannis Chalepas, and his mother, Eirini Lambaditi, who played a major and determining role in the life of the sculptor. After completing his education at the elementary school of Pyrgos, his parents sent him to neighboring Syros, where he completed his further education at the secondary school of Syros. He was an excellent student. However, from a young age, his passion was artwork and marble sculpting. Despite the negative reactions from his family, as they did not wish him to also become involved in marble sculpting, Yannoulis Chalepas became fully and completely involved in his artwork, sculpting, putting his heart and soul into it (or as they say in Ancient Greek, “ψυχή τε και σώματι”; literal meaning, soul and body), thus continuing a long-term family tradition [4].

However, why did his parents, and his mother in particular, hold such a negative stance in the professional direction their son was taking? It is within this negative stance that we can find the first signs that will later lead to the mental illness of Yannoulis Chalepas. His mother had quite ambitious ideas about the future of her son. She considered it slightly demeaning that he should follow the same humble profession as his forefathers. She used any means necessary to try and suppress the willingness and passion of the young Yannoulis Chalepas to be similar to, and follow the

profession of his forefathers. Thankfully, for us, she did not succeed [5].

Moreover, Plato had described in his dialogue "Gorgia", "*την ειμαρμενην ουδ αν εις εκφυγοι*", meaning that no one can escape his destiny; thus, the destiny of Yannoulis Chalepas was to enrich our lives with his artistic masterpieces, which constitute him as the most significant Greek sculptor [6].

Yannoulis Chalepas must have had a particularly strong personality, and an apt example of this is that despite the negative stance of and pressure from his family, he still chose to follow his great love, the profession of his forefathers, sculpting.

In fact, his artwork and his persistent efforts with this art, will be a form of psychotherapy, a systematic form of self-healing, which is unique in the history of psychiatry and will lead to the creation of his numerous masterpieces, which in turn, will make an everlasting, eternal imprint on Greek artistic history.

Yannoulis Chalepas was also a genius with a sensitive personality. Although a dreamer and an idealist, he was also known for his anxiety and eccentricity, for his egotism and quiriness, all traits of his personality which he possibly inherited from his mother [7].

In 1869, the Chalepas family move to Athens, and settle in his family's home on Mavromichali Street, which will later on become his workshop. At the same time, he enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, which was in the same building as the Athenian Conservatory is today, on Piraeus Street. There, he became distinguished for his talent and artistic performance, and was thus granted a two-year scholarship from the Panhellenic Holy Foundation of Evangelistria of Tinos, for a higher education in fine arts in Europe. He chose to continue his studies in Munich, and in 1873, he enrolled at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts. While in Germany, he encountered several problems, mainly due to the fact that he had no knowledge of the German language and also due to limited funds, as the scholarship funds were not being properly administered. Thus, in 1876, in spite of the many appeals put forth by the Munich Academy, where he had excelled in his studies, the Panhellenic Holy Foundation of

Evangelistria of Tinos terminated the scholarship funding, and Chalepas was forced to return to Athens, where he worked continuously. It is during this time that he created his most well-known and most unique masterpieces, namely the "Sleeping Female Figure (Koimomeni)", "Midea" and "Satyr Playing with Eros" up to 1888 [8], by which time his illness became more severe and his family decided to admit him to the Mental Hospital of Corfu until 1902. Following the death of his father, his brother's suicide and his sister's mental illness, his mother, having now been left all alone, decided to bring him to Pyrgos in Tinos, where he could be close to her. During this time, and up to 1916, the year in which his mother passed away, he was subjected to an endless amount of negative pressure and restraints, stemming from the negative stance of his mother against his chosen profession.

With the death of his mother, so ended the long-lasting, silent and merciless battle between his controlling but otherwise loving mother, and the passionate and yet mentally ill artist. He was now able to focus completely and without restrictions on his artwork, and with continuous and persistent work, the mental state of the intellectual and artistic Chalepas gradually and steadily became more stable, while the aesthetic value of his artwork also steadily increased [9].

Thus, in March 1927, he was awarded the "Award for Excellence in Arts and Letters" by the Academy of Athens, which is considered the highest honorary award for an artist. Then, in 1930, after residing in Pyrgos of Tinos for 28 years, he moves to Athens together with his nephews, Eirini and Vasillis Chalepas. They take up residence at their home on 35 Dafnomili Street, in Neapolis, Athens. Chalepas has now, at the age of 76, fully recovered from his mental illness, and possesses acute mental clarity, a unique artistic inspiration and a strong creative will: To anyone who asked as for the reasons for his return to the capital after his lengthy absence he replied "I came to Athens only to work". It is during this time that he created some of his masterpieces, such as the "Female Figure Relaxing" and "Oedipus and Antigone", among others, which, as he himself professed, were better than the "Sleeping Female Figure".

The news of his death on September 15, 1938 spread rapidly, either by word of mouth, or by the media of that time, and brought shock to the artistic world, art lovers, scholars and even to everyday people, who admired and honored him.

The reasons behind the mental illness of Yannoulis Chalepas:

What was the disease that Yannoulis Chalepas suffered from and what were the causes which led to the development of severe mental episodes that imprinted on his life?

Apart from the hereditary factor and the strong emotional strain which existed among his family members (his brother Aristocles had committed suicide and his sister Katerina suffered from severe mental illness), other factors also led to his mental illness. During the period between 1877-1878, aiming for perfection, he overworked himself, spending twenty hours in his workshop without consuming any food, leading to a burnout. In addition, he suffered from unrequited love due to his affections for Marigo Christodoulou, also a resident of Tinos. All these factors thus led to the development of his mental illness, the severity of which caused him to have a nervous breakdown and also led to feelings of severe anger, and consequently to angry outbursts and failed suicide attempts.

The long hours he spent daily working hard in his workshop, put a strain on his physical and mental health, leading to a burnout. This, in conjunction with his solitude, as he was all alone, cut off from the rest of society, and as he did not even have anyone to assist him in the hard medial work required for his sculptures, led to the mental breakdown of Chalepas [10].

Furthermore, as also mentioned above, another major determining factor to his mental breakdown was his unfulfilled and unrequited love for his young compatriot, Marigo Christodoulou, niece of the politician, Grigoris Mavromaras. Marigo's family did not wish for Chalepas to become their son in law, and thus refused to allow them to become engaged. This led to Chalepas becoming majorly disappointed and heartbroken.

His sorrow and desolation, in association with his intense passion for his artwork and his persistence for perfection in his work, led to the mental degradation of the sensitive artist, thus permanently erasing the fine line which exists between genius and madness. It was then that the pent up anger and manic behavior stemming from his childhood experiences rose to the surface, destroying his already sensitive and disrupted soul and mental state, bringing him down to the depths of despair, in which depths he would be imprisoned for many years [11].

A number of scholars state that there is an association between the mental state and the artwork of Yannoulis Chalepas. Besides, let us not forget the fact that in the past, there have been a number of cases where those who are mentally ill, mainly the schizophrenic, have created remarkable and respected works of art or have succeeded in other artistic avenues (e.g., classical music). A hypothesis which exists, even to this day, is that, according to public opinion, artists who write poetry or create music and works of art are particularly sensitive in nature and are sometimes on the brink between sanity and insanity [12].

In the history of all types of art, there is evidence of various cases of talented artists suffering from mental illness, with artists involved in literary writing and visual arts on the top of the list of artists suffering from mental illness. Such characteristic examples from the Greek artistic world, are the novelist George Vizyinos, the painter Michael Mitsakis, the sculptor Yannoulis Chalepas and the poet Kostas Karyotakis [13],[14].

There is a tight association between the mental illness and the childhood experiences of Yannoulis Chalepas. It is not coincidental that Chalepas re-discovered his artistic flare and creativity the day his mother passed away, or the fact that he was released from the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu two years after his father's death [15].

His relationship with his mother was mainly characterized by emotional stress, felt by both parties involved. To her, he was her precious first-born son, and she was thus overprotective of her son, and was overinvolved and intrusive into her son's life. Current psychologists are aware of and can

prove that such domestic factors, as well as over-criticism and hostility can play a major role in the development of mental illness, and possibly to the development of schizophrenia [16].

His mother firmly believed that it was his artwork that caused his mental demise, which is why she tried to prevent his any involvement in sculpting, destroying any of his creations. In spite of her great love for him, she was convinced that if her son were to distance himself from his artwork, he would then be able to find his mental health and sanity [17].

His mother also believed that his artwork, and in particular, his sculpture of the young dead girl, namely the "Sleeping Female Figure", was responsible for his poor mental state. Thus, she would throw the marble and red clay that the artist used as raw materials for his sculpting out into their garden, and would also destroy any pre-model sculptures that he may have created. She kept the same negative stance against his artwork even after he was released from the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, where he had remained a patient for fourteen years.

The extremely hostile and persistent negative stance of his mother towards his artwork and her efforts to distance him from it, resulted in the artist becoming even more dispirited and distressed. As he was now no longer able, at this stage, due to his poor mental state, to stand up to his overbearing mother, he isolates himself even further, becoming even more introverted. This harrowing and distressing battle of wills between mother and son lasted for years. Consequently, Chalepas was thus transformed into a weak-willed individual, without any spontaneity or initiative, unable to deal with his domineering mother, or with any of his compatriots who ridiculed him.

Although this negative stance of his mother towards his artwork did not cause him to react against it or rebel, it made him more melancholy, making him feel even greater distress and disappointment. Thus, because of this emotional strain, his mental state increasingly deteriorated. It was only when he became a danger to himself and to others that his mother eventually admitted that her son was mentally ill, and she thus agreed to his being admitted to the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu on the 11th of July, 1888 at the age of 37.

The years of his confinement into the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu:

The only official diagnosis of the mental illness of Yannoulis Chalepas came from the respective physicians at the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, who stated that he suffered from dementia. This diagnosis of dementia may seem somewhat strange to us, as he was only at the young age of 37 when he was admitted to the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, accompanied by a relative. However, the mental illness currently clinically termed as schizophrenia was first described by the Belgian psychiatrist B. Morrel in 1852 as "dementia praecox", literally meaning premature dementia, and this was also described in this manner later on in 1887 by the German psychiatrist E. Kraepelin. Both psychiatrists noted that this type of mental illness led to progressive mental retardation and neuronal degeneration, exhibiting clinical manifestations very similar to those of dementia, which today is known to be caused by damage to brain cells [19].

The Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu to which Yannoulis Chalepas was admitted, was the first of its kind on the Balkan Peninsula and was founded in July 1838, while Corfu was under British rule, by the Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands, Sir Edward Douglas. The said psychiatric hospital was run according to Western European standards and was funded solely by the British authorities governing the island [20].

The statutes ordinance and the first rules of operation of the institution were published in the Official Gazette of the Ionian State on July 2, 1838 (Section 394,395,396), and the hospital began operating a few days later [21].

When the Ionian Islands (Heptanese) became part of the Greek state in 1864, the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu and the corresponding one on the island of Kefalonia (which had more local character), became part of the Greek healthcare system [22],[23].

The Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu was the only hospital of its kind in the whole of Greece for 23 years [23] until October 1887, when the Dromokaition Psychiatric Hospital began operating. The founding of this hospital was funded by the

rich merchant from the island of Chios, Zorzis Dromokaitis, who made a donation of 500,000 French francs for the establishment of this hospital [25].

The Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu and the Dromokaition Psychiatric Hospital have something in common. The first director of the newly established Dromokaition Psychiatric Hospital was the psychiatrist Christodoulos Tsirogotis, who had also been the Director of the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu for a number of years.

During his time as the Director of the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, Christodoulos Tsirogotis tried to implement his then modern ideas about psychiatric care which he had learned at the University of Pisa in Italy, following in the footsteps of the well-known physicians, Chiarugi from Italy and Pinel from France. With his targeted motivation, conscientiousness and hard work on a daily basis, he succeeded in transforming the mental asylum into a proper hospital, the standards of which were equal to the those of the other hospitals of the time in Greece. He created a psychiatric hospital in which inmates were no longer regarded as convicts but as actual patients, also applying manual work as a form of therapy, proclaiming that even though the inmates in psychiatric hospitals may resemble corpses without intellect, they are still entitled to proper care [26].

It is to this psychiatric hospital that Yannoulis Chalepas was admitted in July 1888, at the age of 37, following the decision of his family and relatives, as well as that of the authorities, as by this time, he had become a danger to himself and to others. The letter written by the authorities justifying his admittance to the hospital stated that it is absolutely necessary that he be admitted to the said psychiatric hospital in order to avoid the inevitable. This letter, written to justify his admittance to the hospital, was in accordance with the operational regulations of the Psychiatric Hospital of Corfu, which stated that the admittance of any patient to the hospital would have to be justified by an official medical health certificate, a letter from the relatives of the patient, as well as by letters from two reputable individuals, rationalizing the admittance to the hospital. In addition, before a patient was admitted, his condition would have to be explained in person to the directors of the hospital [27].

Yannoulis Chalepas and his “Sleeping Female Figure (Koimomeni)”

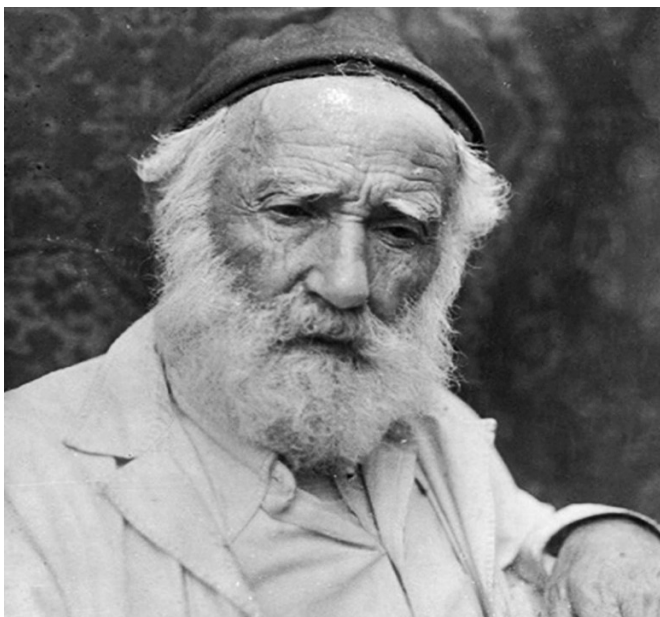
The “Sleeping Female Figure” of Chalepas is one of the most distinctive artworks of modern Greek sculpture. This sculpture is closely associated with the tragic life of the renowned Greek sculptor. In 1869, Yannoulis Chalepas moved with his family to Athens from his birthplace in Pyrgos on the island of Tinos. His father, a marble hewer, decided that the family take up residence in the sparsely populated district where other ex-residents of Tinos also resided and who were also marble hewers. They resided at 8 Mavromichali Street, close to Zoodochou Pigis Church. This will later on become the workshop of Chalepas. It was here, that on a cold winter morning in January, 1878, that Mrs. Afentaki visited him so that she may place an order for a statue of her dead daughter for her tombstone [28].

Sophia Afentaki died at the age of 18 due to tuberculosis, a disease which caused many deaths in Greece towards the end of the 19th century. Sophia was from the island of Kimolos and she came from a wealthy family, who were merchants in Ermou. Her mother, searching for an experienced sculptor to create a monument for her daughter’s tombstone at the First Cemetery of Athens, came to the workshop of Chalepas on Mavromichali Street, which had moved from Mitropoleos Street [29].

As stated by Chalepas himself in an interview with the reporter, Constantine Kalantzis at the gazette at the time, the “Elliniki”, Mrs. Afentaki visited him in his workshop to order a monument for her daughter’s tombstone at the First Cemetery of Athens, showing him a photograph she had of her daughter in her handbag. He asked for 1,000 drachma and immediately began working on a pre-model sculpture from clay. He worked night and day in order to complete this sculpture, exhausting himself. This exhaustion was probably the reason behind the extreme reaction of the artist when Mrs. Afentaki came to see the completed sculpture and complained that the result was not very satisfactory. Hearing this comment from Mrs. Afentaki, the artist took hold of a crowbar and hit the sculpture hard with it in the chest, decapitating it, and thus, destroying it. Following this extreme



Sleeping Female (1877) at the Tomb of Sofia Afentaki, First Cemetery of Athens



Yannoulis Chalepas (August 14, 1851 – September 15, 1938)

reaction from the artist, Mrs. Afentaki regretted having made that comment and pleaded with him to re-create it. In the same interview mentioned above, Chalepas had said the following to the reporter: "I created it, I carved it out of

marble, and sometime later in 1880, the statue which gave me my reputation, was placed on top of the grave of Afentaki" [30].

The above-mentioned extreme reaction of Chalepas is evidence of his poor mental state, and of the complete mental and physical exhaustion which had consumed him. This burnout was due to the endless hours he spent meticulously working on his sculpture the "Sleeping Girl", a sculpture which will be the most exemplary work of modern Greek art [31].

When looking into and analyzing the life of Yannoulis Chalepas, one comes to the realization that he was one of the most significant figures of modern Greek art. Even though life was filled with tragic events and he suffered from mental illness, this did not have a negative impact on his artwork. It was his unique talent that provided him with worldwide recognition as one of the most exemplary artists of modern Greek art.

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