

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Antonis Danos

## Nikolaos Gyzis's *The Secret School* and an Ongoing National Discourse

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2002)

---

Citation: Antonis Danos, "Nikolaos Gyzis's *The Secret School* and an Ongoing National Discourse," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2002), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn02/nikolaos-gyzis-the-secret-school-and-an-ongoing-national-discourse>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

## Nikolaos Gyzis's *The Secret School* and an Ongoing National Discourse

by Antonis Danos

The rediscovery of an ethnic past furnishes vital memories, values, symbols, and myths, without which nationalism would be powerless. But those myths, symbols, values and memories have popular resonance because they are founded on living traditions of the people . . . [and they invoke] presumed kinship and residence ties to underpin the authenticity of the unique cultural values of the community.[1] [T]he paradigmatic figure of the national community is the artist. . . . [G]reat artists are they who create out of the collective experience of the people, preserved in historical legends, and dramatize their lessons for the present.[2]

Nationalist narratives traditionally have owed much of their appeal and longevity to myths that find resonance in—and reinforce—a people's sense of ethnic or national collectivity. One of the more enduring myths of Greek national imagining is that of the Secret School (*Krypho Scholio*). It concerns the alleged suppression (and, in some cases, total prohibition) of education, by the Ottomans, among their subject peoples. According to the Secret School narrative, because of this suppression (especially during the first two centuries of Ottoman rule in Greece, the mid-fifteenth to the early seventeenth), Greeks had secretly organized small, underground schools for the education of their children. These schools were said to have convened in churches or monasteries, usually at night, and usually the teachers were priests. Despite a lack of any serious historiographical support for the existence of such schools, this myth has long been part of the populist historical narrative and is sufficiently acknowledged in official discourse to warrant its incorporation into primary school textbooks.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Secret School myth became fully consolidated by the incorporation into the narrative of an existing popular nursery rhyme, by its visualization by Nikolaos Gyzis (1842–1901) in his painting *The Secret School*, 1885–86 (Emfietzoglou Collection, Athens) and by its commemoration in Ioannis Polemis's homonymous poem of 1900, which was inspired by Gyzis's picture. Generations of schoolchildren in the twentieth century were immersed in the Secret School myth via their familiarity with the nursery song, the painting, and the poem, all of which were—and continue to be—part of school celebrations and paraphernalia on national anniversaries. The myth's wide appeal was reconfirmed in recent years by the commotion surrounding the auction of Gyzis's picture, where it set a price record for a modern Greek artwork, and by the debates (mostly in the press) concerning Alkis Angelou's book *The Secret School*,[3] which set out to expose the lack of historical (or "scientific") substance in the myth's narrative.

While the intertwining over the years of historical, literary, and artistic threads into the fabric of this narrative makes this myth a fascinating manifestation of national imagining—and Gyzis's painting occupies a central place in this process—the myth has also become vulnerable to more unorthodox cases of appropriation.

As Angelou points out, no scholar has come across any source material from the Ottoman years that refers to the existence of secret schools.[4] In fact, the first such references

emerge after the breakout of the Greek Revolution in 1821. In his work *Leucothea* (1825), the German scholar Carl Iken mentions secret schools in Ottoman Greece based on information provided to him by the Greek scholar Stephanos Kanellos, a member of the Enlightenment circle of Adamantios Korais.[5] The circle was made up of Greek scholars who were living in various diaspora centers during Greece's Ottoman occupation. At about the second half of the eighteenth century, they engaged in a process of reinventing the Greek people's past in order to determine their future. The circle's main concern was the liberation of Greece from Ottoman rule. Most of its members envisaged a centralized nation-state oriented both politically and culturally to the West. For Greek scholars who regarded Europe as the modern-day inheritor of Greek classical culture, such an orientation amounted to a re-establishment of ties with the nation's ancient heritage.

These Enlightenment scholars were anxious to prove to "civilized" Europe that modern Greeks deserved to be free. Kanellos's contribution to Iken's text—which, as Angelou asserts, we cannot treat as a starting point for the invention of the myth, since it is a foreign source that would have been largely ignored in Greece[6]—can be seen as indicative of such anxieties by Greek scholars at the time. They argued, essentially, that even during the years of "slavery" under the Turks Greeks had longed for education and cultural "regeneration." Moreover, Iken's adoption of the information given to him points to European expectations of contemporary Greeks that the latter sought to fulfill.

The connection between education and cultural regeneration and political freedom was at the core of Greek Enlightenment ideology. This ideology was carried over by the last Enlightenment scholars into the newly established Greek state, founded in 1828, and especially into the University of Athens, established in 1837. In their inaugural speeches and other panegyrics, many of the professors alluded both to the Greeks' "natural inclination" for education and the Turks' "suspicion," even "persecution," of its pursuit.[7] By the 1860s, such notions were expressed in even more sensationalist terms and were related more specifically to the Secret School construct: "Under the pitiless whip of the blood-thirsty tyrant, the humble priest and the wretched teacher, terrified but determined and undaunted, gather in invisible shelters the tender children in order to introduce them, secretly, to the teachings of Greek Orthodoxy and science," and out of these schools came the martyrs who gave their lives for their faith and country.[8]

Another element that added to the myth's popularity was the incorporation into its narrative of a children's song, the melody of which was based on a nursery rhyme.[9] According to Angelou, the song's lyrics went through extensive alterations[10] and of its five original lines only the first two are unchanged:

My little bright moon  
shine on my footsteps  
so that I can go to school  
to learn to read and write  
to learn God's teachings.[11]

The rhyme had been included, in various forms, in Greek folk song collections by European scholars in the nineteenth century—Claude Fauriel (1824), Daniel Sanders (1844), Arnold

Passow (1860)<sup>[12]</sup>—but neither they nor the Greek Vlasios Skordelis, who published the song in a Greek journal in 1860, made any connection between the song and the Secret School myth.<sup>[13]</sup> That changed, however, in the 1870s and the association was repeated with increasing frequency.<sup>[14]</sup>

As Angelou shows, the Secret School narrative was perpetuated outside scientific historical scholarship, for there is a conspicuous absence, among Greek and non-Greek scholars alike, of any published mention of it.<sup>[15]</sup> One exception (especially glaring because it did not appear in any of the author's earlier writings) is in a book by G. Chassiotis, published in French in 1881, concerning public education in Greece after the fall of Constantinople.<sup>[16]</sup> The fact that the book was intended for European readers (it was published in Paris), toward whom a certain image of the Greeks had to be projected, reinforces the argument that the Secret School myth was intended as much for external as for internal consumption.

Whereas most historians conveyed their rejection of the Secret School construct with silence, some actively engaged in its repudiation. One of the first to do so was Dimitrios Kambouroglou, who in his three-volume *History of Athens* (1889) exposed the absence of any historical evidence for the existence of secret schools, and he mocked the incorporation of the children's song into the myth.<sup>[17]</sup> His claims, however, failed to avert acceptance of the myth as historical reality.<sup>[18]</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Secret School construct had acquired the aura of a sacred national symbol, and efforts at its repudiation by scholars such as Manuel Gedeon and Yannis Vlachoyannis in the 1930s and 1940s did not diminish its prestige.<sup>[19]</sup> Much of the myth's endurance is owed to its visualization by Nikolaos Gyzis in the 1880s.

Nikolaos Gyzis was born on the Aegean island of Tinos and was sent for his education to Athens in 1850. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts in 1864 and a year later, after receiving a scholarship, he left for Munich to attend the Royal Academy of Arts. He was offered a permanent teaching post at the Academy in 1888. Apart from two visits to Greece, one in 1872–74, the other in 1877, Gyzis spent the rest of his life in Munich. His work was well-known in Athens, however, since it was exhibited regularly there.<sup>[20]</sup>

Most of Gyzis's oeuvre through the mid-1880s falls within Genre painting, and during the first years of his stay in Munich these works dealt predominantly with German subjects. After his first visit to Greece, which included a trip to Asia Minor in 1873 with his childhood friend and fellow student in Athens, Nikiphoros Lytras (1832–1904),<sup>[21]</sup> Greek and "oriental" themes began to appear in his work. These were accompanied by the adoption of a brighter and more varied color range, away from the predominant browns and grays of his earlier Genre pictures. After the mid-1880s his work moved increasingly toward more progressive areas—specifically, Symbolism and *Jugendstil*—and he was among the first artists in Germany to produce posters. A small number of his paintings allude to Greek history from the Ottoman era and the War of Independence.

Gyzis is among the leading figures of what art historians have long referred to as the Greek "Munich School"—the first school proper of modern Greek art<sup>[22]</sup>—which was made up of artists who furthered their artistic studies in Munich. The Bavarian capital was the most common destination for young Greek artists from the mid-nineteenth century on, due to

the enthronement in 1833 of Ludwig I's son Otto as Greece's first king, Othon I, and close ties with Munich continued even after Othon's dethronement in 1862. Unlike Gyzis, most of the other members of the Munich School returned permanently to Greece and dominated the art world there well into the first decades of the twentieth century. The prevalent mode of painting associated with this group—and one which has been the predominant cause of much of the critical condemnation these artists received during the twentieth century—is that of Genre.<sup>[23]</sup>

Genre painting in Greece has come under the term *ithographia* (ἠθογραφία—often rendered in English as "ethography"), which refers as well to late-nineteenth-century Greek literature (i.e., prose) and is often translated as "study of manners" or "study of morals."<sup>[24]</sup> Genre painting is usually defined as such on iconographical grounds, that is, its subject matter is derived from daily life, especially (as with Greek *ithographic* painting) from that of peasants and the countryside in general. Despite of its iconographical content, however, it does not have any formalist ties with folk or popular art; rather, it is considered an academic genre.

Seventeenth-century Dutch art and German Biedermeier painting have been declared as the two main sources of Greek Genre painting. Miltiadis Papanikolaou (1978) claims that genre painters (*Genremaler*) avoid presenting the more serious side of reality, and choose instead to escape into an idealistic, even dreamlike, world.<sup>[25]</sup> Tonis Spiteris (1979) describes Greek Genre painting as the kind of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art that represented the ideals of the nascent Greek bourgeoisie.<sup>[26]</sup> It is interesting to note that while ancient (especially, Classical) Greece was the main reference point for the construction and negotiation of the modern Greek identity after the mid-eighteenth century, it was not classicizing history painting that became the main vehicle for this negotiation, as far as painting is concerned, but rather *ithographia*.

Historians have associated Greek Genre painting almost exclusively with the artists of the Munich School, and primarily with the art production of the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Nikiphoros Lytras's return to Greece from Germany in the mid-1860s is often seen as the turning point for Greek art's move toward Genre.<sup>[27]</sup> Lytras, who studied for a while with Gyzis in Munich, is often referred to as the father of nineteenth-century Greek painting. Upon his return to Greece, Lytras became professor of painting at the School of Fine Arts in Athens. He held the post for thirty-eight years, until his death, and was an important figure in the late-nineteenth-century Greek art scene. In addition to Genre painting, he occupied himself extensively (and successfully) with portraiture, a genre that, like *ithographia*, catered to the art demands of the bourgeoisie. It should be noted, however, that it was not so much the expectations of the Athenian (upper) middle class that gave rise to *ithographic* painting in Greece as it was the import of Genre painting from Munich, which conditioned—or, rather, formalistically defined—such demands.

By the time Lytras, Gyzis, and other Greek artists entered the Munich Academy, the earlier dominance of Peter Cornelius (1783–1867)—the Academy's director between 1824 and 1844—and his "grand manner," classicizing history painting had been replaced with that of Karl Theodor von Piloty (1826–1886), who taught at the Academy beginning in 1855 and was its director between 1874 and 1886. Piloty developed a less grandiose style of history painting, more anecdotal and supposedly faithful in its historical details. Genre painting was, it

seems, only a step away from this type of historical painting, a step that several of the Greek artists who were studying in Munich (most of whom came from a rural background) took willingly.

The flowering of *ithographia* in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century followed a period in Greek art in which artists had predominantly focused on contemporary history painting. Following the establishment of an independent state in the late 1820s, Greek artists produced works that dealt with the recent historical events of the War of Independence. While many of these artists were anonymous popular artisans, there were also some eponymous, more officially trained ones, such as Athanasios Iatridis (1798/99–1866), Theodoros Vryzakis (1814/19–1878), and Dionysios Tsokos (1814/20–1862). These three, in addition to several other artists in mid-nineteenth-century Greece, produced (despite different backgrounds, training, and formal influences) a body of work that had as its common denominator the subject of recent Greek history. It combined Romantic history paintings as well as historic genre scenes, the formal sources of academic and Romantic painting, Realism, Genre, and Greek folk art.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a sharp decrease in the number of works that dealt with the Greek Revolution. The Munich School dominated artistic developments, and the subject matter moved decisively in the direction of depictions of rural (supposedly) everyday life. A main reason for this change might be the fact that mid-century aspirations of enlarging the geographically limited new Greek state (aspirations that kept memories of the Revolution very much alive) were gradually replaced by the desires of the growing Athenian upper and middle classes for prosperity and enjoyment of life after decades of war, civil strife, and unrest. Their desires were based in part on an idealized and romanticized picture of the harsh life in the countryside that they had left behind, and Greek Genre painting largely supported, indeed catered to, such rose-colored views.

Nevertheless, works that alluded to recent history were still produced, including some by Gyzis. *The Secret School*, 1885–86 (fig. 1) is one. It depicts a bare, dark room in which five children sit around an old priest and are totally absorbed by the old man's words. His raised finger carries both religious and philosophical connotations, and his gentle, softly lit face exudes an aura of holiness. Behind the children sits a young man, who listens to the priest with similar attention; a rifle rests between his legs, indicating that the depicted activity is dangerous—he is there to protect the children in the case of discovery by the Turks. His youthful but virile figure alludes to the impending struggle of the Greeks for freedom and for the resurrection of their glorious past, as suggested by the large fragment of an ancient column against which two of the children rest.





Fig. 1 Nikolaos Gyzis, *The Secret School*, 1885–86. Oil on canvas. Emfietzoglou Collection, Athens (Misirli 1995) [\[larger image\]](#)

The compositional and formal elements of *The Secret School* are in line with the rest of Gyzis's Genre output. What sets it apart from other Genre historical works<sup>[28]</sup>—both his own and those by other artists—is its portrayal of a scene lacking any historical basis and its allusion to a period earlier than the subject matter of the rest of the historical painting output in Greece. In a letter dated early in 1886, Gyzis wrote about his painting: "I thought to show that time in Greece, during the Turkish rule, when schools were strictly forbidden, and functioned only in secrecy. . . . I wanted to present a mystical act, in a dark, underground place, with only a single ray of light coming through."<sup>[29]</sup> It is clear from these statements that Gyzis subscribed fully to the Secret School myth as it had been formulated by then. Based on information given by Gyzis's first biographer, Marcel Montandon, many historians refer to the artist's interest in Greek folk songs, which he supposedly copied in his (now destroyed) diary during his 1872–74 visit to Greece. One historian concludes that Gyzis must also have read Passow's collection of Greek folk songs (published in Leipzig in 1860),<sup>[30]</sup> which included the children's song *My Bright Little Moon* that had become associated with the Secret School myth.

Gyzis's *Secret School* was one of five of his works to be included in the 1888 annual Panhellenic Exposition of Athens. A reviewer mentions Gyzis's *Greek School at the Time of Slavery*,<sup>[31]</sup> which, since no other work by Gyzis deals with a similar subject, must be *Secret School*.<sup>[32]</sup> What is quite intriguing is the fact that even though the myth was well-established by the time of the exposition, there do not seem to be any other references to the painting in the press. By 1900, however, the painting was well on its way to becoming a national icon. That year, inspired by Gyzis's painting, the poet Ioannis Polemis (1862–1924) wrote "The Secret School,"<sup>[33]</sup> which, through its inclusion in school textbooks, served to further perpetuate the myth.

What had intervened between the 1888 exhibition and 1900 was the disastrous war of 1897, in which the Greek kingdom suffered a humiliating defeat in an ill-planned effort to liberate Crete from the Ottomans. Even though the following year, at the intervention of the Western powers, all Turkish soldiers left the island, the war had created a national psychological crisis that prompted a number of intellectuals and men of letters to call for a

cultural regeneration of Greece.[34] On a more populist level, the need to foster optimism demanded not only new symbols but also the reinforcement of national myths alluding to past glories.

In a memorial speech on the event of Gyzis's death in 1901,[35] Dimitrios Kaklamanos called the *Secret School* "the poem of the secret hope for the resurrection of the nation and for the freedom of the fatherland, which we feel that the old man is teaching the children, along with the alphabet." [36] That same year Kimon Michaelidis wrote, in similar terms, that the painting portrays "the Pain of Slavery which weigh[ed] down the Greek nation, along with the distant Hope for Freedom," [37] and he followed with a few lines from Polemis's poem. (Six years later, in 1908, he extolled the painting once again for its "deeply Greek" character.[38]) In 1902 Montandon declared that every classroom in Greece should have a copy of Gyzis's painting, which he referred to as a truly national work because of its subject matter.[39] By the 1920s, modernist painting in Greece was well consolidated, at first via pleinairism and (a mild) Impressionism, and shortly after via Expressionist and Fauvist landscape painting and images of interiors. Nevertheless, this did not put an end to the appeal of Gyzis's picture; *The Secret School* remained the main vehicle by which the myth on which it was based was perpetuated.

In a long commentary on the painting from 1925,[40] all the various strands of the narrative are brought together: The author talks of the great hardship suffered by the enslaved (Greek) nation, which included the suppression of all education by the "barbaric conquerors;" nevertheless, the "national consciousness of the race, and its traditions" were the "inextinguishable fire" out of which shone the torch of freedom. *The Secret School*, as well as other pictures by Gyzis, portrayed the "consciousness of the race" and its "traditions;" it portrayed a "heroic effort, of great political and spiritual importance," whereby the power of the spirit was set against the "violence of the tyrant." [41] The writer also includes the children's song that was associated with the myth, and he repeats Montandon's appraisal of Gyzis's painting. He claims, finally, that the source of Gyzis's inspiration was a small monastery on his home island of Tinos, which had been called "Secret School" during the Ottoman years. He maintains that the monastery was given this name because within it was a school in which twelve(!) monks taught local children "in secret." [42] The number of the monk teachers, however, indicates a much greater degree of educational activity than what is normally suggested by the small, underground, one-priest school of the myth. Angelou suggests that since there is no historical information about the time when the Secret School toponym arose (such as for the school on Tinos), it is possible that the scholarly tradition that invented the myth imposed itself retrospectively on the popular tradition.[43] No such qualms entered the mind of the above-quoted author, however: in 1922, three years prior to the publication of his commentary, Greece had experienced the worst military and social tragedy in its history as an independent modern state. The Asia Minor defeat (or "Catastrophe," as it has been called ever since) suffered in the hands of the Turkish army, and the consequent displacement from Turkey to mainland Greece of about one and a half million refugees, brought about a period of self-examination and introspection, as well as a desire for cultural and social regeneration, that was far more profound and enduring than what had followed the 1897 war.



By the 1940s, a new generation of painters, the so-called "Generation of the [Nineteen] Thirties," became established at the forefront of Greek painting. The aesthetic and ideological orientation of these artists called for the creation of an "autochthon modernism," namely, an art that would engage modernist trends in a creative dialogue with Greek traditions (Classical, Hellenistic, Byzantine, and popular). A prominent element in their discourse was the complete rejection of nineteenth-century high (as opposed to popular) art, especially of Munich School Genre painting, of which the *Secret School* is an example. Nevertheless, in 1943 D. Kallonas wrote that *The Secret School* proved Gyzis to be a "gentle praiser of Greek island life, and a melodic composer of everyday-life scenes, of the humble and pure people."<sup>[44]</sup> The painting's reputation was apparently still strong in the 1950s: the surrealist painter and poet Nikos Engonopoulos (1907–1985), who was a prominent member of the Generation of the Thirties, subtly included Gyzis's piece in his attack on nineteenth-century Greek painting when he declared that "gone forever are the 'middle ages' of childish, anti-painterly, *ithographia*, . . . of 'secret schools', and . . . of sugary sentimentalism."<sup>[45]</sup> This kind of attack did not deter the artist and critic E. Frantziskakis from claiming that Gyzis's work "provides a fine and moving album of Greek history" due to its subject matter, which is "drawn, principally, from the years of enslavement."<sup>[46]</sup> By this time both the Secret School myth and Gyzis's painting were so deeply embedded in the popular national consciousness that they were destined to endure regardless of historical, cultural, or social circumstances.

In an article on Gyzis published in the early 1970s,<sup>[47]</sup> art historian Yannis Papaïoannou claimed that even though *The Secret School* is not among Gyzis's greatest works, it transcends the boundaries of mere Genre painting because its subject deals with "psychological and spiritual heroism. Its historical weight causes [us to feel] a sacred affection, because it brings to [our] mind the harsh years of slavery, as well as the indomitable strength of national consciousness."<sup>[48]</sup>

In the 1980s art historian Chrysanthos Christou placed the painting within the phase of Gyzis's oeuvre in which he turned to the depiction of "typical moments and traditions of Greek life, in works where [the artist's] secret nostalgia for the distant homeland is transcribed into colour and . . . melodic line."<sup>[49]</sup> In the background information given for *The Secret School*, Christou refers to Gyzis's inspiration by the alleged "Secret School" monastery on Tinos, to the children's song, and to Polemis's poem.<sup>[50]</sup> Ultimately, Christou formally vindicates *The Secret School* by asserting that through a "rare combination of idealistic and realistic characteristics, Gyzis achieves an impressive immediacy and conviction of the whole [composition]."<sup>[51]</sup>

Such a formalistic appraisal has been rather rare, however, within the overall celebration of the painting, which mainly has taken place on thematic grounds. During the twentieth century, the dominant art-historical negotiation of nineteenth-century Munich School production has resulted, for the most part, in condemnation. In the middle decades of the century this condemnation was part of the discourse of the Generation of the Thirties, whose members accused Munich School artists of being contemptuous of Greek popular art. In the latter part of the century, their condemnation was the result of a constant art historiographical anxiety that is best described as the anxiety of the "periphery" in its relation to the "center." In other words, Greek art historians have consistently viewed the

Munich School as being responsible for slowing the progress of Greek art and delaying the advent of modernism in Greece. It is therefore intriguing that Gyzis's painting continues to receive praise.

This praise has been due to the picture's contribution to the national(ist) narrative of the Secret School, the endurance of which is demonstrated by the ongoing debate surrounding it. This endurance, however, makes the myth open to appropriations that are less than orthodox.

The myth of the Secret School was once again brought to the fore when Gyzis's painting came up for auction in December 1993. Although *The Secret School* had always remained in private collections, it was reprinted widely throughout the twentieth century and therefore was well-known even to those unfamiliar with nineteenth-century Greek art. When its inclusion in the first "Greek Sale" by Christie's, Athens, was announced, commentators in newspapers urged the Ministry of Culture to acquire the painting so that it would become, as part of the National Gallery's collection, the property of the people. The bidding rose beyond the Ministry's financial range, however, and it had to withdraw. The painting was finally sold to an anonymous buyer for a record bid of 170,000,000 drachmas (which, after Christie's fee, amounted to a total price of 187,500,000 drachmas, valued at about £400,000 at the time).[52] The initial lament for the lost opportunity on the part of the state to acquire the painting was soon replaced by euphoria when its buyer became known: he was a well-known Greek businessman who pledged that he would make the painting readily available for public exhibitions. True to his word, he sent *The Secret School* on a national tour; the painting was shown in various provincial towns all over Greece as well as in Cyprus. The tour received wide publicity and the painting was showered with eulogies. Its national significance was fully established.[53] In the words of one art historian, *The Secret School* is no longer merely a history-Genre work that portrays an aspect of Greek tradition and "history"; now it is regarded as a "national symbol of Hellenism"—and "justly so," he concluded.[54]

Gyzis's *Secret School* is the most widely recognized nineteenth-century Greek painting; this is due not only to its association with the Secret School myth, but to the various uses to which the picture has been put as well. Among the more recent ones, for example, has been its etching in 1996 on the reverse side of the new 200-drachmas paper bill issued by the Bank of Greece (fig. 2). On the front appears a portrait of Rhigas Velenstinlis (1757–1798), a poet, pamphlet writer, and revolutionary during the early efforts toward the liberation of Greece who was put to death by the Turks in 1798.[55] The cohabitation of an actual historical figure with an artist's rendition of an imaginary scene gave further impetus to the debate (conducted mostly in the print media) surrounding the Secret School myth. To the objections of a university professor regarding such "fabrications" of history, a lawyer responded by arguing that "the hypersensitivity of historiography . . . [should not forbid] the use of mythic symbols, [which are] indissolubly connected to national, historical, and popular traditions." [56]



Fig. 2, 200-drachmas bill, 1996. Bank of Greece [\[larger image\]](#)

Similar debates were instigated by the publication of Angelou's book in 1997. In a newspaper article published in 1998, the university professor and well-known scholar F. I. Kakridis lamented the possibility of a complete historical repudiation of the existence of secret schools, and pointed to what he considered to be unexplored possible sources of information that could provide the much-desired historical backing.<sup>[57]</sup> The historian Antonis Liakos's articulate response to Kakridis<sup>[58]</sup> probably did little to avert the latter's desperate effort to discover some historical substance behind the Secret School. An author of elementary- and secondary-school textbooks intervened in the exchange in order to point out the need to keep the debate open.<sup>[59]</sup> In another newspaper commentary, the author condemns the "fabrication" of history, of which the Secret School myth is among the most widespread examples; nevertheless, he concludes rather melancholically that historians have little influence on public opinion.<sup>[60]</sup>

Even if the historical repudiation of the Secret School became widely accepted, however, the myth most likely would endure and be open to new appropriations. A 1998 newspaper commentary, for example, on the present state of the former Greek higher education schools in Constantinople (Istanbul) was entitled "'Secret Schools' of 2000."<sup>[61]</sup> A more recent article on the *existence* of schools and the dissemination of the higher sciences in Ottoman Greece was illustrated with Gyzis's *Secret School*.<sup>[62]</sup> But to date, no appropriation has been as imaginative, or as heretical, as the one carried out by high school students during massive student demonstrations in late 1998–early 1999 against the government's "educational reform" program. The mythical plight of the "enslaved" Greek child of the Ottoman years, who sings to the moon in order to entertain his fears as well as to express his joy at the opportunity to "learn God's things [teachings]," was adapted to express the plight of the modern-day student who is crushed under the weight of the additional (private) tutoring and classwork needed to meet the demands of state education. On one of the placards held at a rally was drawn the caricature of a student who is bent down by the weight of his books and who sings under a large crescent moon (which bears the inscription "governmental reform") a parody of "my little bright moon" (fig. 3):



Fig. 3, [*My Little Bright Moon*] From student demonstrations, January 1999, Athens, Greece. *Kathimerini* [newspaper], 12 January 1999, pp. 1 (bottom; photo by Eurokinisi) and 4 (top; photo by Bardopoulos)  
[\[larger image\]](#)

my little bright moon  
shine on my footsteps  
so that I can go  
to the private institute  
so that I can hopefully graduate.[63]

---

Antonis A. Danos is an independent art historian currently living in Cyprus. He received his Ph.D. in Art History and Theory from the University of Essex in 2001. Most of his research is conducted in the areas of the history and theory of western art since the eighteenth century, focusing on modern Greek art and culture. He is especially concerned with issues of national-identity construction, historiography and modernity, and art criticism.

Email the author [adanos\[at\]cytanet.com.cy](mailto:adanos[at]cytanet.com.cy)

---

## Notes

All translations from Greek are mine. References given in full in the notes are not included in the bibliography that follows. All titles of Greek books and articles in the bibliography (as well as those included in the notes) are given in the original Greek followed by English translation in parentheses. Names of Greek journals and newspapers are given in transliteration.

Many thanks to Dr. Petra Chu and Ms. Mary Gladue for their very useful editorial suggestions.

[1] Smith 1998, pp. 45–46.

[2] John Hutchinson, "Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration," in Hutchinson and Smith 1994, pp. 123–24 (reprinted from Hutchinson's *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* [London, 1987]). The second part of the quote comes from Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth, 1976).

[3] Angelou 1997.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 13–18, and *passim*.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 19–23. Dimaras (1977) 1993, p. 482, n. 165/14, informs us that Kanellos's letters to Iken constitute the "essence" of the latter's book. Koraes was the dominant figure of Greek Enlightenment, which spans the second half of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth, up to the Greek Revolution of 1821. He settled in Paris in 1788 and established himself as an eminent scholar on ancient authors. Apart from critical editions of ancient texts—to which he affixed long introductory sections—Koraes published several pamphlets on current affairs, especially on contemporary Greece. Among these is the "Mémoire sur l'état actuel de la civilisation dans la Grèce," a transcript of a speech he delivered at the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme in January 1803. It is considered to be an important exposition of Greek Enlightenment views regarding nation-state construction, as well as a manifestation of the southeastern European adaptation of Enlightenment ideology. (Koraes's "Mémoire" has been translated into English in Kedourie 1971, pp. 153–88). On Greek Enlightenment, see Dimaras (1977) 1993 and Kitromilides 1994.

[6] Angelou 1997, pp. 22–23.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 28–30.

[8] From an 1863 speech by Konstantinos Frearitis, professor of Roman law at the University of Athens; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 30.

[9] The melody is that of the French nursery rhyme "Ah, vous dirais-je, Maman" (known in English as "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep"). To my knowledge no research has traced the chronological appearance of the rhyme's melody in Greece, something that would shed further light on the origins of the Secret School myth.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[11] "Φεγγαράκι μου λαμπρό/ φέγγε μου να περπατώ/ να πηγαίνω στο σκοτεινό/ να μαθαίνω γραμμάτα/ του Θεού τα πράματα." *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 33–34.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 34ff.

[15] See *ibid.*, pp. 39–42.

[16] Chassiotis 1881; see Angelou 1997, pp. 46–50.

[17] See Angelou 1997, pp. 51–52.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[19] For their works, see *ibid.*, pp. 13–15, and *passim*; for other, similar repudiations of the Secret School, see pp. 71–72.

[20] For Gyzis, see, among others, Kalligas 1981, Misirli 1995, and Kounekaki 1997.

[21] For more on Lytras, see text accompanying note 27 below.

[22] The Greek term that normally translates as "modern Greek" is "Neohellenic" (νεοελληνικός), so it does not necessarily carry specific modernist connotations. "Modern Greek art" normally refers to Greek art from the late eighteenth century on, and does not refer specifically to modernist art, which first appears in Greece at the turn of the nineteenth century.

[23] See Papanikolaou 1978, Spiteris 1979, Christou (1981) 1993, Xydis 1984, and Kotidis 1995.

[24] For a brief discussion on, actually, the untranslatability of the term, see Beaton 1982–83, p. 105 (referring specifically to literature).

[25] Papanikolaou 1978, p. 28.

[26] Spiteris 1979, vol. 1, p. 296.

[27] Papanikolaou 1978, p. 35.

[28] Two other historical works of his are: *After the Destruction of Psara* (ca. 1896, Athens, National Gallery, 460), which follows the Romantic tradition of the storm-tossed boat (see Eitner 1955) and alludes to Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819); and *Doxa [Glory] of Psara* (ca. 1898–99, Athens, private collection), an allegory that combines elements from Symbolism and *Jugendstil*; it has a nineteenth-century Greek literary source, but no direct visual reference.

[29] Gyzis's letter, written from Munich, to his father-in-law, Nikolaos Nazos, dated 24 January 1886; in Drosinis and Koromilas 1953, pp. 138–39.

[30] Montandon 1902, cited in Kalligas 1981, pp. 50–51.

[31] Rok (1888) 1938, pp. 695–97; this is also confirmed by Misirli 1995, p. 354. Angelou (1997, p. 62) claims that Gyzis was very keen to show *The Secret School* in Greece, but he erroneously



gives 1900 as the date of the work's first showing. Gyzis did participate in exhibitions in Greece in both 1899 and 1900, but showed other works.

[32] Gyzis referred to the painting as *The Secret School* soon after its completion—in a letter written from Munich to his father-in-law, for instance, dated 7 April 1886 (Drosinis and Koromilas 1953, p. 139).

[33] The poem was included in Polemis's collection *Αλαβαστρα* (Alabastra) (Athens, 1900); see Christou (1981) 1993, p. 133, n. 428; and Angelou 1997, p. 62.

[34] See, for example, Vitti 1987, pp. 309–12. The most comprehensive critical discourse on Greek regeneration was conducted by the critic Periklis Yannopoulos (1869–1910); see Danos 2002, esp. pp. 86–93.

[35] Kaklamanos 1901.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[37] Kimon Michaelidis, "Νικόλαος Γυζής (Nikolaos Gyzis)," in *Panathinaia* 1901, p. 404.

[38] Michaelidis 1907–8, p. 354.

[39] Quoted in Angelou 1997, p. 61.

[40] Kalogeropoulos and Sochos 1925, pp. 13–46. This particular commentary is unattributed.

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 25–28.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[43] Angelou 1997, pp. 16–17.

[44] Kallonas 1943, p. 21.

[45] Nikos Engonopoulos, Response to a 1956 survey by the journal *Zygos*, reprinted in Kaphetsi 1992, p. 348.

[46] Frantziskakis 1957, p. 21.

[47] Papaïoannou 1974.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 155. Papaïoannou wrote this while Greece was still under a military dictatorship (1967–74). It might be interesting to consider whether his description of *The Secret School* amounts to a subscription to the Junta's reactionary ideology ("fatherland–religion–family") or whether it was actually covert criticism, and a tribute to the people's "indomitable strength" despite adverse conditions.

[49] Christou (1981) 1993, p. 54.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 133, n. 428.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[52] Another painting by Gyzis—*The Grandmother's Fable*, 1884 (Athens, private collection)—also fetched 187,500,000 drachmas in an auction ("Greek Sale VI") held by Christie's on 15 December 1998. Interestingly, *Grandmother's Fable* has often been associated with the "slavery–liberation" discourse next to *The Secret School*.

[53] Before purchasing *The Secret School*, Prodromos Emfietzoglou was relatively unknown as an art collector, although he began collecting in the 1960s. Today he has amassed a large collection of modern Greek art, which recently was housed in a permanent exhibition space in Maroussi, a suburb of Athens. (A catalogue of the collection, *The Emfietzoglou Collection: Modern and Contemporary Greek Art*, was published in 1999.) Thus this painting was, among many other things, a means for the acceptance and establishment in the art world of a previously unknown collector.

[54] Miltiadis Papanikolaou, "Ο ζωγράφος και τα μεγάλα μουσεία (The painter and the great museums)," in Kounekaki 1997, pp. 30–31, quote on p. 31.

[55] See Zakythinis 1976, pp. 157–67, and Kitromilides 1994, chap. 5, pp. 278–79.

[56] Vassilis Kremmydas, "Αυτοκλητοι διδασκαλοι Ιστορίας (Self-proclaimed teachers of history)," *Ta Nea*, 8 June 1999, p. 4; and (the letter of response) Christos D. Tzavaras, "Για την υπερευαισθησία της ιστοριογραφίας (Concerning the hypersensitivity of historiography)," *Ta Nea*, 19 June 1999, p. 78.

[57] F. I. Kakridis, "Μύθος η θρύλος το Κρυφο σχολείο (Secret school: Myth or legend?)" *To Vima*, 22 February 1998, p. B11. Kakridis's example of "unexplored" sources was French journalist René Puaux's reports from Albania, between 1913–14 [!].

[58] Antonis Liakos, "'Είναι μύθος το 'κρυφο σχολείο' (Is the 'secret school' a myth?)" *To Vima*, 8 March 1998, p. B10.



- [59] Th. S. Katsoulakos, "Για το 'Κρυφο Σχολειο' (On the 'Secret School')," *To Vima*, 5 April 1998, p. B10.
- [60] Pantelis Boukalas, "Ποση και ποια ιστορια (Which, and how much of, history)," *Kathimerini*, 22 March 1998, p. 47.
- [61] Panos Lezes, "Κρυφα Σχολεια' του 2000 ('Secret Schools' of 2000)," *Kathimerini*, 29 March 1998, p. 30.
- [62] Th. Nikolaïdis, "Η αναγεννηση της ελληνικης παιδειας (The renaissance of Greek education)," *To Vima*, 26 March 2000, pp. B10–11.
- [63] "Φεγγαρακι μου λαμπρο / φεγγε μου να περπατω / να πηγαινω φροντιστηριο / μπας και παρω απολυτηριο."

## Illustrations



Fig. 1 Nikolaos Gyzis, *The Secret School*, 1885–86. Oil on canvas. Emfietzoglou Collection, Athens (Misirli 1995) [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, 200-drachmas bill, 1996. Bank of Greece [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, [*My Little Bright Moon*] From student demonstrations, January 1999, Athens, Greece. *Kathimerini* [newspaper], 12 January 1999, pp. 1 (bottom; photo by Eurokinisi) and 4 (top; photo by Bardopoulos)  
[\[return to text\]](#)