

Theophilos the Painter

He was a daydreamer, short, pale and rather sickly, but his passion was to be a hero.

Theophilos Hatzimichael was born in the Mytilene suburb of Vareia in 1873. Before being “discovered” by Stratos Eleftheriadis, better known as Teriade, he would simply beg for water colors and a place to paint...a white plastered wall, a door, a window...maybe a piece of canvas, if he was for pay, only a plate of food in return for his art.



He was an odd little man, who loved to wear the white kilts worn by the Greek Infantry of Evzones. Because of this, he was nicknamed “Tsolias,” the Greek word for these soldiers.

His painting depicted scenes from history, mythology, nature and everyday life. They were both primitive and expressive, with wonderful water color combinations.

In 1927-28, at the age of 55, he took up residence in a huge plane tree in the village of Karini, near the mountain village of Agiassos.



The tree is still there and you can purchase copies of his paintings for next to nothing, while enjoying a delectable lunch at the taverna. You can also still see his paintings on the

white plastered wall of a building on the grounds. There is a Greek poem, which I’ve loosely translated here, referring to the time he lived in

that tree. It is written from two points of view...Savvas the Hunchback, who lived in a small home on the property, and Theophilos himself.

The Old Man Plane Tree of Karini

Savvas the Hunchback of Antoniou

*One summer day, as the sun was setting,
a little soul of God came asking for help.*

*I opened up the door for him; I accepted him near me.
At one table we ate together, along with my children.*

*My home was small, and would not fit all of us.
Theophilos inside the Plane Tree lived.*

*At one table we ate together, along with my children.
At sleep we separated, he slept away from me.*

Theophilos

*I am Theophilos that lived near them.
And for years they offered me their warmth.*

*Sweet bread, sweet wine, and even sweet company,
At Savva's the Hunchback, I lived very nicely.*

*And I, in turn, made him many offers;
The labors (work) of Karini are all mine.*

*Mementos (souvenirs) to remain for everyone who sees them
And maybe they'll give me a blessing if they like them (me).*

Although his works are now incredibly valuable, and are insured by Lloyd's of London for astronomical amounts, Theophilos died in 1934 of food poisoning, alone and not very famous, still wearing his kilts. The museum bearing his name was opened over 30 years after his death, in 1965, financed and directed by Teriade, the publisher and editor who had discovered him.



Stratis Myrivilis, the famous Lesvian author of "The Mermaid Madonna," wrote about Theophilos in his book, "Vasilis Arvanitis" in 1934, the same year the painter died:

"He was a strange man and people thought him half crazy. He wasted away poor and alone in his unwashed kilts. You might wonder how an islander came to be wearing kilts. Well it was his passion. He used to long for the annual carnival so he could wear his kilts out of doors. Sometimes he would dress up as a Macedonian, sometimes as a soldier of the Greek kilted regiment. He was a short, pale sickly man but nevertheless there burned within him a passionate desire for the heroic stature which God had denied him. Sometimes at carnival he would gather his friends together and they would all dress up as Olympic gods. Theophilos would always be Ares, the god of war. He would wear a crown of gold-colored cardboard and carry a wooden spear with its point covered in

silver paper and a round shield made of a thin board. On the shield would be painted the head of Medusa with her snake hair. Because he suffered from alopecia the hairs of his mustache were sparse and he would wear a false moustache made of tow, which he would twist fiercely as he walked behind the red mantle of Zeus.

More often he would wear a kilt and carry an old curved yataghan at his side or he would paint murals of the Greek War of Independence. It was thus he appeased his passion.

He left for Pelion on the mainland where he found work as a shepherd, and there, whenever he came across a mill or a coffeehouse with plastered walls, he would cover them with murals. He wore his kilts all the time there, even though the local people wore breeches and thus he earned himself the nickname Tsolias. On his return from Volos he threw away his shepherd's crook and earned himself a living any way he could, begging for a piece of canvas or a white wall where he could paint his pictures. He didn't ask for money; only a plate of food and a supply of water-colors. His passion was to paint heroic themes, events in the life of Ali Pasha, and hunting scenes. When he was dead the critics of Athens and Paris proclaimed him a great painter and his pictures became extremely valuable".

We will have the opportunity to visit the Theophilus Museum during the Southern Route tour, and see the hollowed out tree in which he lived, as well as some of his original, albeit faded, paintings on the wall of a building on the grounds, during the South Central tour.

