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Krystallia Markaki

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# Toy Design in the Papastrateios School of Interwar Athens

## Toys School

Krystallia Markaki  
*PhD candidate, Panteion University*

### Abstract

This study focuses on toys designed and produced at the Papastrateios Vocational Public School of Toys and Decorative Arts in Athens – the only school founded in Greece to create playthings, during the interwar era, in order to reveal the artistic nature of toys. At a time when playthings were either imported or poor replicas of foreign originals, these toys, tokens of children’s talent, exemplified the principles of the labour school movement, as conceptualized by the League for Women’s Rights, who founded the School, and as realised in the practices of the contemporary painters and sculptors that staffed the School. Irrespective of whether the toys were made of wood, cloth, unbreakable paste, tin or paper, industrial or handicraft, countryside or urban, a means of instruction and/or an object of vocational training, they all assumed an artistic form which crystallized a particular understanding of Greek identity. This study examines the ways these modern Greek toys which served both tradition, as conceptualized by Benjamin, and modernity, and drew their inspiration from nature, the Nike of Paionios, the Kore of Euthydikos, Byzantine costumes and Hellenistic terracotta. These toys became instantiations of high art as expressed by children, not only in material but also in social and cultural terms and eventually were awarded first prize at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition.

Keywords: toys, wooden toys, Toys School, cloth toys, artistic toys

### A picture from the Toys School

Picture an art labour school in the early 1930’s in a refugee neighbourhood in Athens<sup>1</sup> – a public vocational training school which by teaching, apart from the

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<sup>1</sup> The article constitutes a part of my dissertation: *Παιζοντας με τα αθύρματα στον Μεσοπόλεμο. Μια κοσμοπολίτικη ελληνικότητα*, [Playing with playthings in interwar Greece. A transnational Greek-

general curriculum, drawing and plastic arts, sought to turn its students not into painters and sculptors but toy makers and decorators. The School's intake were children aged between 12 and 18 years, primary school graduates of predominantly refugee or popular strata descent. The boys and girls followed a three year study program and actively contributed in the daily operation, management and functioning of the School. The school was equipped with teaching and production labs in which the graduates, as salaried artisans, manufactured artistic pedagogical toys and decorative items for sale.

The Papastrateios School of Toys and Decorative Arts was founded in 1928 by the League for Woman's Rights<sup>2</sup> (the most radical women's association of the time). The Papastratos brothers, tobacco industrialists after whom the School was named, donated funds for the school's facilities and equipment. Children considered the school their second home.

As reported in a document located in the School's archives, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1932, two Greek Agricultural Society workers arrived to help the students plant trees in their yard. A book which contained students' drawings and published in 1933 by Spyros Vasileiou – a teacher of free drawing and prominent Greek painter – described how the students were thrilled when, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, his proposed inspiration for that day's lesson was the planting of trees (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 20).

A drawing of the School's façade, made by a first grade student, captures the event: some children were digging, others planting or cleaning, the Agricultural Society workers were somewhere among them, Mr. Costas – the janitor – was pushing a wheelbarrow with soil, while others were carrying the bread for lunch. "Digging had opened up his appetite and he still recalls the hot lunch he enjoyed on that occasion" commented the teacher, adding that the student had even drawn the truck which had brought the food (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 20).

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ness]. The documentation for the Papastrateios School of Toys and Decoration derive from its unpublished and unclassified archive. These include the Λογοδοσία του 1932 [Accountability Report of 1932], in which Anna Stamatelatou, in her capacity as head teacher, greeted graduates and took stock of the school's first year (thereafter Accountability Report 1932), the Ιστορικό της Παπαστρατείου [History of Papastrateios School] (thereafter History of School) compiled in 1951 by the then head teacher, Maria Anagnostopoulou, and other records and loose documents, including price catalogues, are currently kept at the 1o Vocational High School of Imittos.

<sup>2</sup> For the League for Woman's Rights (LWR) and its members see: Samiou (2013); Avdela & Psarra (1985).



Figure 1. The Planting

For the purposes of this paper, attention is paid to one of the implications of this drawing: the transformation of children's experience to include raw materials for the construction of artistic toys or, alternatively, of toys as works of art, created by children.

**“The teachers of the School teach them, first and foremost, to look around them” (Accountability Report, 1932)**

The teachers of the School, as Avra Theodoropoulou, president of the LWR reported, “were young artists who worked innovatively and without prejudice” (1931). All were members of the “Art Group 1930” (Matthiopoulos, 1999, p. 454), anti-intellectuals, modernists, some adopting a more abstract approach, others neoclassical, who sought to capture their subjects with bold forms and opposed the conservative artistic elite at the institutional, social and economic levels. Sculptors Michael Tombros, Antonis Sohos, Kostis Papachristopoulos, Titsa Chrisochoidou, painters Maria Anagnostopoulou, Spyros Vasileiou and decorator Penelope Diamantopoulou, among others, brought into the classrooms non-conventional trends and conveyed life knowledge to the children. This familiarized the children with their surroundings, in particular, nature which they were unable to experience other than through a “series of black dots and printed drawings” (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 14).

Aesthetic education serves the building of an attitude, an ideology which arises out of new school structures, the Labour School. The principles incorporated; action as a goal/means of learning, use of resources other than textbooks, emphasis

on children's skills and abilities rather than whole-classroom teaching, project based evaluation, learning-by-doing, cross-curricular teaching, problem solving, collaborative culture and respect for children's creativity, making use of the school's forms and norms, drawing and handcraft as integral school activities, self-directed learning, and initiative taking as the children's mode of working. The new pedagogical principles and the theory of playful labour blurred the boundaries between work and play.<sup>3</sup>

Visiting and working in museums or taking educational trips to the cinema, circus, shipyard, countryside or seaside brought students in contact with quotidian elements of civilization, both "traditional" and foreign, contemporary and past, and "triggered vivid reactions" which later crystallized in "human characters and stylized animals" (Accountability Report, 1932). The vivid expression of spontaneous reactions demonstrated the awakening of the creative powers of children's souls. The students' awakening stemmed from their personal impressions while "the subtle guidance of teachers" (Vocational School, 1930) served to mitigate imitation or imposition. The only instruction students received, from their teachers was, "Go on. Freely design whatever you wish" (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 29). Imagination, inventiveness and humour did the rest.

, The students built decorative or humoristic compositions using raw materials taken from nature or drawing from memory. Occasionally, a teacher brought them an artichoke, or asked them to illustrate Christmas carols or their recollections from a zoo which they had visited. On one occasion, a child brought a frog into the classroom which acted as a catalyst for giraffe drawings, children singing Christmas carols, frog weddings, Turkish and Christian frogs or the planting of trees, as mentioned previously (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 22).

Interestingly, this incident, as part of an organised free drawing class, did not result in the creation of a frog toy, however, the ice-cream seller that waited for children outside the School<sup>4</sup>, during the summer, was fashioned into a small coloured wooden figurine. Having drawn the ice-cream seller, the children made a clay mould, in the plastic arts lab, carved the wood in the woodworking lab and, finally, painted it either with an airbrush<sup>5</sup> or by hand, in the decorative lab. The

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<sup>3</sup> For labour school see Kandirou (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Photo of Papastrateios façade, from Aggeliki Nafpliotou archive, who taught drawing in the School in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. She kindly shared it with the author along with her memories during the summer of 2014.

<sup>5</sup> From interviews of Adamantia Nafpliotou, School Head during the interwar era, and Maria Argyriadi, toy-collector, who allowed me to use it for which I am most grateful.

drawing, which was praised by the school's Artistic Committee, eventually became a toy, reproduced in the production lab, and found its way into the marketplace.



Figure 2. The Ice-Cream Seller



Figure 3. The Wooden Ice-Cream Seller

The same process applied to the building of all of the toys: an idea formed by the student's experience or surroundings, was captured on paper, and later in a clay, plaster, paper or metal mould and, finally, painted, decorated or dressed depending on the type of toy.

The Toys School attempted to establish a market for toys which were both Greek and artistic in nature. In interwar Greece, the toy market primarily consisted of imported toys (for well-to-do families), poor replicas of foreign originals (which were botched and trivial) produced in a few local workshops (Conference Proceedings, 1928) or festival toys (Argyriadi, 2008, p. 122).

The painter Maria Anagnostopoulou, who had been trained in Vienna, Paris, Milan and Turin, brought books and albums with dolls' pictures and patterns, contributed her expertise in European toy-making, in particular, the Lenci doll (Argyriadi, 2008, p. 165). The Lenci doll cast and mould had been assigned to Adolfo Mugnai, an Italian, while Henrik Hanne, a German graduate of the Munich Fine Arts School, who brought his toy construction experience and toy samples, oversaw the school's wooden toys department.

The tobacco industrialists, eager to support both popular and traditional arts (History of School), equipped the School with modern machinery necessary for the construction of wooden toys: lathe, router, drill, smoothing plane, saws, similarly, toy-making tools used to fashion cloth, paper, and metal.

Unavailable tools or materials were "invented", for example, the unbreakable pasta for the doll's head by the sculptor Antonis Sohos, later became professor at the Supreme School of Fine Arts in Athens and his student Xanthos Kontarides (History of School).

Voice mechanisms, springs, shafts, propellers and wind up mechanisms were imported from German and Austrian sources, like, Paul Weiss, Margarete Steiff, A. Herzmansky, and A.Krautzberger.. From Turin or domestic import agencies, hair and cloth were imported for the Lenci doll.

Having these mechanisms and materials at their disposal, in conjunction with the children's talent, they created the imperatives of contemporary artistic movements, like the Hands and Crafts movement which required the use of everyday items, apart from handy, elegant, simple, traditional, and, in a sense, anti-industrial.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the toys produced were plain, unpretentious and, clearly, inspired by Greek tradition (Adakritos, 1933). This manifested the modernistic stance of the School's art teachers and their unconscious ideas regarding the sublimity of children's art (Lidakis, 1976, p. 375), as well as, their conscious adoption of the Ancient Greeks' sense of modesty, harmony and Doric simplicity, as testified by the patterns taught by Vasileiou and the explicit Ancient Greece influences on all of the School's sculptors (Pavlopoulos, 1994, p. 29).

## **The toys**

### ***(Cloth, paper and past)***

The dolls came in many sizes – between 25cm and 100cm tall – and described as 'modern'. The children have made both character or boudoir dolls, and dolls that represent everyday characters like drunkard, gypsy lady, or dolls dressed in Greek traditional costumes. They also produced shop-window dolls and puppets (School Archives).

The doll's head was constructed from compressed paper or cloth (imported felt or linen in a leather colour) mixed with gum or glue suitable for stuffing or made from unbreakable pasta – to ensure the dolls would not break and mitigate the little girls crying (Nafpliotou interview). The body consisted of a lining from cotton, felt, batiste, calico, flannel or linen and the limbs made from hay, cotton, vegetable fibre or grated cork in various compositions. The hair, straight or curly, often "made in France", was imported in brunette, blonde, black or white (for grandmothers and Santa Claus) skeins and sewn onto the head or attached as a wig.

The construction required additional materials like cardboard, wire, a wind up mechanism for the head and occasionally, a voice mechanism.

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<sup>6</sup> For artistic movements see MacCarthy (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Hand-written note, undated, probably from the 1930's, in the unclassified School's archive.

Workers did not specialize in one item, hair-body-head, but each girl had to learn the whole process. To build a doll, we started with free drawing and Spyros Vasileiou taught us to create a pattern. Later we used our own pre-made models taken from books which they had brought from the Lenci's and, on this basis, we made our own variations. After the doll was complete, we started drawing again, painting series of mouths and eyes. Eyes looking forwards, right or left, and we added some make up onto the cheek, we rubbed some red crayon. We made faces with happy or sad eyebrows (Nafpliotou interview).

Finally, the costumes and accessories were added. The costumes were predominantly sewn and painted by the children, it may be interesting to note, that some were airbrushed with colours and patterns which the children had created during their free drawing lessons. Vasileiou taught the children to give form to their ideas, by borrowing patterns from nature "the way the ancients did when they formed moulds out of a thorn or a snail or the way peasant women do out of branches and flowers" (Asteriadis & Vasileiou, 1933, p. 29). The younger children were inspired by the dots on the frog, which had been brought into the class (p. 22).

The patterns for the traditional costumes were inspired by Aggeliki Chazimichali's (a distinguished folklorist of the time) books, from city museum visits, where costumes were on display, as well as from everyday life. The costumes included examples of bourgeois or peasant women, women from Hydra, Crete, Macedonia, Mani, Corfu, Arta, Pogoni, Trikeri or Salamis, dressed in "national" costumes. Also depicted were Amalia (named after the Queen Amalia who used to wear "traditional Greek" costumes with western accessories<sup>8</sup>), the Evzone (whose costume has numerous connotations), several of these ladies' companions and the man from Mani.



Figure 4. Dolls in National Costume

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<sup>8</sup> For traditional Greek Costumes see Papantoniou (2000).



The modern doll series included a boy in a velvet navy costume, baby dolls, girls in felt dresses, with wreathes, gymnastics and pyjama costumes, simple or luxurious dresses (made from organdie), gypsy woman's dresses, and so forth.

The retail price was not contingent upon the quality, amount of labour or similar criteria, but rather on the size of the doll and the cost of the costume. While many of the dolls were subject to identical design and manufacturing processes the price varied greatly due to the differing costs of lace, organdie, silk, baize, velvet, taffeta, flannel, calico, or alpaca; for example, an Amalia doll made of taffeta was priced at 285 drachmas, of organdie – 212 drachmas –, a Cretan girl with a Cabot costume – 157 drachmas –, a gypsy woman made of alpaca – 63 drachmas.

The everyday characters included an old lady (with or without distaff), the Vlach (with or without crook), man from Urla, national guardian with kilt, islander with knickers, milkman, peasant, butcher, shepherd, peanut seller, gypsy woman and, finally, a child, all made from stockings. In addition, a drunkard and a villager, made from either stocking or compressed paper.



Figure 5. The Drunkard (... with a Donkey, a Pig and an Elephant)

The series also included animals; "exotic" and domestic, giraffes and donkeys; both made from stocking or compressed paper.

The Fasoulis and other figures featured in the school's puppet shows, undoubtedly allude both to Ancient Greece and contemporary pedagogical theories, as the founders of the school themselves claim. The puppet shows, as a spectacle, and the children's puppets, as tangible, drew on a Greekness, whose origins could be traced back to antiquity or, more precisely, borrowed from that time. The reason figures like Fasoulis, Punch or Pulcinella were common in other countries as well, was due to these patterns having been mediated through ancient Greek theatre (Accountability Report, 1932). The puppets, both villains and heroes, are uti-

lised for fun and entertainment, in a manner reminiscent of the ancient jumping jacks and heroes of ancient drama.

There is an animal range, which included; donkeys (in two sizes), rabbits, pigs, cats, dogs and ducks (velvet) – all of which animals were to be found in the domestic setting. Additionally, cinema and postcards familiarised students with foreign animals, which were the basis for; flannel elephants and giraffes, and crocodiles made of felt.

The animals were also constructed from; muflon, canvas, alpaca, flannel, outre, some of which are used as bomboniere.

### The wooden toys

Children made toys using plain wood or linden as found on the lamb, goat, giraffe, donkey, lion and cow. Some were single-pieced, others included separate heads and all had wheels. In the same category, due to the way they move – dragged or pushed – which included wagons, cars and trains. Several figurines were manufactured using the same materials and mechanisms; some, alluding to domestic or foreign modernity, depicted a working parent (moving legs), a peasant with a harrow that works in the field, or a maid with a wheelbarrow (moving hands). Some other toys allude to nature or quotidian, domestic or foreign, for example, a goose shepherd and his goose with moving limbs, a donkey with a moveable head etc. Typical of this category, is a working wooden loom which comes in two sizes (40x30x25 cm and 55x35x30 cm) representing tradition and connotes technological modernization. This may also bring to mind the contemporary sewing machine-toy, an exemplar of the industrial age.

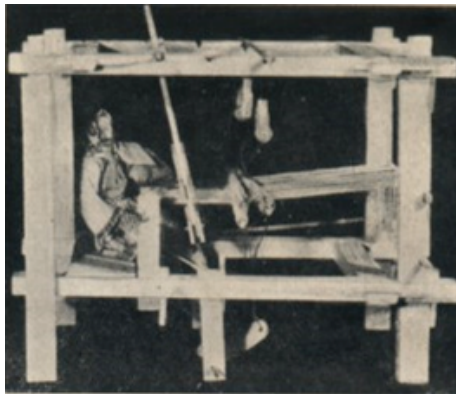


Figure 6. The Loom

The mechanical toy category includes; a jumping Mickey Mouse, a swimmer (well-known interwar toy) which mimics a swimming movement, a jumping donkey, twisting rabbit, and a jumping man etc.



Figure 7. Jumping Donkey



Figure 8. Four - Wheel car

Adopting the Froebelian mode of instruction with an industrial twist, the School produced the Froebel gifts themselves, but also “My Buildings”, the box of cubes used in various construction sets, like “My Printing House”(a box with letters and numbers), “My Village” (a set with 35 pieces including houses, churches, mountains and trees), “My Island” ( a 40 piece set (including houses and boats), “My Jungle” (a box with 10 wild animals) or “Noah’s Ark” (Germany’s toy producing flagship) (Benjamin, 1930, p. 112). This category included; a dollhouse with furniture (bookcases, tables, beds with mattresses, coloured or batik sheets and pillows, chests, dresser with mirrors etc.). The School also produced assembled toys like the “Wagon with the Driver” (comprised of 30 pieces), a “Peasant House” and board games, like checkers, and a tombola, in either wooden or papers boxes.

Apart from the carved toys, others like the boat, with the iron parts or metal keel, were fashion on a lathe, similarly the walking man, shepherd, milkman, man with the crook, and several animals. Interestingly, fir cones were used as raw ma-

materials to build storks, roosters and ducks. The metal parts were fashioned in the blacksmith's workshop. The blacksmiths produced some of their own toys. Due to limited space, these and cotillion toys were not included in this paper.

Finally, outdoor toys included; swings with fish, dolphin, horse or bird seats, rubber rollers, part metal rollers, horse on a pike, cat in a pitch fork, and sports equipment, for example, various sizes of croquet mallets, rackets, bats etc.

### **Expression of the beautiful and symmetry**

The toys were made by young talented artisans that "created according to the ancient [Greek] meaning of the word... with direct emotional contact between the artisan and the work of art, the producer and the product" (Panayiotopoulos as cited in the History of School). The toys included; original pieces and replicas (primarily of the Lenci doll), artistic or *blasé*, inspired by nature or technology, mobile or immobile, compact or assembled, indoors or outdoors, in a set or singular, large or miniature, human figurines, animals or objects, cheap or expensive, made of wood, tin, paper (simple or compressed), hay, string, fir cone, pasta, cloth, wool, pearl or clay.

Journalists praised the toys as works of art, as children's masterpieces of design, harmony and execution, as expressions of the beautiful and symmetrical as revealed by children's activity (Adakritos, 1933). The toys were sold like fresh bread in the school's exhibitions, both permanent and periodic, and in the school shop, as well as in country markets.

The School presented their toys at international European exhibitions receiving numerous awards – Grand Prize 1933 and 1934, International Exhibition of Thessaloniki; Grand Prize in the non-competitive section of the same exhibition; Diploma in the Bari exhibition 1936; Gold Medal in the International Exhibition of Paris, 1937 (History of School).

The enthusiastic reception of these toys, by the domestic and international press of the time may sound both romanticized and exaggerated, yet, it needs to be stressed, the Papastrateios products constitute crystallizations not only of an artistic and educational process but primarily of popular tradition, whose origins can be traced back to Ancient Greek tradition and its inherent sense of simplicity, unpretentiousness, modesty and harmony.

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