

MODERN ODYSSEYS

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract painting. It features bold, expressive brushstrokes in a rich palette of reds, oranges, yellows, greens, and blues. The composition is dynamic, with swirling, organic shapes that evoke a sense of movement and depth, reminiscent of a seascape or a dramatic landscape. The colors are layered and textured, creating a sense of volume and light.

GREEK AMERICAN ARTISTS OF THE 20TH CENTURY



70. Costa Vavagiakis
Allison II, 1996
 Oil on canvas, 25 x 24 inches
 Private collection

*"I think my ambivalence [about being neither fully Greek nor fully American] is compounded by the fact that my parents haven't assimilated well. I feel displaced, or, better, not placed, neither here nor there. The ambivalence ... has also provided a need for expression in my work. The way it manifests itself is a need to get intimate, to connect to the people I paint. It can help add an emotional component to my experience and my work."*¹

The parents of Costa Vavagiakis emigrated from Crete to the United States in 1956; his father worked as a carpenter. When Costa was seven years old he was taken to visit Greece.

I especially remember going to the museum at Delphi and seeing the *Charioteer* bronze. I was fascinated by it and remember staring at it for a long time. I remember the creases in the fabric of his garment. I remember his glass eyes. I was transfixed almost. The volumetric wholeness that I strive after in my painting is in part influenced by Greek sculpture, from my first experience with the *Charioteer* to the later study of Phidias and Praxiteles.

In spite of the fact that no one else in the family had any links to the arts, his parents were supportive of Vavagiakis's aesthetic drive, though "not totally understanding." In New York, he attended the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design and did nocturnes and cityscapes and interiors and still lifes.

It was the mid-1980s. I had some successes. I had a gallery. It was good, okay? But it wasn't even close to what I wanted to do. I started working in these acrylics and doing monochromatic busts—they were grisailles and a little under life-size—and I realized I was very much into sculptural form and it was like seeing the retrospective of Jacques Lipchitz.

In his teens, Vavagiakis saw a Lipchitz retrospective (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as he recalls),

and I was just blown away. I remember thinking this was what I wanted to do— to pursue art in this way— to give my life to that. Art would be a means to an end. It would be a means to God or understanding. So that was why I started getting back to the figure in the late 1980s or '90s.

Vavagiakis's portraits are superealist images of people he knows well. Through the precision of his technique, he captures the details of physical appearance, while at the same time suggesting a revealing psychological dimension; his sense of sculptural form imparts a solid presence that is both sensual and startlingly matter-of-fact.



71. Costa Vavagiakis

Arthur, 1997

Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

Collection of D. H. Putnam and S. W. Kellison