

## “A DRAWING FROM MY CHILDHOOD”

The small drawing by young Giorgio de Chirico representing a ship was conserved by the artist his whole life long. The carefully detailed drawing is an indication of his observation skills as well as his burgeoning artistic sensitivity. It evokes both his childhood spent in the maritime city of Volos, as well as the commencement of his formal studies in Athens, where the family moved in 1899. The ambitious drawing, which is at the same time delicate and dreamy, was probably executed around that time.

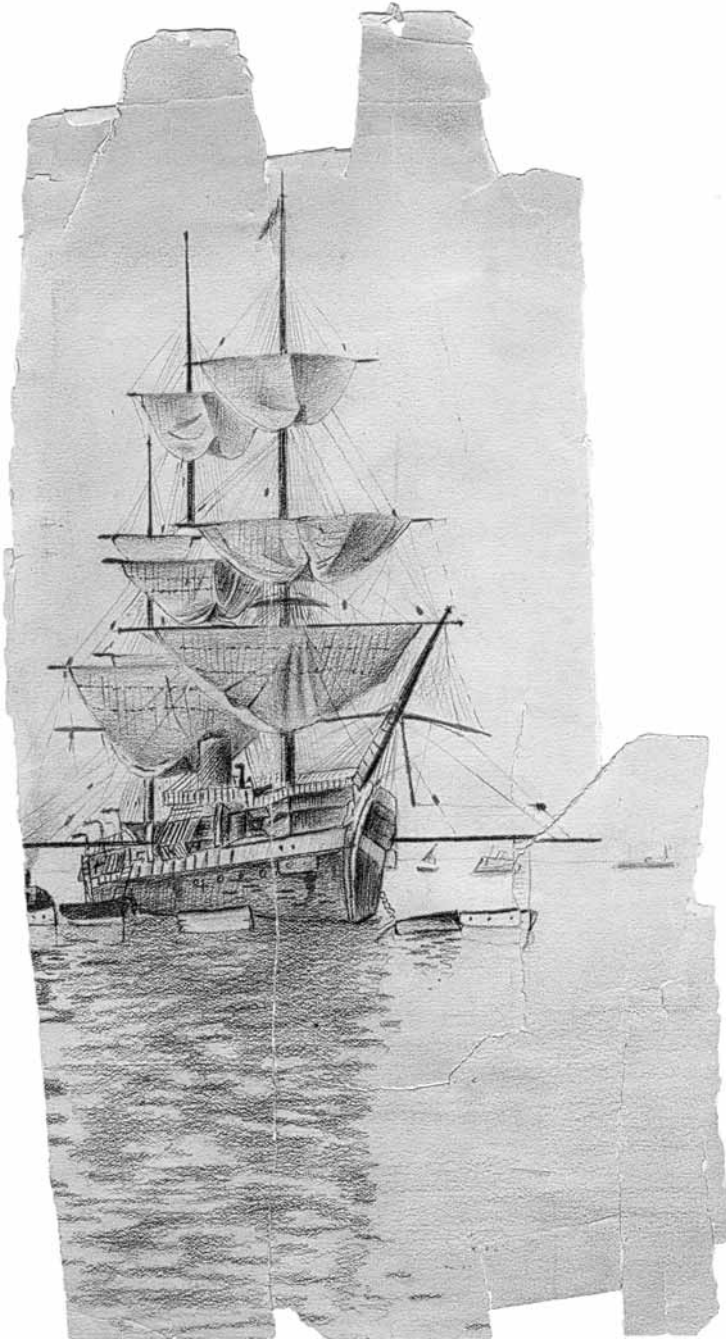
A potential iconographic source for this drawing was identified by Nikolaos Velissiotis in the work of Volanàkis Konstandinos, a Greek maritime painter, that de Chirico speaks of in his *Memoirs*, whilst remembering his first attempt at oil painting:

[...] I thought that oil painting was done with oil and so I took the bottle of olive oil which stood on the sideboard, poured a little of the contents into a tin and, dipping a brush into it, I diluted some of the Lefranc colours which I had bought in a shop on the palette. My first painting was a still life; [...] This first still life of mine represented three large lemons, with their leaves, sitting on a table. The composition was a little too symmetrical and monotonous. I had put one lemon in the middle, seen from the front, and two others at the sides, seen in profile, facing each other. I was not successful in modelling the lemon in the middle and it looked more like a little yellow shield than a lemon. [...] Instead, the lemon leaves and the grain of the wooden table were very successful. This picture caused a tragedy, however; it never dried. A few months after I had painted it you had only to touch it to find your finger covered with paint. I decided to solve the mystery. Every week a very old painter called Volanàkis<sup>1</sup> came to the Polytechnic to correct us in the drawing classes. He was a marine painter. Halfway through the last century he had painted pictures which were not without painterly quality, had much atmosphere and were full of poetry. As subjects they showed Greek beaches near Athens, seen from the port of Piraeus. On the beaches could be seen ladies and gentlemen dressed in the fashions of the period, as in the paintings of Courbet. The painting was smooth but not servile and its quality was reminiscent of Induno.

When I met Volanàkis he was already old, could not see very well and wore thick spectacles; [...] The painter Volanàkis, whom I asked about oil painting, also told me that it was done with oil. “But with what oil?” I asked anxiously, thinking of my lemons that never dried. “With linseed oil,” added Volanàkis. For me this was a revelation...<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> De Chirico wrote the name as “Bolonakis”. It has been corrected here by N. Velissiotis.

<sup>2</sup> See G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome 1945; II ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962; English translation *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, pp. 41-43



Giorgio de Chirico, childhood drawing, 28 x 14.5 cm, c. 1900

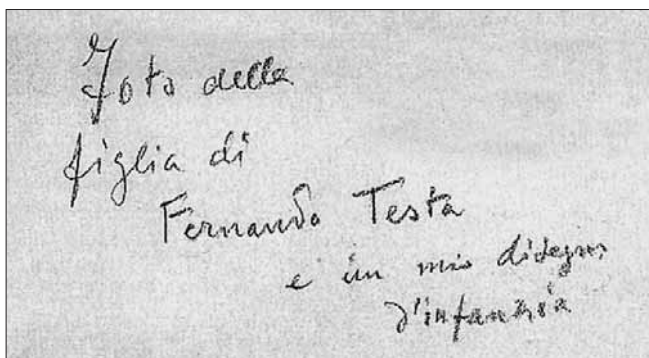


Volanakis Konstandinos, *The Port of Volos*, c. 1875

In the Greek painter's profile, edited here by Velissiotis, one finds a number of geographical correspondences with de Chirico's biography.

### **Volanakis Konstandinos**

Born in Heraklion, Crete in 1837, he went to work in Trieste, Italy where he took his first lessons in painting. In 1867 his employer discovered his talent and sent him to Munich, where he enrolled at the Fine Arts Academy and studied under Carl Theodor von Piloty and Kaulbach. He returned to Athens in 1883, where he taught at the Polytechnic Institute and at the Fine Arts Academy, remaining as a professor until 1903. His paintings of ports with ships are well known. He married a young lady from the Afendouli family of Volos, a city he would vacation in for lengthy periods and where he painted the famous work *The Port of Volos* in which one notes the railway line built by Giorgio's father, Evaristo de Chirico, with the supply train carrying goods to and from the port. He died in Piraeus in 1907.



Handwritten note by de Chirico conserved with the drawing: "Photo of the daughter of Fernando Testa and a drawing from my childhood".