Cavafy could not be more irrelevant in the history of art. Beyond his notes on Ruskin around 1893 and his conversation with Marinetti in 1930, Cavafy did not expended much intellectual energy engaging with the debates of the artistic avant-garde that was erupting in his circles. While other poets took advantage of the disciplinary breakdown of text and image, Cavafy staid silent. Even in his personal demeanor, he was no stylish dandy but dressed shabbily and surrounded himself with outmoded Victorian hand-me-down furniture. The silence itself, one could argue, was a conscious strategy. But as strategies go, silence is uninteresting. Even as they love to read his poems, art historians have found little interest in Cavafy. This essay attempts to find a future for the visual history of Cavafy that goes beyond Modern Greece’s logo-centrism, beyond the myopia of the poetic word, and beyond the national distrust of the visual. It presents a small case-study of Cavafy’s two portraits photographed in 1929. Strategically disregarding Cavafy’s words, it excavates visual information resident in the images.

In contrast to Cavafy’s marginality in art history, Cavafy's has had a revived heroic emergence in postmodern art and the articulation of a queer aesthetic. The poet has been appropriated as a historical figure and placed within the literary presence of his poetic constructions. Duane Michaels’ *The Adventures of Constantine Cavafy* is the most prominent of such Cavafy experiments. Michals breaks the mechanical assumptions of the arch-modernist photographic medium by choreographing a narrative instability between the dead author and his texts. Using actors, Michals brings Cavafy to life as a character of counterfactual realism. Michals, along with Cindy Sherman, Les Krims, and Lukas Samaras, inserted a “directorial mode” in photography. Having excluded himself from the visual discourse of his own time, Cavafy is reinvented by the contemporary gay artist who visually externalizes Cavafy’s textual content. Such a bio-directorial approach can be seen in other photographic from Dimitris Geros’ *Shades of Love* to Stathis Orphanos’ *My Cavafy*. At the end of the day, Cavafy remains hostage to his texts and any critical reading of the poet’s own visual agency is terminated at the start. The choreographed Cavafy, in many ways, is a construct without texture, spatial depth, or internal formal dialectics.

Although independent from Cavafy's photographic afterlife in art, an academic dialogue has emerged over the poet's personal relationship to photography. Cornelia Tsakiridou argues that Cavafy was ambivalent in embracing the new medium, while Eleni Papargyriou shows that, in contrast, photography held a fetishist sway over the poet, as understood by Walter Benjamin and other theorists. Both scholars exhaust Cavafy's poetic corpus for clues. This contextual line of inquiry holds great promise for future research. But in order for the conversation to proceed, actual artifacts must enter the discussion. To isolate Cavafy in a room occupied by his word alone compounds Cavafy's loneliness and reinforces Cavafy’s posturing of visual disinvestment. Objects, images,
and architectural settings seem indispensable in exploring the constructed visuality latent in Cavafy’s physical universe.

Cavafy makes the art historian’s job extremely difficult by refusing to foreground a visual discourse in his texts. At closer inspection, however, the visual is not entirely absent but must be excavated from the visual background. Foregrounding the visual background seems most promising in the single most important artifacts disseminated by Cavafy himself, namely his two 1929 portraits. As Papargyriou has shown, the photo deploys a self-conscious photographic strategy that Paulos Nirvanas first employed in Greece with his 1906 portrait of Alexandros Papadiamatis. There seems to be little information about the circumstances in the fabrication of Cavafy’s two photographs (such as the name of the photographer, the date of its creation, nature of commission). Yet, the images photos have been disseminated in endless reproductions after the poet’s death, used for the covers of most Cavafy translations and ubiquitous in cyberspace. Despite its familiarity, the image’s background has not been looked at critically. Seduced by the physiognomy and penetrating stare of the foregrounded poet, we have ignored the background. Our attention is captivated by the physicality of the sitter, and we try to penetrate his personhood through his iconic coiffeur and glasses, his suit and tie, and his accessories of handkerchief and cufflinks that pop from the darkness of his body. With our hyper-literary imagination, we seek Cavafy character dissociated from the architectural background. In turn, the photograph provides the visual building blocks for all postmodern reenactments that, in fact, replicate the photographic space of those portraits. Unwillingly, we fail the first rule of interpretation to incorporate every visual aspect within the work’s frame. But it is not just us. Not only has the background been ignored by the later appropriations of the photo, but it has been entirely made-up in future iterations. The particulars of the photo have easily been subverted without notice.

So what have we missed? The dominant surface framing Cavafy's persona is a hanging tapestry that, through its provenance, suggests a cultural biography. The flat tapestry inside the flat photo creates a dynamic space, which is neither the space of the sitter nor the space of the print. Containing its own iconographic and formal content, the tapestry energizes Cavafy’s space between the punctum of the clicking camera and the image’s endurance every time we revisit it. In order to push forward in our interpretation, we must start with the situational archaeology of the images. Seemingly taken a few minutes apart, there are two photographs from the 1929 sitting. The first shows Cavafy’s full body, leaning on the left arm of the couch, while the second shows Cavafy’s upper body and face, leaning on the right arm of the couch. The two photos are very different from each other in their content and attitude. In the photo encompassing more visual space, we read the artist’s room as a space and take stock of the furniture, floor, carpet, tapestry, art. The poet seems demurely shy as he directs his gaze to the floor, allowing us to infiltrate his private space through our photographic gaze. In the photo that zooms in the head, the artist stares us down with a deep reflexivity. The propping arm has switched, we focus on the hand, the eyes and the physiognomic details. Cropping marks around the torso of the first photo give clues on the photographer’s process and beg the question on whether one of the two was considered the definitive one. Whatever the specifics might be regarding intentionality, the two photographs are not casual snapshots but clearly staged. As formal
portraits, therefore, they beg a many questions about their visual content, but I will only address a couple of interesting points having to do with the dominant visual background and with the architectural repercussions.

We must imagine our sitting subject moving from left to right (or vice versa) in his favorite couch between the two photos. Regardless of the order of movement, the two stances are symmetrically disposed around a hanging tapestry symmetrically placed over the couch. The tapestry is made up of two elements, a floral border and a central panel with figures. Just as we zoom in and out of Cavafy’s body, the two photos also zoom in and out of the represented bodies and the abstract border surrounding them. A careful reader, moreover, quickly identifies figures or details that are represented in both.

Closer analysis of the represented evidence can be illustrated here, showing a double Cavafy as he moved between the two clicks. The architectural space represented in both photos is shown in yellow. The two areas illustrated in the photos are marked blue (for photo one) and orange (for photo two). The only two things shared by both photos are the body of the poet (obviously) and the central tapestry. In many ways, the moving poet has simply moved around the tapestry, which between the two photos becomes the centerpiece.

In spite of the tapestry’s visual and spatial centrality, it has received little attention. Even to the most untrained eye, the Asian provenance of the textile is immediately apparent. A set of figures fills a semi-perspectival space in the stylizations of Japanese or Chinese art. The figures are courtesans or attendants, Ukiyo-e, that flourished during the Edo period and spread globally. By the end of the 17th century, such leisurely women or bath-house attendants entered the visual politics of prostitution and their images were mass produced. During the 18th and 19th centuries, such images had an unabashedly sexual content that appealed to puritanical tastes of collectors in the West. The attendants are visible even within the photograph, but more work needs to be done to decipher their precise origin. A preliminary overview suggests that the tapestry originated from China. Its most likely entry into the Cavafy household is through the poet’s aunt Sevastie, who was married to Léon Verhaeghe de Nayer, a Belgian diplomat stationed in Istanbul. Sevastie travelled to Shanghai in 1884 and visited the Cavafy’s on her way back. Moreover, Sevastie tried to convince her nephew to take a position in the office of the British Customs in Shanghai but without success. The Chinese tapestry can be read as a register for the cosmopolitanism of a global British empire, but also as the memory of a failed professional opportunity. It is clear even from the grainy black-and-white photograph that the Chinese tapestry was in a tattered state of conservation in 1929 with visible patches, although it’s very material shabbiness adds to the work’s antiquity. As a
piece of cloth, not thin enough to be a transparent curtain nor thick enough to block action, the tapestry adds to a dialectic of furfilled/unfurfilled haptic desire. The zooming of the lens between the two photos, facilitates a spatial proximity to the piece. The first photo reveals the composition and the general vintage of the work, while the second photo grabs us and forces us close against the texture of the fabric. The sexual overtones are undeniable both in iconography and in the dialectical process between the two photos.

A second sketch (left) illustrates that haptic presence. If we ignore our foregrounded painter and focus on the background around him, we note how the decontextualized fragments of the large composition create an abstract aura behind Cavafy’s head and shoulders. Framed by the lower corner of the tapestry, we can distinguish the L-shaped belonging to the abstract border and a square with the representation of the attendants. The darker frame melds into the darkness of Cavafy’s suit, as a few ornamental details pop out as white forms on a black background (for instance a heart shaped form over the left shoulder or a group of shapes over his right ear that resemble an incomprehensible language. The central part of the tapestry contains two cropped attendants whom we can recognize as such only with the knowledge of the second photo. The figures’ wrapping costumes make them indecipherable human. As with the darker frame, abstract figures gain prominence and beg formal associations with other elements. Black lines against a white background, these figures include leaves and flowers. A pod-like element to the left of Cavafy’s eyes, become surreal eyes mirroring the poet’s spectacles. Located on the center of the tapestry, the elements that we see on the left of Cavafy reappear in the other photo but on the right of Cavafy. With a careful reading of both photos, this central zone of figures becomes a central component of the narrative. In both photos, the central zone with the attendants touches the corner of the poet’s face and, in both cases, creates a strong dynamic diagonal. Formally speaking, both of Cavafy’s photographs follow clear rules of Modernist composition, dividing the frame along asymmetrical vertical and horizontal axes that create a pin-will effect among the irregular quadrants. The relationship between the diagonal areas hence becomes charged. In other words, the geometrical composition of the painting forces a narrative juxtaposition between the repeated diagonal juxtaposition between Cavafy and the Asian attendants.

A knowledgeable viewer capable of reading the sexual connotations of the attendants, must therefore generate some narrative between the poet and the parading women. Some
added biographical knowledge further assists our reading. Cavafy, after all, regularly visited male prostitutes at the Al Salam. Spatially more important is the fact that one floor below Cavafy’s photographed space was actually a brothel. Constantine and his brother Paul moved to the second floor of 10 Rue Lepsius in 1907. The neighborhood was a red-light district and at some point, an actual brothel moved to the first floor. Cavafy did not object, but enjoyed looking down from his window watching the male customers enter and exit. Cavafy’s choice to use an antique oriental tapestry with its pornographic connotations is far from unique but belongs in a long tradition of Japonisme and closeted eroticism that developed in Oscar Wilde’s House Beautiful movement. Since the 1890s, every self-respected British aesthete possessed an Asian artifact that suggested eroticism and celebrated a non-western attitude towards sexuality. As we know from inventories of Cavafy’s possessions, photographs, and current house-museum, Cavafy possessed many objects and surfaces that he could choose to accompany him through posterity in this definitive set of portraits. Despite his silence on aesthetics, Cavafy did in fact make a grounded aesthetic choice. Darkened by the shadows of photography and its mysterious tool of cropping, Cavafy conceals his aesthetic choice as much as he reveals it. Cavafy here plays with a “strategy of coding” involving symbols and abstraction understood by the best players of a sophisticated homosexual tradition in the 1920s. Even if a creation of the photographer, Cavafy is a corroborator in the centrality of his Asian heirloom in all its tattered state of preservation, its pornographic Ukiyo-e subtext and its cropped representation. Once we unleash the interpretive question of the hanging tapestry, we can add more layers of meaning. The items in the photo are not limited to an erotic reading alone. After all, the object was biologically connected to Cavafy’s maternal family. With his mother Hariclea and his aunt Sevastie long dead, the tapestry was a memento of their absence. We must introduce two more biographical facts towards the reading of a maternal loss. When Cavafy was young, he would join his mother to rituals of eating dessert. After meals, his mother would sit on an armchair and he reclined on the couch next to her. If the couch in Cavafy’s portrait originates from his old home, it could very well be the couch of those maternal pleasures. Finally, any consideration of Cavafy’s relationship to photography must take into account that his mother died while having a stroke on her way to a photographic studio.

Returning to the first photo, where the viewer is made privy to Cavafy’s larger domestic interior, raises some additional issues in interpreting the two photographs. The poet and his Asian art are the two most dominant subjects (dark black masses in my sketch, left), but are surrounded by an interior composition of artifacts. Using a wide-angle lens, the photographer has taken in a lot more objects, while creating an uncomfortable perspectival unfolding (where Cavafy is practically sliding down a verticalized couch). The rectangular hanging tapestry
counteracts another framed artwork, mirrored along the vertical axis. Multiple telescoping frames of this smaller piece, are focused on the framed image of a circular object that stands as shorthand for the mechanical world, the physical camera, or even Futurist possibilities. Below, a book stand frames an open book that must be read as the lectern of the sitter’s poetic publications. Using an iconographic that is as old as Saint Jerome’s Renaissance representations, the lectern stands apart from the author but completes his function. The wide-angle lens also particularizes the floor, its carpets and herring-bone pattern of carpentry (not shown in sketch).

Undeniably, we are in the poet’s presence. Recomposed and reconfigured, the objects in the photograph create a new space of dynamic symmetries and modernist visual tension. Beyond the formal new life of Cavafy’s room, however, we begin to unravel the reality of Cavafy’s personal space. The poet becomes the architect of his own domesticity. While he poses in his own living room, the photo is not an ordinary snapshot of that interior, but a highly selected and manipulated construction from a large tool kit of views and objects.

Cavafy’s house was open for all visitors in the afternoons. He was entertained and entertained notable visitors, many of whom left a written testament of the experience. Whether it was Nikos Kazantzakis or Kostas Ouranis, Cavafy used his saloni as a theatrical space. All accounts speak of architectural manipulation to generate a sense of mystery. Visitors typically accuse him of playing photographer by keeping the room dark, modulating natural light by constantly changing the window shutters, playing with candles, and manipulating a sensibility of shadows and controlled gazes. Although impossible to reconstruct from the textual descriptions, the effect that Cavafy generated in his living room seems informed by visual theory, at least by the self-conscious manipulation of surfaces and diaphragms.

Like an interior designer, Cavafy played with textiles, hangings, and furniture to generate moods. Like the Greek carpets that Freud used on his couch (and Annie Leibovitz photographed), the Asian tapestry that Cavafy used above his couch constructed uncanny visual texts and made for complex conversation pieces. The photographs under discussion are thus not only portraits of the artist but portraits of the artist in the process of constructing a light chamber (camera lucida). More striking than what one sees, moreover, is what Cavafy hides, namely the other three walls and a space overburdened by furniture. The chamber in the photograph seems so still that we can hardly recognize it as the actual room that we know from other photographs. Detailed accounts of Cavafy’s room left to us by his visitors, published photos of Cavafy’s house after his death, and the actual Cavafy house, now museum, provide points of reference with which to test what is represented in the photographs. The real saloni was cluttered. It resembled a Victorian orientalist reception room, and it was sometimes referred to as the “Arabian” room. The space was crammed with furniture resembling a junk shop. In addition to windows bringing light from the outside, a large Venetian mirror reflected light. Photographs of relatives filled the horizontal surfaces. All these items are missing from the official portrait. We note a tremendous act of editing and fabrication. What we see is not Cavafy’s real saloni. Using the limited choices of walls and vantages, the photographic
version of Cavafy’s *saloni* is a modernist construction. Partially stripped of an overwhelming clutter, the poet chooses a single organizing artifact, the Asian tapestry. It is uncanny that we can visit this space today. Since 1992, the Cavafy house has been functioning as a Cavafy Museum administered by the Greek Embassy in Egypt. The house today is an odd collection of happenchance and lacks any curatorial coherence. It is a constructed fetish of its own right. xx

Even if limited to his photographic portraits, the architectural spaces, and the material possessions, the art-historical Cavafy remains to be investigated. The history of Modern Greek poetry has created a particular condition a self-inflicted repugnance to domestic interiority informed by a self-conscious exteriority towards a paganistic countryside. For the period ca. 1908-1930, however, psychological and architectural interiors were central in Greek poetry, exemplified in Kostas Karyotakis. Such a focus reflects an inward turn forced by the closing of geographical expansion, but more importantly, it reflects an architectural investment in cities and their spaces, as a setting of artifactual complexity surpassing even the most idealized rural vernacular. xxi In 1930, the Greek poetic gaze left the city, chasing gods and butterflies in the Aegean islands: “the walls of my room tumbled and I was left in the garden.” xxii The pervasive escape to the outdoors evolved into the national religion of the summer holiday. Interiority was pessimistic, exteriority was intoxicating. A resultant poetic vacuum left the city undefended. While the nation fantasized sun and sea, bulldozers decimated the urban fabric into nightmarish subdivisions (διαμέρισμα). For those reasons, and many more, the aesthetics of actual domestic interiors could not sustain interest by the national poetics. With windows flung wide open, Cavafy’s cinematic darkness was intolerable. Overeducated in the literary arts but undereducated in the visual arts, Greek intellectuals substituted poetic visuals his visual poetics. Such a systemic closing of the eyes to Cavafy’s portrait is manifest in two fascinating examples of erasure. The first one comes from Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, the Cubist contemporary of Seferis. In 1963 Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas illustrated a landmark edition of Cavafy’s collected poems published by Ikaros Press in Athens. The line drawings imagine the internal spaces in the poems, except one, a representation of the famous photographic portrait. xxiii My own derivation of the drawing (above) points attention to the details that Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas selected from the original print. Most notably, he provides crisp details about the carpet, the herring bone wooden floor, and the couch. When it comes to the hanging tapestry, however, Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas creates an
important fiction, he erases the Asian attendants and replaces them with floral abstraction. In other words, he takes the flowers from the boarder and spreads them to the central zone, eradicating the original figurative content. What went wrong? Did Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas not pay enough attention? Had he not seen the original photograph? Was he using an inferior copy? Had he visited the actual room? Whether conscious or conscious, this slippage is historically significant. It represents the invasion of the floral into the figurative. By the 1960s, the flower dictatorship of the 1930s was complete. The Hellenized modernist space had no room for Asian attendants.

A similar erasure occurred in 1983, when Greece celebrated fifty years from the poet’s death with a commemorative 20-drachma stamp. The stamp is a miniature of the full portrait redrawn in color. Although focusing on the sharp iconic face, it cannot avoid the architectural background rendered in blurred shapes. The artist remains faithful to some of the most visible abstractions, but when it comes to the Asian attendants, he facilitates a subtle Hellenization. The figures resemble Greek statues or folk costumes. The stamp is so small and the background blurry enough that no definite identification can be made. Nevertheless, the allusions direct us towards national connotations.

The two 1929 portraits that Cavafy commissioned and disseminated contain an untapped discursive space where we can find the poet’s visual sensibilities that he resisted from articulating in his prose. In contrast to the vivid imagery inside Cavafy’s poetry, the poet’s visual identity is ambivalent and coded. It is a minor art, or to use Karyotakis words, “a modest art without attitude” Closing the windows to the monopoly of flowers helps us resist an indigenous kitsch that we have accepted as the national norm. It will also help us create a healthy distance from the logocentric blindness that has canonized all and every form of art produced by the canonical poets. The collages of Odysseas Elytis or the rocks of Yannis Ritsos are simply not great works of art. In retrospect, Cavafy’s conscious disengagement with the visual arts reflects a noble respect for the artist who possesses skills that the poet lacks. Returning our gaze to the must subtler form of Cavafy’s visual expressions may also rescue the poet from the directorial lens that has monopolized his image in postmodern photography. Dull interior surfaces hold the key to an art historical inquiry with visual depth and texture.

NOTES


Dimitris Geros, *Shades of Love: Photographs Inspired by the Poems of C. P. Cavafy* (San Rafael, Cal., 2010), Stathis Orphanos *My Cavafy: Chance Encounters* (Los Angeles, 2006).


I resist replicating the image out of respect for intellectual property and copyright laws that forbid the duplication of art works without permission. I consider the photos to be works of art and not visual replications of the subject’s reality. The Cavafy portraits have been reprinted in hundreds of instances without any concern for authorship, which is precisely what has caused the disappearance of the photographer’s identity from the scholarship. Instead, I use my own interpretive sketches to illustrate this analysis with the understanding that they will not be, in turn, replicated without the author’s permission.

Eleni Papargyriou, “Το φωτογραφικό πορτραίτο του συγγραφέα,” *Νέα Εστεία* 1830 (February 2010), 339-359.

Here I plead ignorance about the original, but I hope that more information will surface from a closer archival search, cf. *Προσωπογραφίες του Κ. Π. Καβάφη* (Σύλλογος Αιγυπτιωτών Ελλήνων 1995), Demetris Daskalopoulos, *Βιβλιογραφία Κ. Π. Καβάφη: 1886-2000* (Thessaloniki, 2003)

A similar exercise of foregrounding can be applied onto Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), best known from Alfred Stieglitz’s photograph. The background that animates the urinal is a painting by Masden Hartley in Stieglitz’s studio, see Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 43-44.


Many reproductions of these photos can be found through the Cavafy literature. My observations are not based on the inspection of the original negatives or prints, but on their publication in *Καβάφης Άπαντα* vol. 4, *Ανθολογία από κείμενα χειρόγραφα, επιστολές, φωτογραφίες, σχέδια και βιβλία*, ed. Philippos G. Phexis (Athens, 1982), pp. 129, 132.

Thanks to its facial detail, the second photo has been much more reproduced, but this does not mean that it was intended as the definitive one of the two. Papargyriou reprints the second portrait as more authoritative, see “Το φωτογραφικό πορτραίτο,” p. 354, fig. 12. None of these technical details can be addressed, however, without a thorough analysis of the original negatives and prints.


Liddell, *Cavafy*, pp. 179-180


xxiv The series entitled “Προσωπικότης,” was released on June 11, 1983 and included George Cavafy, Nikos Kazantzakis, Manolis Kalomiris, and Georgios Papanikolaou.