



## ARTICLE

# Konstantinos Volanakis, the Poet of the Sea

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will study the work of Konstantinos Volanakis, a leading yet underrated figure in 19th-century Greek seascape painting. We will explore his unique artistic identity through the prism of history and symbolism, emphasizing the thematic richness and emotional depth of his nautical iconography. The study will explore Volanakis's seascape painting as an existential and cultural heritage treasure, its place in the broader context of Greek art, and the reasons behind its limited recognition. Central to this study is the integration of digital technologies. For the needs of this study, an interactive website, a virtual exhibition, and a digital timeline were created - designed to enhance accessibility and public participation. This digital study was established by the author's interactive work, entitled "Konstantinos Volanakis, the Poet of the Sea", which is implemented as an online platform and was created for the needs of the course "WWW and Digital Collections Management", for the master's program in Digital Culture from the University of Piraeus. By connecting it to the present, the research demonstrates how Volanakis' themes of travel, migration, and "belonging" have an effect in contemporary contexts, while at the same time highlighting the potential of digital cultural heritage works to promote critical thinking and preserve collective memory.

**Keywords:** Digital Cultural Heritage; Greek Art; Greek Seascape Painting; Piraeus and Maritime Identity; Art Education

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## 1. Introduction

Konstantinos Volanakis's work, which I came across by chance at the Basilica of Saint Mark in Heraklion, Crete, in the summer of 2024, was breathtaking. Volanakis is one of the major figures in the modern Greek seascape painting. His work, besides the cultural aspect it offered, took visitors on a journey of exploration and emotion. His paintings are characterized by depth and emotional impact and have contributed to the development of nineteenth-century Greek art. The interaction of light and water, the accuracy of the detail, and the atmosphere of his works transformed his paintings into stories where present, past, memory, and feeling meet. Ports, ships, and waves are not simply visual subjects, but mainly symbolic and narrative elements that reflect broader cultural and existential concerns.

Based on this experience, this study examines the artistic and cultural significance of the work of Konstantinos Volanakis. Furthermore, it investigates how his art goes beyond the traditional seascape to become a source of narrative, identity, and emotion. After this introduction, the study is divided into five major parts. In the first section, the work of Volanakis is examined from an artistic and cultural perspective. The second part presents a historical and theoretical background of the evolution of seascape painting in Europe and Greece, its symbolism, and the position of Volanakis in Greek modern seascape painting. The third part emphasizes the role of digital media in both education and cultural participation; thus, the modern technologies' contribution to the public's relationship with cultural heritage is elucidated. The fourth part explores the author's interactive digital work about Konstantinos Volanakis. This part will describe its creation, thematic layout, and ease of use. Lastly, in the fifth part, we will bring the discussion to a close with the conclusions and outline the possibilities of future research.

Within our research's approach and the way we experienced it, the sea is the timeless element around Volanakis' work, and it is not merely the source of his art but also a cultural metaphor that links memory, travel, identity, and emotional life. His art pieces still speak to present-day viewers, although they belong to the nineteenth-century. In

fact, they have been able to transcend time.

## 2. Artistic and Cultural Dimensions of Konstantinos Volanakis' Work

Konstantinos Volanakis turned out to be one of the major seascape artists of the nineteenth century. By studying his artwork, our main intention was to attract the public and open them to the great value of Volanakis' work as we experienced it. We were impressed with his work profoundly when we happened to meet it in the summer of 2024, in the exhibition 'Konstantinos Volanakis—Waterline',<sup>[1]</sup>. In it, we not only recognized his very own artistic personality but also the thematic complexity of his work. Within Volanakis' work, one will notice that historical narrative, poetic elements, and the technical perfection of a great painter are combined. In this exhibition, we also had the opportunity to see Volanakis' works with a different eye. In some of his later works, a strong emotional charge is reflected. The dark seas, the silent atmosphere, and the feeling of loneliness and abandonment constituted Volanakis' emotional confession.

In this section, we will highlight specific artistic characteristics that define his style and reveal the layers of meaning embedded in each art piece. From dramatic scenes of naval battles to peaceful scenes of daily life in the harbor.

### 2.1. Interpretive Framework and Pedagogical Orientation

The study mainly aims to enhance visitors' skills through visual literacy in understanding complex visual compositions, through close observation and analysis of Volanakis' art to develop their aesthetic perception<sup>[2]</sup>. Visitors who visit a museum where Volanakis' art is hosted can figure out how the history and culture of the time the artist lived influenced his art and realize that the sea was not only the source of Greek identity but also the way nature was expressed in art. This kind of process changes the visitor from a simple passive point of view into a more active and involved one, and at the same time, makes deeper and more personal connections with the artworks<sup>[3]</sup>.

The research, using directors' questions and interac-

tive interpretive instruments, informs the viewers about the artist's intentions and the significant part of his subjects in the symbolic system, more than just what they represent. Coasts and piers, bays and seas, boats and ships, calm waters and raging waves, the voyages of ships and the life of fishermen: all these elements that make up the sea and its world are depicted by Konstantinos Volanakis in seascapes of unique skill, which draw the viewer into a virtual journey into seafaring and the relationship of man's life with the water element, as a generator and as a horizon of expectation. Besides that, by means of creative activities and being open to different interpretations, the same tool helps in finding one's inner voice and convinces one to take up painting as a means of reflection and as a source of creative fantasy.

In any case, the study is not simply focused on art but is also directed to give the recognition Konstantinos Volanakis deserved, as one of the founders of modern Greek seascape painting, and has not been given as much as it should. Volanakis is one of the artists who did a lot to bring the spirit of the nation's maritime heritage into Greek Art, although his name is mostly mentioned among other artists who have been more popular. The study of his work and the distribution of it reconstruct the public with art and enhance the collective memory. Making Volanakis the center of the scene contributes to the removal of this historical problem and makes sure that his heritage is not only within the academic world but also in the public, thus, a renewed acknowledgment of his skillful portrayal of the Greek sea is being fostered.

The thorough investigation of his work and its spread is a way of returning the public to art through study and thus elevating the collective memory. Centering the scene on Volanakis helps to solve this historical problem of the past and makes sure that his heritage is not only in the academic world but also among the people, thus, a renewed acknowledgment of his skillful portrayal of the Greek sea is being facilitated.

## 2.2. Originality and Cultural Significance

In the era in which he lived, Konstantinos Volanakis was considered a failure <sup>[4]</sup>. The present study comes to

dethrone this perception and place him in the position he deserves. The innovation of this study lies in the fact that it not only analyzes the artist's work from an aesthetic point of view, but through the prism of digitality and digital culture, it leads the visitor to see his work with different eyes, to feel, to learn, to experience. The way the work was approached and the creation of the platform also present a pedagogical perspective of his art. The digitality that was incorporated to present Volanakis' paintings makes the interaction more accessible and attractive to a wider, and especially younger audience <sup>[2]</sup>. By doing so, it works as a link between the past and the present, thus the study of the sea as an aesthetic, historical, and symbolic landscape is facilitated.

Konstantinos Volanakis's work expands beyond a simple idea for a traditional exhibition. Through a lively and interactive platform, the audience is led to critical thinking and personal interpretations, which in turn make his work relevant to the new generation. This study is distinguished by its contemporary, complex, and multi-layered approach to his art. Visitors are provided with a virtual tour to "travel" into the marine worlds of the artist and thus confront the art directly and experientially. An impressive digital interaction allows visitors to study the most detailed parts, the textures of the waves, the colors of the sky, the rigging of the ships, etc., of Volanakis' compositions. The virtual world offers an exceptional position that is not limited to a close-up view alone but can extend to other very close aspects, such as his subtle use of light and his power to depict the sea's dramatic and ever-changing moods.

At the same time, the innovation of this study also appears in the "conversation" that begins between the past and the present. The sea, the journey, the escape, the nostalgia, the return, and the belonging are re-examined through the filter of today's dilemmas. Through this prism, Volanakis' works acquire a new perspective, acquiring not only resonance, but also an emotional depth, strong enough to move and inspire today's man. We realize, then, that Volanakis' paintings may address another world of the nineteenth century, but the themes that are presented and evoked are eternal and will be forever relevant. They have a compelling potential to become a mirror of the modern

human condition, thus building the connection between us and the collective past of sea voyages and emotional landscapes, which are still influential in shaping the world.

### 2.3. Research Questions of the Study

A series of interrelated questions is aimed at being answered by the present study. The most basic of all is the artistic contribution and cultural significance of Konstantinos Volanakis in contemporary Greek Art. The research embraces the entire work of Volanakis, focusing on the sea and the emotional charge it holds, from an existential, cultural, and symbolic perspective. Furthermore, the study aims to answer and explain the reasons why Volanakis was not recognized as deserving and, on the contrary, was considered a failure. We will demonstrate how modern technologies, mainly using digital tools, can provide new ways of interaction and create a new sensation for a nineteenth-century artist. Finally, the research delves into how ports and marine life, as presented in Volanakis' work, are not only places where someone comes and goes, but also represent transition, memory, and identity.

### 2.4. Key Themes and Analytical Focus

The study reveals both the artistic and cultural influence of Konstantinos Volanakis, one of the leading Greek artists of the nineteenth century. At its core, the visual output of the artist himself is the subject of a dual approach, both aesthetic and thematic, with the depiction of the sea, the journey, coastal spaces, and the people inhabiting these maritime environments receiving most of the attention. His artwork is not just historical records; rather, they are complex visual stories in which the strokes, the light, and the arrangement signify a unique view of the sea world. We see his technical perfection, surpassing representational realism and touching the viewer on a deeper emotional level.

The sea is always present in Volanakis' life, so his visual references influence his subject matter. Volanakis lives in an era in which many nations are born, and each nation wants to show its superiority through the connection with a glorious past or with important historical events<sup>[5]</sup>. The subject matter he chooses to depict is part of the

framework of historical iconography, choosing themes that are mainly related to the sea. These works stand out in international competitions and are purchased by prominent personalities, as Volanakis lives far from Greece<sup>[5]</sup>. The depiction of marine life has always been a favorite subject; in these works, he highlights the grandeur of nature and the condemnation of human existence in front of it. It is important to note that the work of Konstantinos Volanakis can also be characterized as ethnographic. Even though at first glance it is not the man who dominates the work but the sea and the ships, the painter gives us a lot of information about the social class of the people he depicts and their occupations. The use of the sea coastline should not be seen only as its main motif, but as a symbol of change, expectation, and transformation. The scenes depicted are transformed into places that project broader human and cultural narratives. If we consider the works with which we came into contact in the Heraklion exhibition, but also with the research carried out on the life and more general work of Volanakis, we see that these scenes that are projected do not only represent a geographical landscape but also become symbols of collective memory<sup>[1]</sup>.

The study records the artistic and intellectual heritage of Volanakis as it was preserved, reinterpreted, and transmitted to the present day<sup>[6]</sup>. Intending to bring today's man into contact with the art of this great painter, we were led to include his work in a digital and educational context, the virtual tour of the digital museum, and the use of modern pedagogical methods. This engagement with Volanakis' work and our experiential experience led us to pose a vital question about how nineteenth-century art can be revived and reborn in the present. New technologies have facilitated this interaction of a historical work with a younger contemporary audience, making the issues discussed understandable and attractive<sup>[7]</sup>. Through the mesh of the artistic work, its maritime and cultural background, and its current digital reinterpretation, the paper provides a multifaceted view of Volanakis' input. It argues that his work should not be considered a mere vestige of the past, but a living and vibrant body of work, which has the power to influence not only our comprehension of Greek identity but also of the eternal human relationship with the sea.

## 2.5. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study being carried out faces certain limitations. Its main limitation lies in the fact that it focuses exclusively on the work, life, and career of Konstantinos Volanakis, a fact that narrows our thematic orientation. Although on the one hand we have a focused and detailed examination of Volanakis' work, on the other hand, we have not fully developed the more general picture of Greek art of the nineteenth century. Having focused our attention on Volanakis' analysis, the study identifies from the smallest to the largest level the profound influence of his work. However, the research is confined to the poor and incomplete archival sources and the biographical material for Volanakis. A good number of points regarding Volanakis' life and art are not only unrecorded but also unpublished; therefore, it is imperative to make use of the secondary sources and a well-thought-out interpretive approach to the pieces of evidence. The shortage of primary documents hampers the artist's working methods, influences, and personal experiences from being brought up with absolute certainty.

The next limitation is related to the absence of the artist's own analytical commentary or theoretical writing on the subject. Compared to the later painters who have left behind letters, diaries, or essays, the voice of Volanakis hardly occurs in the historical records. Consequently, the study mainly depends on the visual language of his works for nearly all its proofs. Though it poses several interpretive possibilities, it leaves the scholars with less direct access to his artistic intentions and symbolic choices, therefore, requiring academic inference supported by the contextual understanding. These impediments determine the research strategy that has been embraced in this inquiry and bring out not only the difficulties but also the interpretive opportunities in dealing with a nineteenth-century artist whose heritage is mostly recorded in his art.

## 2.6. Future Research Perspectives

In this last chapter of the second part, we would like to present the prospects for future research. One approach is to investigate the art of Konstantinos Volanakis not simply as an individual case of a great seascape paint-

er, but also in comparison with other Greek and European seascape painters of the nineteenth century. Something like this would highlight both the similarities and the differences between the artists, in terms of thematic choice, technique, and style. For example, a comparison between Volanakis and the painters of the Munich School might bring to light how his focus on the Greek light, the coastal areas, and life at sea either corresponds to or relates to the stylistic features of his German contemporaries. Even the influence of artistic heritage on later artists in Greece could be an equally interesting research topic. Studying how the elements of his style, the chosen themes, and even the treatment of seascapes are reflected in Greek painting of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries could be one of the ways to discover how he not only contributed but gave the genre a whole new direction.

Moreover, digital humanities can also serve as a powerful tool to further research in this field. The attempt to create digital archives, virtual exhibitions and museums, the development of immersive technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality (**Figure 1**), could be some more innovative ways in which Volanakis' work could be disseminated and presented, and why not used by the educational sector. These instruments can open up new avenues for visual analysis, increase public access to artworks, and provide opportunities for in-depth engagement with works from the past. In addition, the research on seascapes as national identity and collective memory is a less explored area that has great potential. Understanding how Volanakis' depictions of nautical scenes, coastal landscapes, and marine life fed cultural narratives of the post-independence period can give us a picture of the political and social environment that gave birth to his masterpieces.

To sum up, thorough and pointed archival research has the potential to not only broaden but also substantially enrich our current understanding of his biography and his creative work. Digging into private collections, local archives, and long-standing institutions in Greece and Germany could unearth letters, sketches, or documents that have never been published. Such materials would not only bridge the gaps that exist in the artist's biography but also reveal facets of the artist beyond his iconic



**Figure 1.** Digital exhibition with ArtStep.

### 3. Seascapes Painting: History, Symbolism, and Digital Engagement

Mitchell argued that landscape should not be considered merely a depiction of nature, but also a cultural medium through which power, ideology, and social relations are depicted<sup>[8]</sup>. A depicted seascape, according to this view, is placed in the same context; the sea world is transformed into a visible and invisible expression. The sea that is depicted becomes the place where the stories of colonization, the exchange of commodities, and the discovery of other lands are told or contested. The aesthetics of the sublime, to begin with, were defined and differentiated by Edmund Burke<sup>[9]</sup> and later by Immanuel Kant<sup>[10]</sup>. The aesthetic of the sublime describes an experience of grandeur, vastness, or power that overwhelms our senses, creating a mixed feeling of awe, terror, and delight, as opposed to purely pleasurable beauty. It involves pleasurable discomfort as reason grapples with the infinite (like a starry sky or a raging storm), leading to a sense of human insignificance, but also to a connection with a higher, transcendental capacity, which has been famously explored by philosophers such as Burke and Kant and is central to Romantic art.

The sea, in all its expanse, has always been a symbol of immensity, the unknown, the soul, adventure, while in antiquity it was a source of inspiration and was associated with deities<sup>[7]</sup>. Turner, with his series of stormy seas and shipwrecks, depicted the weakness of human nature and

the invincible power of nature<sup>[11]</sup>. In Turner's art, we see beyond a simple seascape and are led to ponder and reflect on where man can go. Today, a different take on the issue is presented by works of research in mobility studies and maritime history, which positions the ocean as an ever-changing source of connections, flows, and cultural exchanges<sup>[12]</sup>. Under the influence of such arguments, the art of seascape is thought of not only as the depiction of the water and the ships but of the wider early modern globalization processes, which comprised the movement of goods, people, and ideas. The sea, with the fears and dreams it hides deep within it, is uniquely depicted in the works of European artists<sup>[13]</sup>.

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic was a leading force at sea in terms of both trade and naval warfare. Dutch painters, such as Willem van de Velde the Elder and Younger, created more accurate depictions of ships and battleships, thus celebrating the sea power of the Republic<sup>[14]</sup>. These masterpieces showcase Mitchell's stance on landscape as a medium for culture, whereby the ocean here was representative not of nature's ruthless side but the triumph of a sea-and-trade-merging state<sup>[8]</sup>. By the Romantic turn, Britain reinvented the sea scene to delve into the awe-inspiring concept of the sublime.

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influence of such arguments, the art of seascape is thought of not only as the depiction of the water and the ships but of the wider early modern globalization processes, which comprise the movement of goods, people, and ideas <sup>[15]</sup>. The sea was the space that symbolized both the dreams and the fears of early modern Europe, and the artists reacted by depicting these alongside each other in their works.

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic was a leading force at sea in terms of both trade and naval warfare. The Dutch painters like Willem van de Velde the Elder and Younger were intent on producing the most breath-taking and accurate portrayal of ships and marine battles, thus celebrating the maritime power of the Republic <sup>[14]</sup>. These masterpieces showcase Mitchell's stance on landscape as a medium for culture, whereby the ocean here was representative not of nature's ruthless side but the triumph of a sea-and-trade-merging state <sup>[8]</sup>. By the Romantic turn, Britain reinvented the sea scene to delve into the awe-inspiring concept of the sublime. The English Romantic "painter of light", Turner, managed to connect with Edmund Burke's theory of the Sublime, an aesthetic concept of overwhelming awe and terror in nature, which deeply influenced his dramatic seascapes and landscapes <sup>[9]</sup>. Turner, through expressive colors, his stormy seascapes and depictions of light, managed to depict the vastness of nature. On the other hand, Italian vedutisti such as Canaletto were able to show this connection between sea and city life in a different way. The city of Venice, with its canals and lagoons, was not depicted only through its architectural perspective, but as a continuation of the sea, thus presenting the importance of marine life culturally, socially, and architecturally <sup>[16]</sup>. During the same period, Claude-Joseph Vernet's array of French harbors, made for Louis XV, brought together the factual and the allegorical. His depictions are a perfect example of how a seascape could be used to represent Enlightenment ideas about progress, rationality, and effective government. For a nation to be glorious, it needed naval power <sup>[17]</sup>.

The art of painting seascapes throughout Europe spans much deeper than the mere visualization of water. This is an intimate cultural activity that is intricately linked to the discourses around identity, power, beauty, and modernity. The Dutch case highlights the sea as a source of national trade; the British case foregrounds the sublime;

Italian vedute emphasize the incorporation of marine imagery into civic life; and the French Enlightenment painting underscores the role of the state and scientific observation. Taken together, these instances point to the fact that the seascape should not just be seen as one of the visual arts, but also as a theoretical and cultural construct that acts as an intermediary between Europe and the rest of the world.

### 3.1. The Development of Greek Seascape Painting

The depiction of the sea has a long history, from antiquity as a symbol of power, mystery, and journey, evolving from religious and mythological scenes to realistic landscapes, ethnography, and modern, abstract, or surrealist approaches that express the psyche of the artist and the path of man. From Minoan frescoes to representations of vases, in the Greek space, the sea has occupied and occupies a significant role as it is inextricably linked to national identity and history <sup>[18]</sup>. However, in Byzantine art, the landscape was rare and usually under the control of religious stories <sup>[19]</sup>. Only with the coming of the modern Greek state in the nineteenth century did the sea become a subject with a distinct and dominant character in the painting of landscapes. The Greek Revolution of 1821 and the naval battles that accompanied it established the seascape as a symbol of freedom and national identity. The naval battles of the Greek Revolution were vividly depicted by Greek and philhellene painters of the nineteenth century, such as Eugène Delacroix and Nicolas Gyzis, with works that glorify heroism, the sea, and battle, integrating the naval conflicts into the broader narrative of national awakening. Greek seascape painting has been evolving this century with the great contribution and work of great painters such as Ioannis Altamouras, Aristides Prosalentis, and especially Konstantinos Volanakis <sup>[20]</sup>.

Volanakis, who was born in Heraklion, Crete, in 1837, started off working in trade but eventually changed his career to art. His artistic growth was very much influenced by the time he spent studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich with Karl von Piloty, a most prominent member of the Munich School. There, he first encountered the European tradition of seascape painting, and here he decided to engage systematically with seascape paint-

ing. His artistic rise occurred when, in 1867, at the age of just 29, he won first prize in an international competition announced by the Emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph II, for the visual depiction of the naval battle of Lissa (1866). According to the terms of the competition, the artist who would be awarded would have the right to travel free of charge for two years on Austrian warships in the Adriatic to study the ships and the marine topography, to better execute his composition. Volanakis' design received first prize among the many participating and eminent artists, and such was the enthusiasm of the Austrian Emperor, who, when Volanakis submitted his design, approved his immediate boarding on a ship of the Austrian fleet with which he would circumnavigate the Adriatic and Dalmatian coasts [5].

Volanakis' art combines the disciplined style of the Munich School with his deep knowledge of Greek maritime culture. His works range from painful sea battles and turbulent seas to the serene coastal coastline, demonstrating his knowledge, his skill in creative depiction, and the capture of emotion. Through the use of colors, the play of light, and the movement of each figure in the water, on ships, or on the coastline, he not only contributed to the elevation of the Greek sea but also to the depiction of Greek national civilization and culture, which he transformed into an emblematic medium. Through Volanakis' artistic eyes, we see the sea not only as a natural habitat, but also within the framework of culture and emotion, highlighting the common memory and Greek maritime life. Ultimately, Greek seascapes played a decisive role in the evolution of contemporary art as well as in the aesthetic way the nation used to express and establish its identity. Their art was the vehicle by which the sea was transferred from a physical geographical space to a symbolic field, connecting Greece's ancient maritime heritage with the dreams of a modern and glorious state [21].

### 3.2. The Symbolic Dimension of the Sea

The sea, in addition to its physical and historical aspects, has always been a dominant symbolic and metaphorical theme in the culture of mankind. In literary works—from Homer's *Odyssey* to contemporary poetry of Elytis' and Cavafy's—the sea is a place of danger and hope, banishment and return [22]. To Homer, it is the arena where Od-

ysseus' journey took place: a place of struggle, grief, and finally return. Modern Greek poets like C. P. Cavafy used ocean voyage imagery to represent the journey of life and the past, while N. G. Seferis saw the sea as an image of exile, longing, and elevation [23]. For Dinos Christianopoulos, “*the sea is like love. Like Eros.*”

In a lot of cases, the sea can be seen as a symbol for infinity, the unknown, or the unfathomable depths of the subconscious mind. Gaston Bachelard saw water as one of the elemental sources of the human imagination, closely connected to dreaming, letting go, and depth [24]. The sea, in psychoanalysis, has always been identified with the most ancient and universal archetypes of origin and return, serving as a metaphor of the maternal and the unconscious [25]. These varied things the sea is related to, its symbolic aspect, go beyond any location or time. The sea, as a metaphor, is unrestricted by time or place and symbolizes, among other things, freedom, danger, transformation, and existential doubt [21].

Seascape art is one of how the sea's fluctuating moods and figures are recognized as symbols and felt by the audience on an intellectual and emotional level in the presence of the artwork. The sea was for Volanakis not only a subject but also a brilliant metaphor to express various ideas, emotions, and experiences. Konstantinos Volanakis' work bursts with a new dimension if we realize that not only are the metaphors of the sea a part of his painting tradition, but also that he dared to challenge them by painting realist scenes. His turbulent waves, tranquil harbors, and majestic vessels are, in fact, the visual narratives of journey, memory, and identity, and not just the straightforward descriptive records. His work goes beyond mere representation and becomes contemplation, both on the personal and the collective level, as he invites the viewers to experience silent meditation by the sheer power of his art and not words.

## 4. Digital Media, Education, and Public Engagement with Art

With the arrival of the twenty-first century and the evolution of technology, digital media have begun to enter the art sector. The presence of virtual museums, online archives, and interactive platforms has fundamentally

changed the entire way in which artistic works are processed and understood by the public. Projects such as the digital platform Europeana and Google Arts & Culture provide the entire world with access to very high-resolution reproductions of works, curated narratives, and multi-media formats, thus giving users ways of engagement that are not limited by physical space [26]. Digital worlds like these not only support the preservation and recording of cultural heritage but also open new avenues for learning, interpretation, and public participation [27]. Digitization has become an essential tool for the operation of modern museums. It effectively does two things simultaneously; on the one hand, it preserves and “rescues” fragile works of art, and secondly, it broadens the accessibility of viewers wherever they are in the world [28].

Using high-resolution imaging, 3D scanning, and detailed metadata, museums not only save the physical side of the cultural objects from the inevitable natural decay but also give researchers the chance to see the objects in such a way that was impossible before. In this case, a digitally scanned painting can be a means to show the brushwork, underdrawings, and surface textures that cannot be seen even if the work is directly handled. Besides that, digitalization activities are empowering everyone with the same rights to be the next generation of culture custodians. Because there are no longer geographical or institutional restrictions on platforms such as Europeana and Google Arts & Culture, users can have open access to large collections, curated narratives, and virtual tours [29]. Despite the significant investment that has begun and is being made in digital culture and the sustainability of digital resources, complex copyright issues governing the use of digital images continue to be an obstacle.

#### 4.1. Museums in the Digital Era

Digital engagement goes a step further from just preservation by focusing on the aspects of participation, interactivity, and immersive learning. We are already in the second decade of the 21st century, modern digital technologies are now everywhere and are constantly evolving, while most of the world has now become familiar with their use, enjoying a multitude of new possibilities. Giacardi highlights that one of the most common ways for mu-

seums to engage the public is to enhance their experience through gamification, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR) [30]. For example, through VR technology, the user can feel like they are inside a painting, wander around it, and interact [31]. These digital innovations put the visitor in an active role, exploring and not just standing as passive spectators in front of a work of art. When it comes to the seascapes, digital engagement opens a whole new world of interpretation. People, through the internet, can “sail” in the seascapes, get to know the ships in the three-dimensional, or even play with the animated versions of the sea environments. These kinds of applications not only help the users to understand the stories told by the seascapes but also, as they do through the experiences of traveling and discovering, they create an emotional bond with these narratives [28].

Museums offer excellent examples of how digitalization and public involvement can come together. The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich employs interactive installations to show how seascapes are related to the stories of empire, trade, and exploration, thus changing the old-fashioned artworks into the documents of history that are alive. At the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation in Greece, online exhibitions have been created to not only showcase the art of Konstantinos Volanakis but also to relate it to Greece’s maritime heritage. These projects convey the message that digital media can be an instrument for interpretation to become more profound, for artworks to be contextualized both historically and culturally, and for the participation of the public to increase. Museums, aspiring to become landmarks of cities, through new technologies, intend to attract thousands of visitors, on the one hand by improving their experience, on the other hand by impressing them at first glance. The adoption of new technologies by Museums aims at the effort to free the museum from the encyclopedic character it possessed in the past and adopt the idea of the museum as a multidimensional organization, emphasizing its social role [27]. The social dimension of its operation changes for the better, with communication with the public, the interpretation, and transmission of the content of its collections. In addition, the transmission of information, non-messages, and experiences is done clearly and

effectively to different social groups and individuals with diverse expectations, pursuits, and interests. Thus, digital technologies come to optimize the services provided to visitors, but also to the society in which they are located and operate. This means that the museum now turns its attention to the individual visitor, wishing to satisfy their need for information, education, and entertainment.

## 4.2. Educational and Societal Impact

The idea of learning in museums is not new, and as Hein states, during the second half of the 19th century, museums were considered as one type of institution among others that offered education to the masses<sup>[32]</sup>. Museums, therefore, have a long tradition of transmitting knowledge, and this function was considered the central axis of their educational activity for many decades. However, today, museums are more important in facilitating individuals to develop essential skills for the 21st century<sup>[33]</sup>. These skills include “technological literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, social consciousness, and awareness of the globalized society”<sup>[34]</sup>.

The educational and societal impact of digital transformation is huge. Digital platforms allow students to study artwork in an extremely detailed way; for instance, they can zoom into the minutest detail or compare works from different collections without being limited by geography<sup>[7]</sup>. Interactive tools facilitate experiential learning and critical thinking, which are beyond the scope of traditional teaching methods<sup>[35]</sup>. With this data, new expectations are being created regarding how museums should address their audience. Thus, museums are trying to integrate new technologies into their environment to respond to the needs of this new reality. The public, through open digital collections, is connected to the exhibits and the respective cultural heritage, and they become a source of cultural identity and collective memory. A digital exhibition can significantly contribute to “opening up” the museum to an audience that faces various challenges, such as geographical distance, disabilities, or low income<sup>[36]</sup>. We see that digitization is not only a technological innovation but a political commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and cultural dialogue.

All this digital transformation is leading to a change in the way museums operate, with their role shifting from being mere custodians of physical objects to being a participatory tool for the promotion of cultural heritage. In the case of seascapes, this new digital model allows people who live far from marine environments to feel the dynamism of the sea and connect with its symbolic power. In an online exhibition dedicated to painting, for example, the public can further analyze the skill of each painter and delve deeper into their thematic composition. For this reason, it is crucial that cultural spaces make the transition and make the most of the new possibilities offered by the evolution of communication providers, because with the contribution of technology, traditional culture can not only be preserved but also inspire a larger audience.

## 5. Project Overview and Usability

The inspiration for the creation of this specific study, in addition to our visit to the exhibition dedicated to the work of Konstantinos Volanakis, was also the postgraduate course in the field of Digital Culture, “WWW and Digital Collections Management. The creation of this project was a process based on three main objectives: the functionality of the website and the applications used within it, the provision of quality content, its good and simple structure, and the creation of an interesting and pleasant user experience. The website entitled “Konstantinos Volanakis, the ‘Poet’ of the Sea” is accessible at: <https://konstantinosvolanakis.weebly.com/> (**Figure 2**). The platform was created with Weebly, which is an easy-to-use website builder and was chosen primarily for its user-friendly interface and flexibility. Thus, the whole process aimed to make navigation easy and the user journey accessible. The menu organization is clear, direct, and functionally structured. Users can find the data directly in each section, so that they do not get tired, and the browsing process is uninterrupted. This design philosophy is in line with both the learning process and the user’s visual experience, as a result of which users can delve into the biography and artistic work of Konstantinos Volanakis without facing technical obstacles or complicated navigation.



**Figure 2.** Homepage of the digital platform.

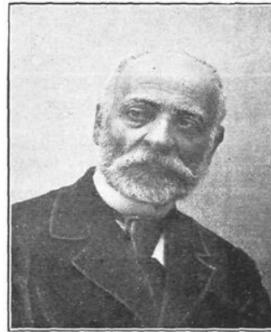
### 5.1. Thematic Structure and Interactive Features of the Digital Exhibition

Upon entering the website, visitors are welcomed by a digital museum environment created and hosted on the Artsteps platform (<https://www.artsteps.com/>). In the museum, the artworks of Konstantinos Volanakis are presented with simplicity, and are distinguished in four thematic axes: “Ports”, “Wave”, “Sunset”, and “Darkness”. Each of these thematic axes presents, in addition to Volanakis’ talent, the highlighting of the themes in accordance with his emotional mood and the style of his works. In addition, the artworks are accompanied by prose and poetic quotations that aesthetically converse with the artworks, providing interpretive ideas and deepening the viewer’s emotional engagement. The atmosphere of the tour is also enhanced by a piece by internationally renowned musician Ross Daly, which makes the user’s experience immersive. All the material used is from cultural heritage institutions such as the Aikaterini Laskaridi Foundation and the National Gallery [37].

Users can then delve into Volanakis’ life and artistic career, from his birth to the present day, when his work continues to live on, presented in chronological order, with

the help of the Time Graphics tool (<https://time.graphics/>). This visual and interactive historical record presents the key moments of the painter’s career in a concise but clear way. The timeline leads to contemporary reinterpretations of his artistic work, including the research of art historian Manolis Vlachos and his doctoral thesis, and the artist’s significant “return” to public opinion—mainly in Piraeus—through the major exhibition of the Hellenic Maritime Museum in collaboration with the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation (Figure 3).

In addition to the timeline, a presentation on the homepage showcases selected works by Volanakis, providing an initial visual introduction to his artistic world. This first visual presentation is quite limited, as it is only a teaser for the next section of the platform dedicated to an extensive exploration of his art. The experience is completed with an elaborate, interactive quiz created with the Quizizz platform (<https://quizizz.com/>). Users are invited through this pleasant and easy-to-use tool to familiarize themselves with the main elements concerning the life and artistic contribution of Volanakis, thus integrating the material into their memory through a pleasant and entertaining format (Figure 4).

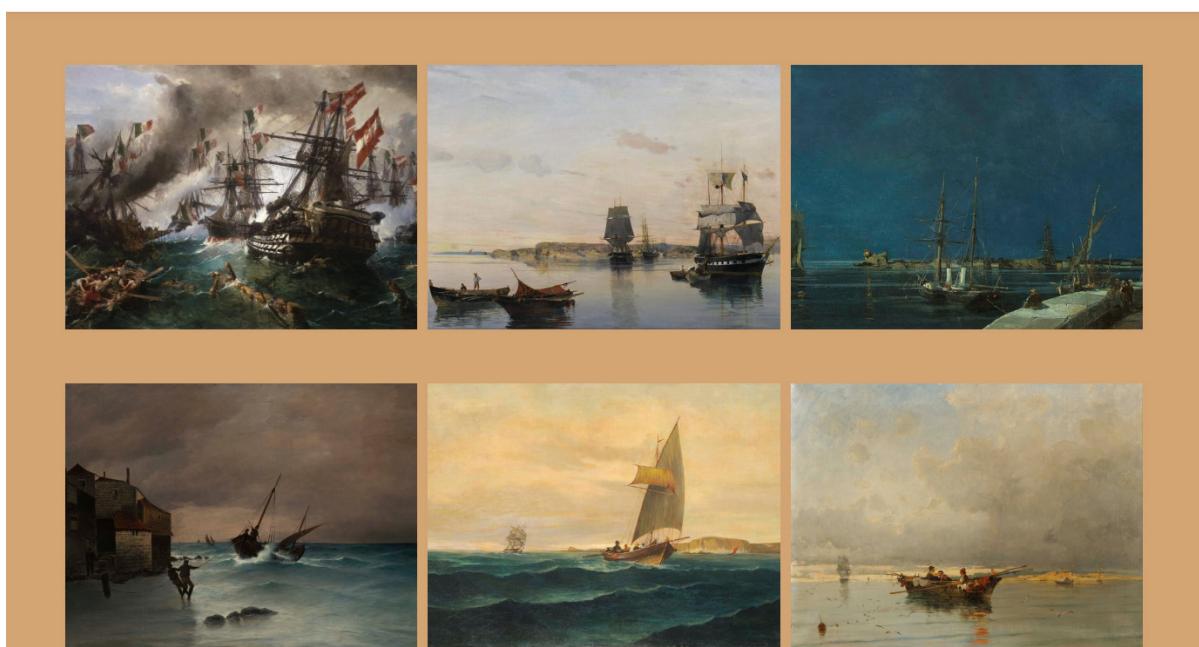


#### Studies in Munich and artistic maturation

On October 28, 1864, at the age of 27, Konstantinos Volanakis enrolled in the famous Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, under the direction of the distinguished historical painter Karl von Piloty. Although his age was not young, studying art at a mature stage of life was not considered unusual at the time. In the Academy's register he is recorded as number 2076, as a Greek Orthodox, the son of a merchant.

He began by attending the Sculpture Department, practicing in copying sculptures from plaster models, without it being known who his first teacher was. At this time, other Greek artists were also in Munich, such as Theodoros Vryzakis and Nikiforos Lytras, but Volanakis formed other connections,

**Figure 3.** Part from the Content Section.



**Figure 4.** The artwork section.

## 5.2. Content Structure and User Navigation

The user must navigate through the menu to the primary section of the platform that deals with the biography. This part shows the life path of Volanakis, his arrival into the world in Heraklion, Crete, his stay in Munich, which

was long and quite influential, and finally, his return to Greece and settling in Piraeus. Here, visitors get the basic contextual means to understand his artistic development by getting insight into the key events, influences, and environments that not only changed the way he worked but also made his work (Figure 5) more accessible. Naviga-

tion in this part is done with the help of a well-defined and straightforward layout, which not only allows the user to have a quick glance at the content but also helps to keep the platform in its educational mood.

The following main section, first, connects the users with the art world of Volanakis. It displays the works of art that the National Gallery and the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation have chosen as the most representative of their collections. This part of the site works against the textual presence by design; thus, words are kept to a minimum, and the visitor's role is to establish a direct relation with the artworks, without any external interference. No interpretation is sought here, only the encounter with the work—the viewers are thus given the chance to perceive

the paintings of Volanakis from the point of view of their being, for instance, the serenity of the harbors, the uninterrupted ebb and flow of the waves, and the shining of the distant sea horizon. The final part of the digital platform features the person who has given life to the project. Mavrea Christina has been responsible for the writing, content curation, and digital implementation. This section (**Figure 6**) gives a brief account of the reasons and the wider conceptual framework leading to the creation of the platform. The section is in line with the general aesthetic and pedagogical principles of the website by being clear in its presentation, not giving too much detail which would be unnecessary, and at the same time, making it accessible and usable to all visitors.



**Figure 5.** The work of Volanakis' section.



#### The early years of Konstantinos Volanakis

Konstantinos Volanakis was born on March 17, 1837 in Heraklion, Crete. The family's possible places of origin include both the village of Bolania in Heraklion and Volani in Rethymno. He completed his secondary education in Heraklion. His father, Dimitrios, was a wealthy merchant, while his mother, Chariklia (née Iliadis), came from Smyrna. The family was large: his brothers Ioannis (who died childless), Athanasios – an industrialist who supported Konstantinos financially for several years – and Miltiadis; as well as his sisters Polyxeni, wife of Theodoros Afentoulis, and Kalliopi, wife of I. Manousis. In 1851, when Konstantinos was 14 years old, the family decided to leave the troubled Crete and settle in Syros, which was experiencing great economic and cultural prosperity at the time. This move fundamentally changed his life. At the same time, at the Gymnasium of Ermoupolis, the renowned painter and portrait painter Andreas Kriezis, from Hydra, who had studied in

**Figure 6.** Part from the Content Section.

## 6. Conclusions

Our experience with the association with the works of Konstantinos Volanakis in the summer of 2024 was a decisive factor in the inspiration and creation of the present study. All this experiential experience gave rise to the need to reexamine and reinterpret his work within a contemporary digital environment. This study highlights the importance of Konstantinos Volanakis, who can be considered one of the leading figures of contemporary Greek seascape painting, and shows how his work can be given a new lease of life through digital cultural heritage initiatives. His art, although based on the nineteenth century, retains its validity and emotional power and can communicate effectively with a contemporary audience. Volanakis, with his work, manages to reframe issues such as the sea, travel, departure, and return in the light of contemporary issues such as migration, nostalgia, and the sense of belonging, thus creating a timeless conversation. It turns out that he is not simply a historical object, but, on the contrary, he comes into contact and converses with the man of today who experiences the same emotions and concerns.

The uniqueness of his work lies in the connection of three themes: the convergence of aesthetic interpretation, pedagogical orientation, and digital mediation. Once these aspects are combined, the research opens new and exciting possibilities for art encounters that are the main point of the potential of digital platforms, not only to preserve and disseminate cultural heritage but also to transform it into a living, participatory experience. It also makes Volanakis' work more accessible, especially to younger generations. This strengthens cultural memory and encourages a critical understanding of his legacy. The results of this effort signal that online tools can serve as a time machine, effectively reducing the gap between past and present and making the art of the past a living medium for reflection and dialogue of the present. Further investigation could open a wider field for this model through a comparative approach with other European marine painters, which would give a broader artistic context to Volanakis. Similarly, tracing his influence on later Greek artists will reveal the tradition of seascape painting. The development of more advanced augmented and virtual reality editions also indicates the next chapter of this research, offering more exciting ways

to approach his masterpieces. In fact, this research confirms once again that Volanakis' "silent poems of the sea" continue to communicate with their customary clarity and depth of emotion, thus welcoming audiences of all ages to contemplate the timeless stories he so skillfully embodied.

## Author Contributions

Methodology, D.K and C.M.; software, D.K and C.M.; validation, C.D.; formal analysis, D.K., and C.D.; investigation, C.M.; resources, C.M. and D.K; data curation, C.M.; writing—original draft preparation, C.M., and D.K.; review and editing, C.M.; visualization, D.K. and C.D.; supervision, C.D.; project administration, D.K. and C.D.; funding acquisition, D.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Not applicable.

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Not applicable.

## Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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