

This exhibition showcases the major literary figures of Greece in the twentieth century, with special attention to those authors best represented in the Princeton collections: C. P. Cavafy; the Nobel Laureates George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis; Nikos Kazantzakis; Yannis Ritsos; and Angelos Sikelianos.

Together, these writers created a mythology of modern Greece. In this they were joined by the British and American poets who placed Greece at the center of modernism – H.D., Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Robert Graves – and by figures such as Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, and James Merrill, who discovered Greece around the time of World War II and forged close personal connections with its leading writers. This encounter between traditions resulted in groundbreaking works of literature that introduced the English-speaking world to the nuanced reality of modern Greece.

One of the greatest contributions of Hellenic literature, besides giving new life to the classics, was a fundamental, new humanism, which appeared in force at a time when nihilism and alienation were dominant and when few writers showed the “idealist tendency” for which the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize to George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis in 1963 and 1979, respectively.

Over the course of the twentieth century, modern Greek literature emerged as an international literature, thanks in large measure to the individuals who devoted their lives to the translation, dissemination, and understanding of modern Greek authors. Foremost among these translators and critics were Kimon Friar and Princeton’s Edmund Keeley, both of whose papers are housed in Firestone Library.

Over the last twenty-five years, Princeton has become a major intellectual center for the teaching, translation, publication, and study of modern Greek literature. Today, through its academic curriculum, as well as its writer-in-residence fellowships, readings, and translation workshops, the Program in Hellenic Studies builds on this tradition by bringing to the English-speaking world the most important voices of contemporary Greece.

The manuscripts, texts, and artwork on display have been selected from the Firestone Library Department of Rare Books and Special Collections and the Princeton Art Museum. Most items were the generous donations of alumni and friends, or were acquired in partnership between the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections and the Program in Hellenic Studies, supported by the Stanley J. Seeger Hellenic Fund.