

# The Greek Outsiders: Artists Lost to Hell

By Steve Frangos

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## PART TWO

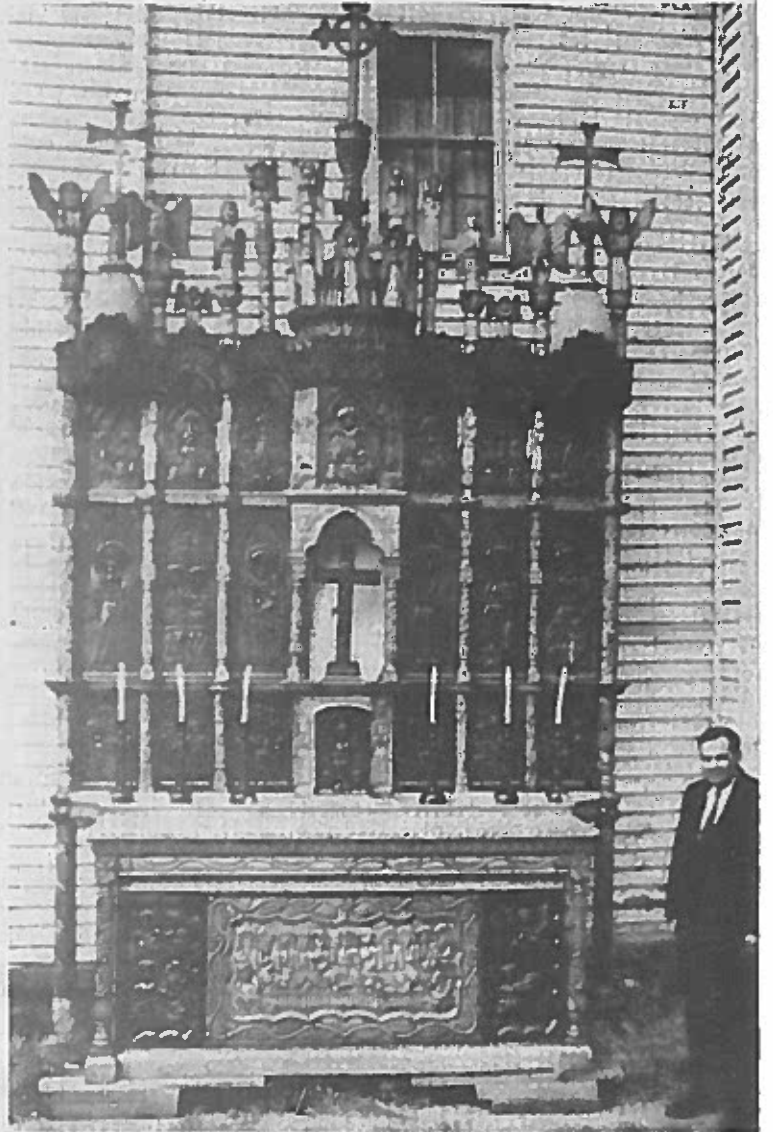
At least six Greek Americans are now internationally recognized American Outsider Artists. While there may be additional Greek American artists that should be recognized as part of this same group, for the moment we can certainly include Helen Contis, Peter Contis, John W. Perates, Tom Stefopoulos, and Drossos P. Skyllas.

With each passing year Greek American Outsider artists are receiving ever greater critical distinction in American art circles. Yet just as these artists are gaining in prestige and overall recognition among art collectors and museum curators the world over, so in equal measure are they all but forgotten among the modern Greeks everywhere.

### JOHN W. PERATES

John W. Perates is certainly one of those Greek American folk artists whose life and work blurs the accepted categories. Perates was born on February 10, 1895, in the village of Amphikleia near Delphi, the most sacred site in all of Ancient Greece. Perates came from five generations of traditional Greek wood workers and he learned his craft from his grandfather. As academic distinctions go, a folk artist is one who learns his or her art as an apprentice to a recognized practitioner steeped in a style based in a long established community tradition. So, upon his arrival in Portland Maine in 1912, John Perates was already a traditional Greek wood worker.

Now while all accounts agree that John Perates arrived in the United States in 1912, the reason most often given, the aftermath of the Balkan Wars and the economic hardships this conflict inflicted on the Perates family is, in his specific case, historically incorrect. The First Balkan War lasted from October 1912 to May 1913 while the Second Balkan War broke out on June 16, 1913. All accounts also stress that John Perates needed to earn monies abroad to help his family. We can be fairly sure that it was, in fact, the unstable political conditions and corresponding economic instability in Greece which led to the first Balkan War and all the rest that motivated Perates' journey to North America. It was with his coming to America that Perates, perhaps unin-



Master Greek American woodcarver John W. Perates next to his finished, black walnut, pine and ironwood altar in Portland, Maine.

tionally, found what various art critics now consider to be his singular artistic vision.

Why John Perates came to Portland is no longer recalled, but it is the second largest city in Maine and factory work was available. Perates immediately found employment at the J. F. Crockett Company, which specialized in handmade furniture.

Given his religious nature we can be safe in assuming Perates worshiped with the other Greek Orthodox faithful in Portland. While the years between 1912 and 1925 remain undocumented on these Orthodox faithful, we do know that "[B]y 1925, the Greek community in greater Portland had grown to

the point where the State of Maine officially recognized the Greek Parishes of Portland and Westbrook. Shortly thereafter, the Parish community [in Portland] bought the old Presbyterian Church on the corner of Pleasant and Park Streets ([www.holytrinityportland.org](http://www.holytrinityportland.org)).

At some point, Perates married Catherine Keenan and the couple said to have had two sons but little else is available on his private life. There is another aspect of John Perates' daily life that is always commented upon but then never explained. Apparently John Perates frequently walked through the cemeteries of Portland and many New England small towns. It seems

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his special breed of icons "in the fall of 1938, when his cabinet-making business was slow and he had time on his hands (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990)." Still other sources report that 'in 1930' Perates first began to carve what he is said to have called his, "furniture for the House of the Lord." Others state categorically that Perates first began to carve his icons when his sons went to serve in World War II.

But all essentially agree that: "Over nearly a forty-year period, Perates carved massive painted icons, a pulpit, and an altar screen intended to grace his church. He took Byzantine subjects and themes that he remembered from his native Greece and that he had seen illustrated in books and added his personal vision to create powerful iconographic panels (Museum of American Folk Art Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists)."

For those of you who have never been to Greece, traditional icon screens are very often painted. Again, the traditional icon screens in Greece can be five-tiers high, while the majority in the United States are most often three-tiers. As I saw when I was in Greece in 1978-1979, Greek icon carvers use what is called in English "chapbooks" for various saints and iconic decorative motifs. A chapbook is a book filled with measured drawings that iconographers copied to fit a specific order. Iconography in Orthodox traditions depicts the saint in a state of perfection so they don't have to change in appearance, which explains the various types of chapbooks.

But John W. Perates, a Greek folk artist by any expert's definition went one step further and merged stylistic features and elements seen in New England cemeteries with Orthodox iconographic traditions. Motivated by his inner faith Perates moved into artistic directions well beyond all rules and categories.

Writing in early 1981, Panos A. Stathatos, an architect for the Rockefeller Center and an advisor for the International exhibition of the Museum of Folk Art in New York City that displayed some of Perates icons we learn that: "In the early 1960s, Perates was commissioned by the Greek Church of Portland to carve and paint a series of icons. When presented to the Parish Council, however the reactions were with

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one exception negative. The priest and the council members saw the simple, common-looking, depictions of Christ and saints and commented that Perates had no respect for the Greek Orthodox religion and tradition. They did not see what they expected to see, the familiar features, form and color of Byzantine icons, and were distressed by Perates's roughly carved, distorted figures, who seemed ready to walk out of their frames (Greek Accent)."

Stathatos also offered this telling story, "An important event that influenced Perates' development as an artist occurred when a friend went to France on a business trip and returned with color prints of paintings by El Greco and the turn-of-century Greek painter, Theofilos. After studying the prints carefully, he told his friend, "Both of them would have understood my icons; the three of us could have been good friends."

In 1970, John W. Perates died. "At his death, Perates' shop contained more than forty large icons, including... a sixteen-and-one-half-foot-tall altar in the Greek style, which he hoped would be sold to a church for the benefit of his grandchildren. He never sold his dazzling array of saints, stating that he made them for himself from his own inspiration and creativity," (americanart2.si.edu).

While World Hellenism continues to ignore the raw and powerful work of John W. Perates, this lone artist' creations are held in the permanent collections of the Rockland Center for the Arts, the Museum of American Folk Art in New York, the National Museum of American Art in Washington DC and private collections around the planet.

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