

The Greek Outsiders: A

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

PART FOUR

For reasons difficult to understand the five Greek American artists who have individually been acclaimed as American Outsider artists have never been recognized as a collective. With each passing year these five Greek American Outsider artists are, individually, receiving ever greater critical distinction. 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.

The Greek American artists who excel at American folk and/or Outsider art (perhaps predictably they have each blurred these distinctly different categories greatly) include Helen Contis, Peter Contis, John W. Perates, Tom Stefopoulos and Drossos P. Skyllas. Certainly other Greek folk, primitive and/or Outsider artists may well exist. Yet aside from David Lewis' book-length study on Peter and Helen Contis 'Byzantine Butterflies: the Folk Paintings of Peter Contis and Helen Contis Greek Immigrants in America' (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1995) no academic or art critic is writing about any of these artists. Even Lewis' fine study never considers that there might be other Greek American artists whose work is strikingly similar to the Contis's overall project.

That these artists, with the notable exception of the complicated circumstances surrounding the Contis couple, worked alone, yet still seem to share not only inspirational sources but actual motifs in their work will be discussed momentarily. First, let us get the very latest information on the monumental work known as the Lovejoy Columns.

TOM STEFOPOULOS

Little is publicly available about Athanasios Efthimou Stefopoulos's (1900-1979) early life in America. We do know that for a time he had been a calligrapher and art deco artist. Yet, for whatever reasons, Athanasios - who in time became Tom - could not support himself as an artist. By the time reporters, archi-

texts and interested others began to seek him out, he was a night watchman for the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway.

Tom Stefopoulos worked in the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway's Hoyt Street freight yard located in northwest Portland, Oregon. The Lovejoy ramp was constructed in 1926 and 1927 to carry Lovejoy Street over this vast complex of train tracks, warehouses and light industrial buildings known locally as the Northwest Industrial Triangle. From 1948 to 1952, Stefopoulos began to first sketch in caulk on the columns of the Lovejoy ramp. Part of Stefopoulos' duties was to help in the coupling of freight trains. As various cars were routed from different parts of the freight yard to be part of a new train, there was a great deal of down time. Stefopoulos, as he later claimed, to simply pass the time, began his complex sketches. Friends began to encourage Stefopoulos to really apply himself to these images and the Greek soon switched to oil paint. As Stefopoulos worked he painted over his original sketches and began to add very stylized calligraphy to many of the paintings. In order to paint his murals Stefopoulos would stand between the train cars and work his way down a column. Consequently many of these murals are 10' to 12' tall and often 4' to 6' wide. No one is sure how many paintings Stefopoulos completed. City work crews, believing the murals were just graffiti, painted over a number of Stefopoulos' elaborate paintings.

Stefopoulos' work is today recognized as a mix of Americana and Classical Greek mythology. Surviving murals include Diogenes with a lamp held high looking for an honest man; huge birds in twisting trees; swans, lions and musical notations, all mixed together with various slogans such as "God is Love."

As far as the average person was concerned in the late 1940s and early 1950s, these enormous paintings just came out of nowhere. For the people of Portland these enormous colorful murals, scattered about a forest of huge concrete columns, soon became accepted as distinctly local creations. A native Portlander, filmmaker Gus Van Sant intentionally opens and



This column, by Stefopoulos, is one yuppie neighborhood in Portland, O

closes his 1989, movie "Drugstore Cowboy" with shots of the columns and the underworld neighborhood in which they once existed.

Toward the very end of his life Tom Stefopoulos was identified as the artist of these towering paintings. But Stefopoulos' renegade art was not to last. Whether you call it urban renewal or gentrification, the vast area once covered by railroad yards, warehouses and light industrial buildings was marked for destruction.

Years ago I wrote a short account of Tom Stefopoulos' fantastic paintings. At that time their ultimate fate was uncertain. While the overall circumstances have changed the urban art Stefopoulos is so recognized for creating may yet be destroyed.

Beginning in the 1990s the Northwest Industrial Triangle was renamed the Pearl District and is now a place of art galleries, upscale businesses and residences. The urban re-

Artists Lost to Hellenism



One of the two that's been raised in the region.

Renewal that has taken place includes the removal of a viaduct and the construction of the Portland Streetcar.

Now remember, Stefopoulos' 'canvas' of choice was a series of concrete columns that each weighs several tons. Not unreasonably, if money and profit are all you live for, the Stefopoulos columns were marked for destruction as the sweeping Lovejoy ramp was to be taken down to open up dozens of blocks for development.

A rescue effort began in 1997. The Stefopoulos artwork, it was argued, was not graffiti but rather treasured creations that identified what was distinct about Portland Oregon. A highly diverse group soon formed to 'save the columns' including the Pearl District Neighborhood Association, Portland's Greek community, developer Homer Williams and then Mayor Katz.

Arguably the most vocal and demonstrative elements within this group consisted of local artists, cura-

tors and architects. James Malbon Harrison, a local architect, led the charge. Portland filmmaker Vanessa Renwick has been documenting the entire process from the early protests to the restoration to the new placements, in her ongoing project entitled simply "Lovejoy." As improbable as it may seem, ten of Stefopoulos's columns were saved.

On October 5, 2005, two of the Stefopoulos columns were erected on street corners in a courtyard of the Elizabeth Lofts on NW 10th street, between Everett and Flanders. This preservation effort did not come cheap; local funds supplemented by donations from developer John Carroll saved this uniquely urban artwork.

But where the original oil on concrete paintings were under (and so protected by) an overpass, they are now exposed to the sun and weather. Consequently, the original paintings have been covered over by large photo-reproductions which are themselves encased in plexi-glass. The eight others are still lying in the field in the North Pearl.

Much controversy exists over how to finally deal with Stefopoulos's art and as far as I can discover nothing is resolved. The Regional Arts and Culture Council and the Portland Development Commission, the two city agencies taking the lead on the project, have decided to remove the original artwork from the columns. The plan is to take the original art and relocate it to the interior of the Elizabeth Lofts and then recreate the very same artwork on the columns for public display in the courtyard. It should be noted that the Elizabeth Lofts are private condominiums.

The future of all ten Stefopoulos columns is still very much undecided, but Hellenes everywhere owe a debt of thanks to the unique public and private coalition that has to date saved some of the greatest art yet created by a Greek living in the United States. Be aware that you can be part of the preservation solution. Tax free donations to preserve Tom Stefopoulos' columns can be made to the Regional Arts and Culture Council by calling 503-823-5111.

To the best of my knowledge there have only been two efforts to system-

atically present the work of a wide range of Modern Greek artists working in North America: the Fall 1947 issue of *Athene Magazine* and then the exhibition that led to the catalogue: *Modern Odysseys: Greek American Artists of the 20th Century*. We can excuse those involved with the 1947 project because the Outsiders I have identified in this series were either not working at that time, or were not known outside of their immediate families.

Taken collectively there are common motifs and even presentation styles shared by the five Greek Outsider artists. None of the five artists is a representational painter. Animal figures and design motifs seen in all five clearly harken back to Greek religious and folk art. One also hears that the work of a given Greek Outsider artist is perspective-less, which in one sense means the images are flat. But then, so too are traditional Eastern Orthodox icons. Motifs such as butterflies, birds and what-not that are seen in every one of the Greek Outsiders can each also be seen in artwork found in the homes and churches of Greek villages.

For those of you who have not been to Greece it is not uncommon for houses in rural Greece to have wall paintings and/or colorful motifs. Elaborate wood work, sometimes painted, is also a part of the Greek countryside I have walked through. The inside of a Sarakantsani shepherd's tent I once visited had embroidery done by the wife of the owner about shoulder high completely surrounding the interior while the outside was rough animal hide. I immediately got the sense that they were surrounded in the interior by this band of art.

Ultimately the point here is that while none of these five artists (with the exception of the Contis couple) ever saw the work of the others, they all share themes, presentation, and other traits. I am left with one final question, when will these five regional American artists be unappreciated for their common Greek roots?

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at grecianmon@yahoo.com