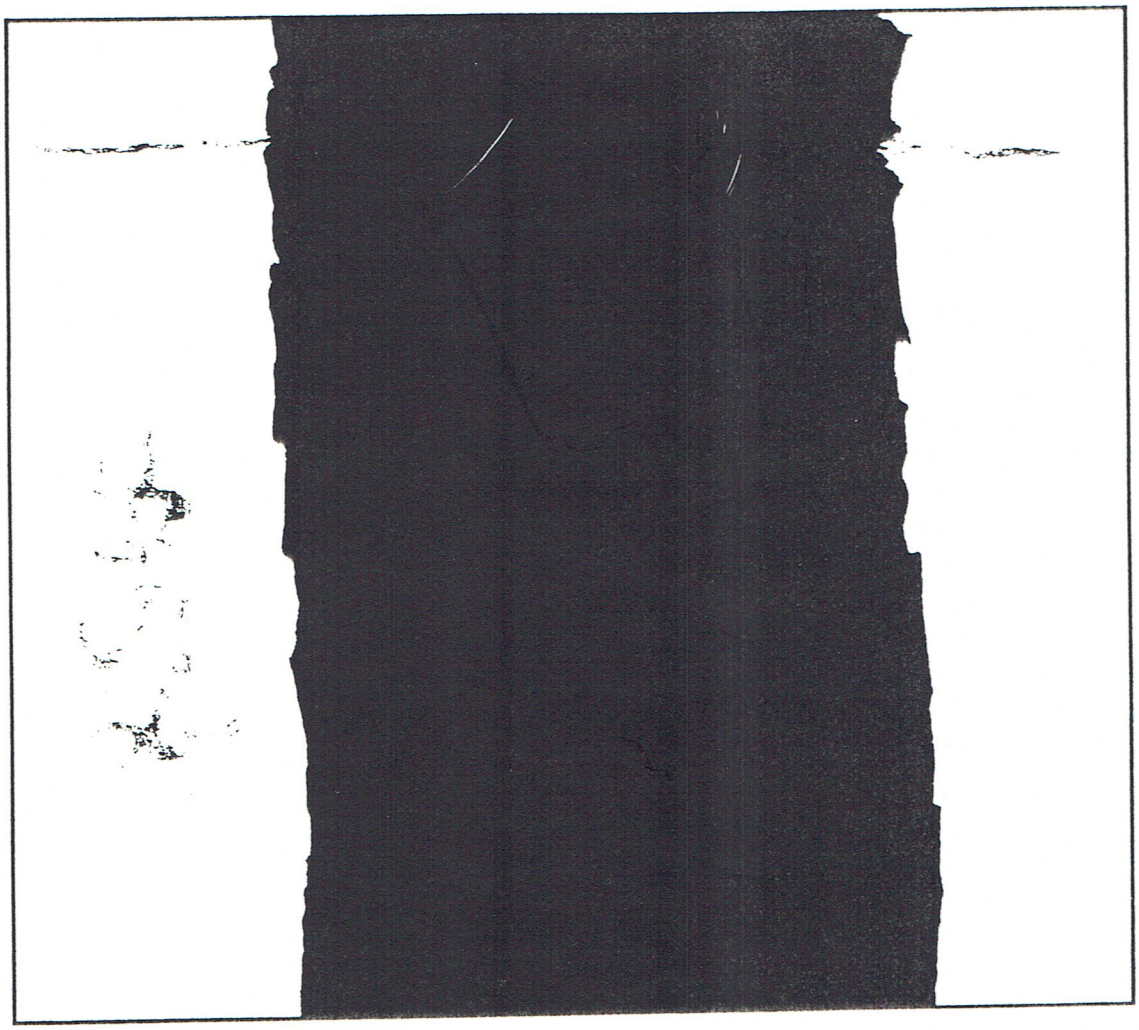
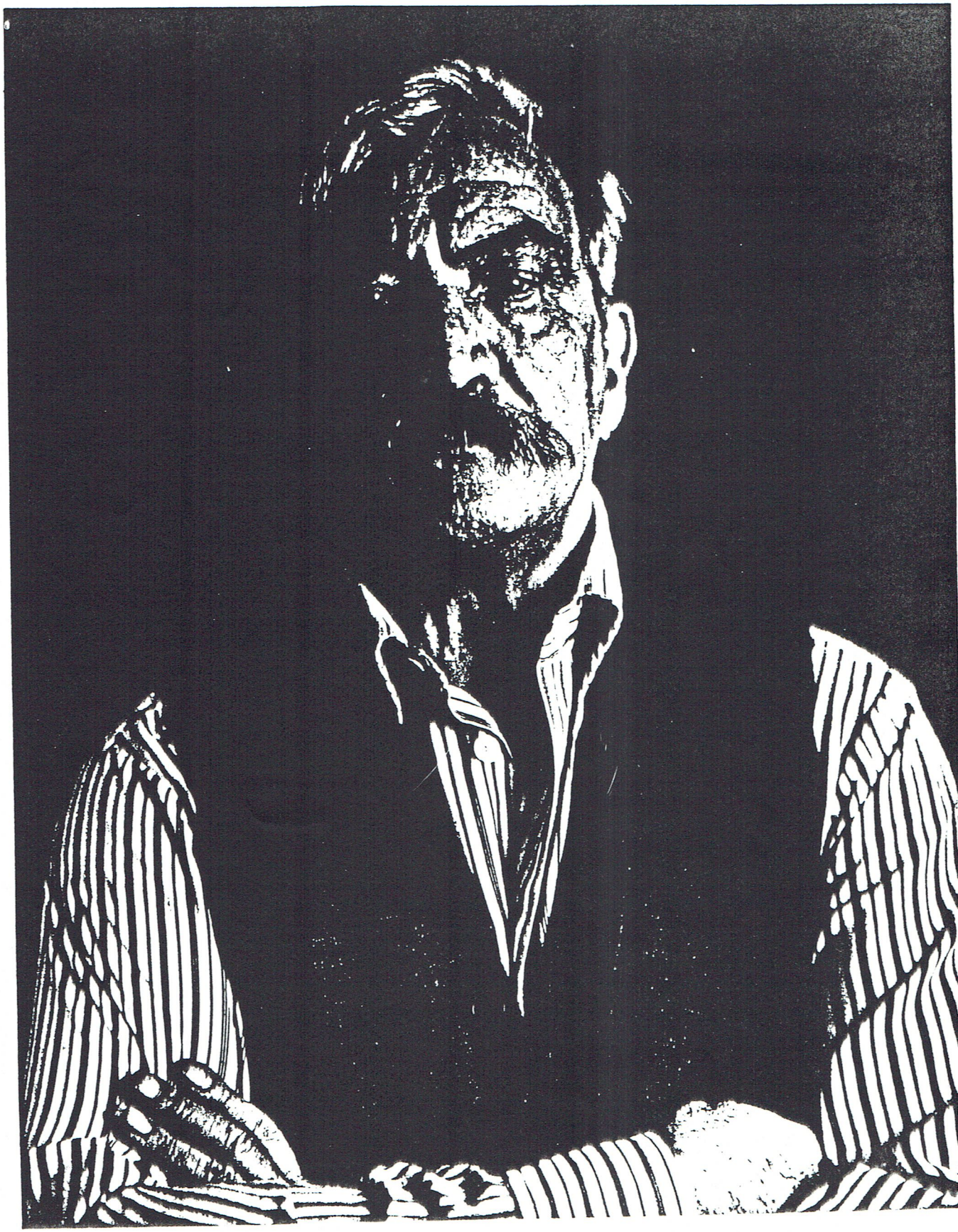


THEODOROS STAMOS

1922-1997

BY: BEVERLY SCHAEFFER, Provisional Docent

April 1997



Description by Dore Ashton in interview for New York Times January 20, 1956
He speaks haltingly with a frown, his arched eyebrows raised high over black eyes that fix the listener intently, and with his mouth hidden under a dense shelf of mustache. He gives one the impression of grave fierceness but often laughs a high full laugh.

THEODORE STAMOS

Theodore Stamos was born in New York on New Year's Eve in 1922. He died on February 4th of this year in Greece after a twelve day hospitalization involving lung problems. He was the fourth child of six born to Greek immigrant parents. When he was eight years old he had a fall in which he ruptured his spleen and had to have surgery. Later this injury was to keep him out of World War II. It was at this time that he started painting.

He attended Peter Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan and dropped out three months prior to graduation. He was awarded a scholarship to study sculpture with Simon Kennedy and Joseph Konzal at The American Artists' School. In 1937 he met Joseph Solman who was a member of the artists group known as The Ten. He was fifteen at the time and was encouraged by Solman to start painting at home. He set up an easel between two beds in his room which was shared by three others.

During the next few years he supported himself and his art pursuit by working as a florist, a hatblocker, a printer, a prism maker, enamel polisher, caster and as a book salesman.

In 1941 he began running a small frame shop on East 18th Street and continued there for the next eight years. It was during this time that he had the opportunity to meet many artists and in 1943 when he was twenty-one he had his first one man showing. It was at Wakefield Gallery Bookstore which was run by Betty Parsons who was quick to recognize his unusual talent. He wassoon commissioned to do a painting for the cruiseship S. S. Argentina and in 1946 his first painting, Sounds in the Rock, to be purchased by a museum was bought by The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

At this point I should like to take a short break and show you a group of photographs which will give you an idea of the world Stamos entered as a young man when he came into the company of "The First Generation". These artists were all older than Stamos and had worked for some time with their new artform while he entered this world just as the Abstract Expressionists were becoming known. This photograph was in Life Magazine in 1951 and shows among others, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Clyfford Still and Robert Motherwell. At this time Stamos' paintings were subtle, quasiabstract and dealt with germination and growth. He also used the same biomorphic vision used by his colleagues.

I do not feel that Stamos was a particularly happy person. In all of my research I have not seen any mention of marriage but I just read that he had three sons...Jason, Damon and Socrates. However in his obituary there is no mention made of them and it only mentions three living sisters. It is apparent that he most enjoyed natural beauty and looked to nature for inspiration. In an interview with a New York columnist he said he liked Tiffany Glass, bentwood chairs and that he walked, fished and gardened a lot. He said he was interested in Oriental philosophy byut only for himself and not to talk about. During his life he formed deep friendships with both artists and poets and it is interesting that he kept the two groups always separated from each other.

During this time Stamos had been teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In 1950 he met Tony Smith, the sculptor, and he recommended him for a teaching position at The Hartford Settlement House in New York. He taught there for sometime influencing many young people. The following year Stamos had Tony Smith build a house for him in Long Island and he was later to say that most of his ideas he found there and the surrounding area served as inspiration for his future work. In 1947 he had met Mark Rothko and they were becoming good friends so you can see most of his world revolved around art and the people in it.

During the latter part of the forties Stamos had begun to travel. First by train to the West and then in 1949 he took a freighter, accompanied by his poet friend, Robert Price, to France, Italy and Greece. They arrived with letters of introduction and he met many artists there among them Picasso. He was most interested in his personality but not nearly as much in the man's work. This trip had a major effect on his life. Probably the highlight of the trip was a visit to his Mother's village near Sparta. There were guerillas all along the way and his family, who were expecting him, were busy praying for his safety. His Mother had told him how during the occupation the guerillas had killed his uncle, who ran a flour mill, and taken his body and cut it up in small pieces because he had hidden the stones that he used for the flour from them and refused to give them up. Later his widow found all the pieces and reconstructed his body so he could have a proper burial. This happened on Good Friday and when Stamos first heard of this he painted a Chinese ink on cardboard entitled Good Friday Massacre . In this picture there were heavy black lines painted which continued past the border and there are two which are reaching diagonally across the field and almost touch two circular forms that are positioned just beyond their reach. This was an emotional visit for Theodore Stamos and then he returned again to New York.

In 1954 his good friend and travelling companion died and two years later he was to illustrate two books of poems written by his friend. In 1961 he moved from Long Island and moved into a house on 83rd Street in New York.

In 1970 he returned to Greece this time travelling to his Father's birthplace on the Island of Lefkada. This he found was not the usual beautiful tourist-type island but a very dry location with red soil. He then began to return to this area often and always during the summer. He meets and becomes a close friend of a cousin and motivates him to paint his people and his land. It is here that he started the series of paintings for which he is wellknown. Namely The Sunboxes, Infinity Field , Torino Series and The Lefkada Series. These are all quite small being about twenty-two by thirty inches. In these works he depicts both land and marine creatures sharing the same space, sometimes in small caves or murky atmospheres or floating along a shoreline. As his personal life became saddened or challenged his works became more intense and also more abstract with deep colors depicting either birth or death. In 1945 he painted such a picture which he called The Formling but when it was shown the following year at a group exhibit at Betty Parsons, who had become a prominent dealer for Abstract Expressionalist painters, the name had been changed to Cosmological Battle no doubt due to the awesome influence of nature's atomic forces.

I would now like to discuss this painting by Theodore Stamos entitled, Flowering Pavement. I do not see the resemblance in this to any of his other works but then I have just seen zerox copies of them which is hardly very satisfactory. I do not know what he is depicting but I do see the familiar use of the slash lines, loosely brushed balls and a rectangle with slashed lines of paint against a hazy atmosphere. In a discussion in our provisional class several of us saw the profile of a dark girl with almost an armour-type mask pulled across her face. Possibly he was contrasting the land (the pavement) against nature (the girl) He has used flat and dull colors for the pavement and I suspect that he might see the girl as a soft flower trying to escape the harshness of her life. At the end of my talk I certainly invite any of you to add your reaction and thoughts.

In closing I would now like to refer to Stamos' Obituary which I have included in my report. It strikes me as a rather sad ending to seventy-four years of life. They describe him as an Abstract Expressionist who was never considered at the top of his group possibly because of his young age. They discuss Mark Rothko who comitted suicide in 1970 and who Stamos buried in his only family plot. They then go on to say he was an Abstract Expressionist whose legal trouble was more famous than his work! What a sad note to have in your obituary! However an explanation must follow (and it did in the obituary.) Stamos, Bernard Reis, an accountant, and Morton Levine, an anthropology professor,were named as the three executors for Rothko's estate. The following year a petition was filed in court by the Guardians of his children in their behalf alleging that the three had sold a large amount of Rothko's paintings (78) at a greatly discounted price to The Marlborough Gallery which had represented Rothko. They alleged that this was detrimental to his reputation and therefore to the assets of the estate. They demanded dismissal of the executors and cancellation of the contracts with Marlborough. It further noted that Reis was an Officer of the Marlborough Gallery and that shortly after the sale of the paintings Stamos had been invited to join them. The courtcase went on for eighteen months and truly rocked the art world. In 1975 the Judge ruled that all three executors were guilty of negligence and a conflict of interests. He dismissed them cancelled The Marlborough contracts (Pace Gallery received them) and levied a 9.2 million amount in fines and assessments. Stamos paid his share by signing his house (valued at $435,000.00) over to the Estate and he was awarded a Life-Tenancy. After this unfortunate chain of events his reputation never recovered and he was known to say that it had been nine years of Hell. He continued to exhibit in New York but less frequently and at lesser galleries. He did exhibit frequently in Greece and even in Tokyo where his biographical data chronicled his involvement in a trial that shattered the art world and many feel broke the spirit of Stamos. He was seventy-four when he died this year in Greece.

Thank You. Do you have any comments to make about Flowering Pavment?

THE END

CHRONOLOGY

1922 Born in New York on December 31, fourth of six children of Greek immigrant parents.

1930 Ruptures spleen as the result of a fall, it is removed. While he is recuperating, he begins to draw.

1936 AttendsPeter Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. He is awarded a scholarship to American Artists' School. Studies sculpture with Simon Kennedy and Joseph Konzal

1937 Meets Joseph Solman, a member of the artists' group called "The Ten". Solman encourages Stamos to begin paintingat home and also directs him to visit Alfred Steiglitz's gallery.

1939 Three months before graduation, Stamos leaves school.
For the next two years he supports himself by working as a florist, a hat blocker, a printer, a prism maker, an enamel polisher, a caster and a book salesman.

1941 Begins running a small frame shop on East 18th Street. Continues until 1948.
Meets Arshile Gorky, Fernand Leger and others in the shop.

1943 First one-person exhibition in New York at Wakefield Gallery Bookstore run by Betty Parsons.
Meets Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman.
1943 Works included in the 1943 Whitney Annual.
Collector, Edward Root, purchases Stamos' Movement of Plants. First of 32 paintings by Stamos purchased by Root. Paintings later given to the Munson-Williams Proctor Institute in Utica, New York.

1946 First museum purchase, Sounds in The Rockby The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1947 One person exhibition at Betty Parson's Gallery in New York.
Meets Mark Rothko, Kurt Seligman and Peggy Guggenheim.
Travels by train throughout the United States and meets Mark Tobey, with whom he exchanges pictures.
Completes mural commission for Moore-McCormack Lines' S.S. Argentina.
Becomes acquaitned with John Graham.
1948 Travels by freighter to France, Italy and Greece with poet, Robert Price.
Through Christian Zervos he meets Brancusi, Victor Brauner, Giacometti, Henri Laurens, Picasso and also Morris Graves at Charres.

1950 One person exhibition at The Duncan Phillips Collection in Washington.
Tony Smith recommends Stamos for teaching position at The Hartley Settlement House in New York which he holds for the next four years.

Teachs at Black Mountain College in North Carolina where Kenneth Noland is among his students. Clement Greenberg is also in residence at the time.

1951 Awarded Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Scholarship.

Builds house on Long Island designed for him by Sculptor, Tony Smith.

Illustrates book, The Sorrows of Cold Stone: Poems 1940-1950 by John Malcolm Brinnin.

1952 Takes part in "Artists' Sessions at Studio "35"

1954 Untimely death of close friend, Robert Price.
Writes and delivers important lecture entitled "Why Nature In Art?" at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. where it is well received by Clive Bell, among others.
During the next few years Stamos delivers lectures at The Chicago Art Institute, The Munson-Williams Proctor Institute, Tulane University and the University of Alabama.

1955 Begins teaching at the Art Students' League in New York where he continued for many years.

1956 Illustrates the Hidden Airdrome and Uncollected Poems by Robert Price.
Receives National Institute of Arts and Letters Award.

1958 One person exhibition at Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York.
Painting in The New American Painting as Shown in Eight European Countries

1959 International Program of The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1961 Wins the Mainichi Newspaper Prize at the 6th Tokyo International.
Moves into house on 83rd Street in New York.

1966 Guest lecturer at Columbia University School of Fine Arts in New York.

1967 Becomes the third Maurice and Shirley Saltzman Artist-In-Residence at Brandeis University succeeding Jacob Lawrence and Philip Guston.

Receives National Arts Foundation Award.
Begins frequent visits with Mark Rothko.

1969 Completes his first large-scale tapestry commission for lobby of office building at 150 East 58th Street in New York.

1970 Mark Rothko commits suicide. Stamos offers Rothko family a part of the Stamos Family burial plot in East Marion, Long Island.

Stamos is asked to help supervise the installation of the Rothko Ecumenical Chapel in Houston, Texas, commissioned by Mr. & Mrs. John D. Menil. He is assisted by painter Roy Edwards who worked on the mural with Rothko.
Stamos makes second visit to Greece; begins to return regularly spending summers on the Island of Lefkada.

1971 Kate Rothko's guardian files petition against the three executors of Mark Rothko's Estate. Kate is Rothko's daughter. Stamos is one of the executors.

1972 One-person exhibition at Marlorough Gallery in New York.

1974 Rothko trial opens on February 14.

1975 Stamos is removed as an executor of The Rothko Estate.

On December 18 New York Surrogate Court Judge, Millard L.Midonick hands down his decision in "The Matter of Mark Rothko Deceased" in an 87 page long statement.

1980 One-person exhibition at Munson-Williams Proctor Institute.

1981 One-person exhibition "Paintings 1958-1960" at Louis K. Meisel Gallery in New York.

1983 Takes a trip to Jerusalem. The trip inspires a series of paintings.

1984 One-person exhibition M. Kneedler, Zurich, Switzerland.

1985 One-personexhibitionGalerie Wurthle, Vienna, Austria.

1986 One -person exhibition at Grimaldis Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland.

1987 One-person exhibition at Pierides Gallery of Modern Art in Athens, Greece.

1988 One-person exhibition at Museum Morsbroich in LeVerkusen, Germany.

1989 One-person exhibition at Heana Tounta Contemporary Art Center in Athens, Greece.

1991 One-person exhibition at ACA Galleries in New York.

1997 Stamos dies in Greece at age of 74.

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