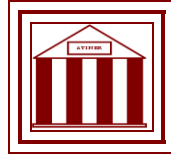


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**Greek-Americans, Greek Subjects,
and American Abstract Expressionism**

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Greek-Americans, Greek Subjects, and American Abstract Expressionism

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Abstract

American abstract expressionism is now world-famous as a style of painting, but less known are the contributions of Greek-American artists and of classical Greek myths to the formative years of this movement in the 1940s. Most notable among the Greek-American participants are William Baziotes (1912-1963), Theodoros Stamos (1922- 1997), and Peter Voulkos (1924-2002). Each of these artists was born of Greek immigrant parents who arrived in the United States before the imposition of strict quotas limiting immigration from Greece, Eastern Europe, and other areas during the 1920s. Most of the Greek immigrants settled in large urban areas like New York, where visual culture was more developed. Despite pressures to assimilate, Greek identity survived in coffee shops, schools and churches.

Abstract expressionists took a vigorous interest in classical myth. The American-born Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), who became in the 1940s, one of the notorious pioneers of abstract expressionism, changed the title of a major abstract painting from *Moby Dick* to *Pasiphae* (c. 1943). He did only after the curator, James Johnson Sweeney, the son of Irish-immigrants, told him the story of the Cretan queen who fell in love with the white bull sent by Poseidon to her husband, King Minos of Crete. Pollock's contemporaries, such as Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, William Baziotes, Barnett Newman, Romare Bearden, and Byron Browne, as well as the sculptor Isamu Noguchi and his occasional collaborator, the choreographer Martha Graham, all drew upon classical Greek themes, giving mythic titles to works produced in the 1940s.

One of closest students of classical myth was the painter Mark Rothko (1903-1070). His famous radio broadcast of 1943 with his longtime friend Adolph Gottlieb shows how reading Nietzsche and Freud led to new interest in Greek myth. Noguchi was the son of a Japanese writer and an Irish-American mother, who taught him as a child about classical myth. In order to acquire Greek marble for his sculptures, Noguchi often stopped off in Greece in route to America from Japan, where he spent years of his childhood with his father. AfricanAmerican Romare Bearden (1911-1988) also took up Greek themes, basing his paintings on scenes from *The Iliad* in 1948. Following the abstract expressionists, the contemporary artist, Lynda Benglis (born 2nd International Conference on Humanities and Arts in a Global World, 3-6 January 2015: Abstract Book 39 1941), a Greek-American, mimicked Pollock's flinging and dripping methods of painting, commenting on that style with her poured sculptures. For this reason, her work has been included in some international surveys of "Action Painting," which is the name the art critic Harold Rosenberg coined for abstract expressionism. To summarize, this paper will document and analyze the Greek contribution to abstract expressionism in the United States.

Keywords:

Introduction

American abstract expressionism is now world-famous as a style of painting, but less known is the role of classical Greek culture for the formative years of this movement in the 1940s and the contributions of Greek-American artists. I shall begin by surveying the use of Greek literary and visual references by artists of diverse ethnicity who participated in the abstract expressionist movement. I will then conclude this study with a focus on the leading Greek-American participants.

Abstract expressionists took a vigorous interest in classical Greek myths. They were following the lead of Surrealists in Europe, such as André Masson and Matta, as well as Picasso, who had absorbed Freud and turned to classical mythology. The Surrealists also admired Giorgio de Chirico's work with his classical references. His references to Greek mythology resulted from his having been born in Volos, Greece, to a Genovese mother and a Sicilian father. He then studied in Athens before moving to Germany in 1906. From 1936, De Chirico's work was often shown in New York, especially that year at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and in the Museum of Modern Art's show, *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*.

American artists felt Masson's influence firsthand since he took refuge in the United States during World War II. By then, Masson had already absorbed mythological themes drawn from ancient Greece and from Freud's writings on the dream and the unconscious. Between 1932 and 1934 alone, Masson painted works reflecting his increasing engagement with Greek myth, including *The Silenuses* (1932), *Bacchanal* (1933), *Daphne and Apollo* (1933), *Orpheus* (1934), and *The Horses of Diomedes* (1934). Masson did not just take his subject matter from classical mythology, he also paraphrased classical forms, such as that of a running figure of Apollo from a Greek vase. Among the Americans who encountered Masson's work was Jackson Pollock, who became in 1940s, one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism. Pollock could have met the French artist at the printmaker Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17, where both artists worked during the 1940s, and he certainly knew his work.

The notion that classical influence came only from modern European artists to American art has been modified by studies that document how the American modernists sought to define themselves by their own return to the classical past. They understood classicism through the filtering medium of Freud and Nietzsche. Above all Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* gave a central role to myth and to the artist.¹ This return to Greco-Roman myth via Freud and Nietzsche can be enlarged yet further by recalling how widespread the impact of Freud and Nietzsche had already been in the other arts, penetrating and transforming American consciousness since the century's first decades. The Abstract Expressionists were thus enmeshed in a

¹Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54-55.

process of cultural realignments that had been under way in America since before the first World War.

In 1914, Walter Lippmann, who had studied with William James at Harvard inaugurated a long career on the New York intellectual scene by publishing *A Preface to Politics*, which brought the theories of Nietzsche, Henri Bergson and Freud to bear on American public life.¹ Sexuality, mythic reverberation and the shock of contemporary intrusion also characterizes the painting that became arguably one of the most notorious visual icons of the tumultuous period between the wars: *Persephone* (1939) by Thomas Hart Benton, who was the teacher of Jackson Pollock at the Art Students League in New York.

Benton's art and life pass through the modernist crisis in their own fashion: Benton begins in the country, passes through a period of urban and cosmopolitan abstraction in Paris and New York, only to return to his rural regional roots and vivid narrative. He switched from abstraction to representation with the claim that he just "couldn't paint George Washington as a rainbow," yet his realism remains stylized. He conceived of a nude *Persephone*, which he followed eight years later with *Hercules and Achelous* (1947). His *Persephone* mingles classical and popular forms, resembling at once the old master Correggio's version of the myth of Antiope visited by Jupiter and pinup art of the period. Yet some details reinforce the classical reverberation for the informed viewer: thus the grain harvest in the background recalls the goddess of grain and fertility, Demeter, the mother of Persephone; the mule-drawn wagon ironically reinterprets the chariot in which Persephone's uncle, Pluto, carried her off. The vines of Dionysus creep into the foreground. The curves of the female form merge with the land, leading interpreters to see a new version of the old metaphor that identifies the fecundity of earth and woman. The corollary, which was not uncommon in American art of the time, was that the agricultural exploitation, which produced the Great Depression's dust bowl, had been a rape.²

The link from Benton to Pollock whom he taught during the 1930s is certain. During the heyday of this last hurrah of modernism, artists took a vigorous interest in classical myth. Pollock changed the title of a major abstract painting from *Moby Dick* to *Pasiphae* (c. 1943) after the curator, James Johnson Sweeney told him the story of the Cretan queen who fell in love with the white bull sent by Poseidon to her husband, King Minos of Crete. Pollock left two sheets of notes on *Pasiphae*, complete with quotations from Ovid and Dante.³

Yet even without a teacher immersed in classical myth such as Benton was, Pollock's contemporaries, painters such as Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, William Baziotis, Barnett Newman, Byron Browne, and Romare

¹F. J. Hoffman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 54.

²Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton, an American Original* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 289.

³Francis V. O'Connor & Eugene Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978) vol. I, 78).

Bearden, as well as the sculptor Isamu Noguchi and his occasional collaborator, the choreographer Martha Graham, all drew upon classical themes, giving mythic titles to works produced in the 1940s.

Noguchi was the son of a Japanese writer and an Irish-American mother, Leonie Gilmour, who taught him as a child about classical myth, which he later related to Japanese mythology. Noguchi met Graham through his mother, Leonie Gilmour, who helped with costumes for Graham's dance company. When he designed sets and costumes in 1946 for Graham's *Cave of the Heart*, based on the story of Medea, he called it a "dance of transformation as in the Noh drama." He wrote about his collaboration in 1948 with Igor Stravinsky and George Ballanchine on the ballet *Orpheus*, for which he designed sets and costumes: "I interpreted *Orpheus* as the story of the artist blinded by his vision (the mask). Even inanimate objects move to his touch—as do the rocks, at the pluck of his lyre. To find his bride or seek his dream or to fulfill his mission, he is drawn by the spirit of darkness to the netherworld. Here, too, entranced by his art, all obey him; and even Pluto's rock turns to Eurydice in his embrace."¹

The following year, Noguchi traveled to Europe, where he visited Pompeii, describing the nearby Villa of the Mysteries as a "beautiful integration of painting and architecture;" Paestum, where he saw the Temple of Poseidon and commented on the "sacred relation of man to nature" and Greece, among other places². He sketched an ancient sculpture of Apollo as the shepherd. Noguchi even titled one of his abstract marble sculptures *Kouros* (1944-45) after the archaic Greek male figures stiffly carved in marble. He also continued to choose titles that make reference to the classics, in one case calling a bronze sculpture *Cronos* (1947) after the Titan son of Uranus and Gaia who was the father of Zeus, and in another case, naming a two-part marble sculpture *Euripides* (1966). In order to acquire Greek marble for his sculptures, Noguchi often stopped off in Greece in route to America from Japan.

One of closest students of classical myth was the painter Mark Rothko (1903-1070). His famous radio broadcast of 1943 with his long-time friend Adolph Gottlieb shows how Nietzschean and Freudian thinking led to new interest in myth:

If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Icelandic, or Egyptian. And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art for all the changes in the outward conditions of life.³

¹Dore Ashton, *Noguchi East and West* (New York: Alfred A. Knops, 1992), 6.

²Ashton, 82.

³Mark Rothko quoted in Polcari, 118.

In Rothko's case, he may even have taken time out from painting to study myth, in order "to break with what they considered stagnant in the European tradition and with the provincial American past."¹

Rothko invoked the ancient religious practice of predicting the future course of events in his canvas, *The Omen of the Eagle* (1942), where he drew upon Greek literature, specifically Agamemnon, the first play of the *Orestia* by Aeschylus, in which two eagles sweep down on a pregnant hare and devour its unborn young, an omen of the coming war with Troy and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Here the image of feet gets adapted from chiton-clad figures in Greek vase painting.² Rothko also chose themes from the Sophocles's Oedipus trilogy, including *Tiresias* (1944), the seer of Thebes, who though blinded, but long-lived and prophetic, suggesting metaphorically Rothko's own vision about the future of art, as he renounced the tradition of representation.

Rothko's colleague, Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974), produced, in addition to other classical subjects, a series of paintings from 1941 to 1945 on the Oedipus myth. In the *Hands of Oedipus* (1943) and the *Eyes of Oedipus* (1945), we can see Gottlieb's concern with vision, recalling that in Sophocles' play, once Oedipus saw the tragic truth behind and beyond appearance and circumstance, he turned against literal sight and destroyed its organs, gouging out his own eyes. It is tempting to speculate that this myth appealed to Gottlieb for its bearing on his own spiritual and artistic development, as he, a Jew, sought to express his pain at the Holocaust, the human tragedy he had no power to stop, by turning away from representational art towards painting where one no longer sees a literal object. The state of the world may have seemed beyond representation.

Other examples among the Abstract Expressionists who drew upon classical myth include *Onyx of Electra* (1944) by Matta, a Chilean-born Surrealist who had moved from Paris to New York for a time; Barnett Newman's *Song of Orpheus* (1944-45); Theodore Stamos, *The Sacrifice* (1946); William Baziotis's *Cyclops* (1947) or *The Flesh Eaters* (1952); and, a bit later, Lee Krasner's *Gaea* (1966) and *Icarus* (1964).

In the same period, an African-American artist, Romare Bearden (1911-1988), who showed with many of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly at the Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York, where he knew Gottlieb, Baziotis, and Hans Hofmann (who immigrated to the United States from Germany), all of whom used classical references in their work during the 1940s.

In 1947, Bearden, an avid reader, began a series related to Homer's *Iliad*. Working in oil he produced such paintings such as *The Walls of Ilium*, where, fascinated by the tragedy of the city destroyed, he showed flames shooting out from Troy's stone walls. In 1948, he also produced a series of watercolors inspired by the *Iliad*, where the walls resemble those in the painting. Many of these watercolors focused on two individuals, as in *The Parting Cup*, where a woman offers a goblet to her departing warrior. Continuing his engagement

¹Adolph Gottlieb's wife, Esther, quoted in Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 78.

²Polcari, 123.

with classical myth, Bearden produced in 1977 twenty large collage depictions of Homer's *Odyssey*. For this project, he mixed classical antiquity with the iconography of African American experience. He imagines the treacherous goddess *Circe*, as a seductive black-skinned figure surrounded by bold colors that suggest a jazz performer.

Most notable among the Greek-American participants are William Baziotes (1912-1963), Theodoros Stamos (1922-1997), Aristodemus Kaldis (1889-1979) and Peter Voulkos (1924-2002). Except for Kaldis who was born in Turkey and raised in Greece, each of these artists was born of Greek immigrant parents who arrived in the United States before the imposition of strict quotas limiting immigration from Greece, Eastern Europe, and other areas during the 1920s. Most of the Greek immigrants settled in large urban areas like New York, where visual culture was more developed, but Greek-American artists developed all around the United States. Despite pressures to assimilate, Greek identity survived in coffee shops, schools and churches. The artists sometimes referenced Greek myths to underscore their Greek identity.

Aristodemus Kaldis, who arrived in New York in 1917, at the age of eighteen, recalled frequenting colorful and cheap Greek coffee shops with artists in the abstract expressionist circle, including Lee Krasner, Arshile Gorky, Byron Browne, and Willem de Kooning. He was known for his art history lectures, but he also painted. At first his work was figurative: his *Absorbing Art* of 1941 features a Greek icon hanging on the wall. It was purchased in his show that year by the collector and educator, Albert Barnes. Later, Kaldis was influenced by the work of Kandinsky and became an abstract painter.

William Baziotes was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Greek immigrant parents. He came to New York in 1933 to study at the National Academy of Design. He commented: "Today it's possible to paint one canvas with the calmness of an ancient Greek and the next with the anxiety of a Van Gogh. Either of these emotions, and any in between, is valid to me...I work on many canvasses at once. In the morning I line them up against the wall of my studio. Some speak, some do not. They are my mirrors. They tell me what I am like at that moment."¹

Theodore Stamos was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side to Greek immigrant parents. He attended art school in New York and met some avant-garde artists while working in a frame shop. From 1943-1957, he showed at the Betty Parsons Gallery, which also showed Pollock and Barnett Newman. In 1948 and 49, he traveled to Europe, visiting parts of Greece. He later developed abstractions inspired by the Greek island, Lefkada, where his father was born and where he began to spend much of his time from 1970 until his death in 1997. In 1996, Stamos donated forty-three of his paintings to the National Gallery of Greece.

¹William *Baziotes*, 'I Cannot Evolve Any Concrete Theory', in *Possibilities*, Vol. I, no. 1, New York, winter 1947-48, 2.

Peter Voulkos, another son of Greek immigrant parents, was born in Montana in the American West. He attended art school there. Not until after he served in the military during World War II, did Panagiotis Voulkos, as he was called at birth, shorten his name and settle in California. Passing through New York City, he met some of the abstract expressionists, whose work influenced his attitude toward his ceramics. In the summer of 1953, Voulkos taught a ceramics course at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, at the same time that the Spanish-born abstract expressionist painter, Esteban Vicente, taught there. Voulkos claimed that he “violated” form, creating energy, as he made ceramic sculpture freer, more spontaneous, and new in form.

Following the abstract expressionists, the contemporary artist, Lynda Benglis, was born in 1941 in Louisiana of a Greek-immigrant father and American mother. She has made sculpture and videos. She mimicked Pollock's flinging and dripping methods of painting, commenting on that style with her poured sculptures. For this reason, her work has been included in some international surveys of “Action Painting,” which is the name the art critic Harold Rosenberg coined for abstract expressionism. Benglis’s work is also on view and well represented in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her work both looks back to abstract expressionism with irony and ahead to newer styles. She makes us appreciate the bold innovation of abstract expressionism as well as its humorous aspects.