

TANASIS FAMPAS





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Instinct served me well again! Regular readers will know my unorthodox method of deciding whether or not to visit art galleries. I scan the many invitations mailed to me daily and wait for some kind of hint in the announcement, usually a reproduction of a typical work, that somehow attracts my attention. So it happened when I opened the envelope from the Municipal Cultural Center and the announcement of the exhibition of paintings by Thanasis Fappas fell out. Those who visit this show (the Cultural Center is on Academias Street right behind the university) will see something marvelous — works so evocative, so stunning, that they are unforgettable.

Fappas, who is a cousin of the famous Greek guitarist Dimitris Fappas, lives in Bucharest. His family came originally from the Volo area where he was born in 1922 and where he recently had a wildly successful show. This is his first in Athens.

Living in Romania has affected his style — colors, costumes, indicative of that country, a certain Slavic air to paintings. But the main influence seems to have been Byzantine icons. The poses are reminiscent of those in icons; colors gleam like the fabled jewels of Byzantine emperors; there is a hierarchical spirit in these paintings.

But to identify the Carpathian-Danube area and the Byzantine influence in the paintings is not to complete the analysis. There is also something visionary about these paintings which always show a young woman or a young girl. With white face, gaze turned inward, and a spiritual quality about her. There are no old people, there are no men. Fappas explained his choice of subject to me as due to the lyric qualities of women he wants to express — her sensitivity, her soulfulness. Inspired by his wife who is Romanian and by his daughters, who often appear as children in the paintings, he finds something that touches his soul in the idea of women, especially the young girl, the ephebe, who waits with full heart and a certain timorousness to become a woman. There is something virginal in these women, pure, wistful, unlike. Fappas says he does not paint men anymore because they require of him a different style, heroic and epic, which doesn't attract him.

Fappas' women are always coiffed, thus contributing to their spiritual air as well as to their ethnic qualities. They usually hold something simple — a vase, a guitar, a flower, some fruit, a book, a child. Their hands are always delicate and sensitive. Their surroundings are vague, not defined, but with a cathedral-like hush about them.

[...]

I spoke before of the jewellike colors Fappas uses — glowing reds, blues, yellows. These are combined with the softest, most delicate, most tender hues — lavenders, misty blues, greens and pale yellows.

Fappas went to Bucharest to study and has been there ever since. He showed me some pictures of his large house and of his collections of folk art and antiques. He is probably better off living as an artist in Romania than he would be here in Greece. Artists here are in no way protected and nurtured and helped by the State. In Romania Fappas belongs to the Artist Union. This means the State supplies the studio, paints at half-price, funds for trips outside Romania every two or three years for exhibitions. The State supplies a pension, supplies a vacation house, and is the artist's best client.

As a final note on Fappas of special interest to Greeks, the artist, also an accomplished book illustrator, has just prepared the illustrations and the cover for the Editions Bucharest translation of the book „Chronicle of the Occupation“ by Ioannes Tsatos.

HARIS LIVAS

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The world of symbols which Thanasis Fappas has adopted from the beginning of his career centres round the human figure, more particularly round what we would describe as "the atemporal image of woman" as a mother, or daughter or a wife — whether a reembodiment of the heroine of antiquity, or our contemporary. Working out a system of "pictograms" that represent the little girl, the teenager, the beloved, the mother, etc., Thanasis Fappas lays the foundations of his style which goes deeper and is richer in delicate shades than mere "pictograms", in the effort of transforming an utterable and always present sadness by means available to painting. All his women, whether shown alone, accompanied by a child or standing in a group, bear imprinted in every one of their attitudes a sadness, a tragic quality of some kind which turns them into the spirits of officiating vestals or into more earthly women ever pining for the loved one that is away. With these sad and luminous figures Fappas' painting horizon brings out the heart-searing presence of a feeling of pain which has disturbed the normal course of life. But an ardent devotion for an inflexible ideal and perfectly appropriate and controlled means of expression alone make it possible for an artist to render sadness, yearning and grieving, which feelings do not have the power to attract the onlooker or to help build up an interior comfort.

Born in 1922 at Vola in Thessaly, on the shore of the gulf of Pagassitikos, which along its millenary history has silently witnessed the tears and the grief of women waiting for sailors irresistibly drawn by the crystal-clear expanse of the Aegean Thanasis Fappas had met and had been afflicted by grief and sadness at an early age.

He left for Athens as a boy in search of livelihood, leaving behind the sad and

longing women. He soon gave up the study of art exchanging the brush for the gun. Invaded, tortured under the heel of the occupiers, Greece demanded sacrifices: an effort of patriotic abnegation to bring back again its cloudless sky and the dove and olive branch and peace.

As a partisan of the Greek Liberation Front (Hellas), Thanasis Fappas, alongside other Greek patriots, withdrew to the mountains to fight. The youth of this poet and fighter was shaken by the violence of these years. It was the time when pain made its way tenaciously into Fappas' heart. The artist then made a secret, unbreakable oath binding himself to fight relentlessly against anything encroaching on man's rights.

The violent campaigns of repression against the partisans' families, the moans of his dying comrades, the general mourning grief, the mourning had created an apocalyptic atmosphere throughout Greece, as well as on Mount Pelion, "the land of the centaurs", blessed by the gods, where the sea and the neighbouring mountain had generated the unparalleled pride of a people for whom liberty was the supreme wealth.

Decanted during a long process of elaboration, those experiences were to invade the works of the painter who, a born fighter, was to reject any mawkish superficial outlook unrelated to the effort of contributing with every stroke of the brush to the building up of a memento that repudiates pain, ugliness and malice. Thus, from the beginning of his career down to the present, the paintings of Thanasis Fappas are integrated in the lucid work of those artists who live synchronously with their epoch, becoming the messengers of ideological ideals in which man is the supreme goal.

The homogeneity and consistency of this outlook account for the fact that all the paintings in his studio were born simultaneously and not successively. His works were begun and were constructed and finished by groups and once completed, there are no differences in style or quality between them. His plastic and chromatic forms undergo a slow distillation process, orchestrating the spiritual suggestions of the shades of white and the musical fluency of the curves, which are never the broken ogee kind.

The diligence and severe exigency with which the painter consors every gesture in his works go back to the years he spent in Bucharest as a student.

As his fellow-students remember him, he was the first to come to the studio and the last to leave. Today, when the intervening decades have put a certain detachment between the artist and that period which he passionately devoted to his studies, he remembers with touching emotion the great masters who taught him: Camil Ressu, Nicolae Dărăscu, Jean Al. Steriade and Ștefan Constantinescu.

Showing the same interest and zeal in the study of every artistic technique and every craft, the young painter became equally proficient in painting, engraving and sculpture, forming his own personal discipline, a system of rules which he adopted in his works.

The will to concentrate in the rectangle of his canvas the whole tension of his thoughts and the subdued music of his feelings, has caused the artist to spend as much as five years over one painting, as he confessed, hiding his pride under a genial smile.

Over 600 works thus constructed and bearing his signature — an immense poem dedicated to mankind — are displayed in the museums and collections of three continents. This kind of "portrayal" does not represent this or that person, it is the etymon of a spiritual family, born out of the will to attain the all embracing meanings of what is generally human.

The background elements, the "landscape" embracing the characters, the stage requisites, create a poetical temporal and

spacial ambiguity. Architectural fragments, seascapes, (significant rather by the symbol by the shade chosen to paint them), drapings taking the place of dress elements, the frequency of everyday objects commonly accepted as symbols of all that is fragile and ephemeral (a flower, a pomegranate, a fruit, an amphora, etc.); these are the elements of his vision which, unwilling to force upon us a definite theme and place, proposes a lyricism of a special quality.

Actually, this is the specific essence of Fappas' painting.

Never yielding to the decorative temptation of effects, the painter's works are channelled towards a broader view, inviting us to call forth his native land and thus recalling a distinction which Henri Matisse defined as follows: "...Mediterranean art appealed first and foremost to the spirit, while the gorgeousness and material sensuality of Oriental art exalted almost all the senses..."

All his characters are imbued with intense feelings which they conceal with a kind of modesty, as if propriety kept them from clouding our dreamery with their grief.

This "inner tension of the feelings" is formally balanced by the manner adopted in painting, which calls to mind Renair's fond tenderness: "Pour moi mon souci a été toujours de peindre les êtres tels de beaux fruits".

The long, all-embracing curves that catch the viewer's eye, melodiously shielding it from the occasional angularities are of a particularly suggestive quality, introducing as they do into the essence of Fappas' style an undertone that defines his personality.

Wishing to contribute by every possible means to the enhancement of the traditional climate of understanding and good neighbourly relations of his "two homelands", Thanasis Fappas has organized exhibitions for a number of Romanian painters in Volas, his native town. At Almyras, Laskos and Velestino, in his native country, Fappas has raised monumental statues dedicated to the heroism of patriots murdered by the Nazis, and the artist is now

completing the clay model of another monument of ample proportions and dimensions to be placed on the cliff at Valos. The monument is dedicated to Greece's Independence and Resistance.

These facts, which show the complexity of Fappas' consciousness are in perfect consonance with his works; they help us to get an insight into them.

The discreet, nostalgic and sad message of Fappas' art is transmitted by means of the "spiritual" luminosity of his paste, which, compared with the Byzantine chromatics, has certain counterparts in the frescoes only. Therefore, however tempting, his Byzantine relationship should be regarded with certain limitations and nuances, only as a spiritual relationship — the enigmatic silence of serene faces, and more particularly the propensity to soar towards spiritual heights.

These "great loves" clearly cover all that pertains to the severe essence of humanity. The system of the moral structure of Fappas' personality is built on the harmoniously complementary data of two cultural areas: on the one hand his native Greece with her treasure-store of beliefs and spiritual attainments, which have moulded the unmistakable essence of the European mind, and on the other hand, the area of the Neo-Latin civilization and culture of the lower reaches of the Danube and of the lands on either side of the Carpathians, which is the artist's adopted country.

In considering the unmistakable scope and complexity of the artist's experiences, a distinction should be made: the inhabitants of the part of Thessaly round the gulf of Valos (Pagassitikos), where the artist was born, are mountaineers, peasants, fishermen or sailors.

This rare, singular personality of a man who feels at home on the foaming crests of the waves or in the deep valleys bordered by moss-covered rocks, as if to protect the delicate skin of the nymphs from the cold stone — is Thanasis Fappas' personality, with the nonchalant liberty he allows to his roaming thoughts and the stable earth-rooted will to feed his obsessions. These obsessions circumscribe the

human area, bringing out the deep understanding, the assimilation of a viewpoint in which we find the essence of Romanian civilization as an expression of peaceful living in the midst of nature.

The story sadness of the women waiting for those they cherish as shown by Thanasis Fappas' female countenances, should be accepted as a specific feeling originating in an unmistakably Romanian experience: the feeling of longing for the loved ones, expressed in Romanian by one word *dor*

Considered to have no equivalent in any other language, the word *dor* stands for a kind of nostalgia, a great longing to see, or to see again, someone the feeling possessing someone who yearns for, covets or aspires after something; it is an aspiration, a longing, as well as a pain caused by the loss for someone who is away; it is an erotic attraction, but also a pain of the flesh... a whole of great complexity hard to define.

In this east-European area speaking a Romance language, this complex and diversified polysemy acquired by the word *dolere* (coming to us from the word *dolus*, which is popular Latin) expresses the heart's anxiety, although its initial significance was confined to physical pain.

The need to give a name to a wide variety of this experience has become specifically Romanian.

By analyzing the subdued chromatics, the sensibly musical modulations of the shades of colour, the scanty decorative elements, the natural attitudes of his characters, in a word, the whole scale of means capable of contributing to the heightening of emotion in Fappas' painting constitutes a dimension of an archaic essence which reaches beyond a specific national culture towards a generally human quality.

The wealth, diversity and complexity of the suggestions which Thanasis Fappas' art arouses in the viewer speak of themselves for the greatness of this modern mind, which the tools of an artist's craft, and by an art of great nobility and sincerity, blending the elements of two distinct, vigorously outlined civilizations, has defined and consolidated its special place in contemporary art.

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