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The Greek Connection in Abstract Expressionism

When asked what in his ancestry, nationality and background he saw as relevant to an understanding of his art, William Baziotes said:

"I think besides the natural influence of this country (America), the fact that my parents were Greek and lived in a neighborhood of Greeks from the Near East may have had effect on my works. This influence, I believe, was mostly watching and feeling the attitudes these Easterners had towards life, and their music and dancing. I would sometimes go to a wedding that lasted two or three days. In their music that has no beginning or end, the slow indolent rhythms of the dance and the cat-like singing would leave me in a pleasant state. This was a feeling of everyday things dropping away, of leaving you in a dream state, of being half-hypnotized, of time standing still, of life becoming magical."

During the period when World War II loomed as the most overwhelming and pervasive tragic event in modern history, Barnett Newman equated the human state with the position of the ancient Greeks:

"After more than two thousand years we have finally arrived at the tragic position of the Greek and we have achieved this Greek state of tragedy because we have at last ourselves invented a new sense of all-pervading fate, a fate that is for the first time for modern man as real and as intimate as the Greeks' fate was to them. And it is not without significance that, like the Greek fate, which was the projection of a social image -- the only valid symbol for a people proud of their sense of civilization -- our fate is likewise the product of civilization. Our tragedy is again a tragedy of action in the chaos that is society, and no matter how heroic or innocent or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over us. We are living then through a Greek drama and each of us now stands like Oedipus and can by his acts or lack of action, in innocence, kill his father and desecrate his mother."

These two statements demonstrate the diverse starting points out of which the Greek connection entered into the sphere of influence for the first generation Abstract Expressionists. For Baziotes and Theodoros Stamos Greek is personal identity. They are the genetic inheritors of an ancestry whose beliefs and customs were a central element in their upbringing as first generation Americans of Greek immigrant parentage. For Newman, as for Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and Tony Smith, Greek ideas and ideals were an intellectually rooted interest and preference, discovered through various, overlapping sources which invariably led them to the ancient seedbed of Western culture.

The first and most well known evidence of the Abstract Expressionists' affiliation with the Greek is the use made of Greek tragedy and mythology in the paintings of Gottlieb and Rothko beginning around 1939-1940. It was a choice of subject matter arrived at through intense investigation of the appropriate possibilities available to artists whose goal was the creation of paintings which could get beyond the particulars of time and place to communicate in purely visual form the nature of the universal human state. In their statements of the period, Gottlieb and Rothko made it clear that the subject of myth provided them with the spirit and meaning appropriate to the current state of the world at war. By cutting through the levels of cultural niceties which had intervened between the ancient and the contemporary, they felt they could reach the state of mystical communion with elemental truth and feelings which they deeply desired. Like a few other artists around them who were following parallel routes, theirs was an ethical, humanist pursuit which sought correspondences that reconciled the individual and the universal, both through links of the macrocosm and the microcosm and through the chain of cultural achievement whose roots lie in Greek accomplishments.

They formulated their idea with the help of a multiplicity of sources which included analysis of the most advanced modern art as well as studies of great thinkers and poets in other disciplines including psychology, philosophy, literature and the sciences. Along with their friend, Barnett Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko saw the Greek connection through their readings of Nietzsche, whose Birth of Tragedy passionately discusses the synthesis of the two spirits of Greek tragedy, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, as the route to genius in art. They also identified with the writings of Sir James Frazer who, in The Golden Bough, called forth ancient rites and rituals with magical tones expressive of the ancients' communion with the forces of nature beyond the level of metaphor.

During the decade of the 1940s, the pictures of Rothko and Gottlieb unabashedly portrayed their alliance with specific Greek tragedies. Rothko made a number of works titled after characters from Aeschylus, while Gottlieb concentrated on the Oedipus myth as dramatized by Sophocles. The two artists, working in close concert at the time, chose tragic, heroic, human figures whose sagas of wisdom and suffering, love and war, innocence and punishment they perceived as exemplary of man's continual fate. It is the Greek notion of man at the center of things, man who like his gods heroically struggles with the powers of the unknown, facing destiny with the will to power. In Nietzsche's words:

"He (man) feels himself to be godlike and strides with the same elation and ecstasy as the gods he sees in his dreams. No longer the artist, he has himself become a work of art: the productive power of the whole universe is now manifest in his transport, to the glorious satisfaction of the primordial One. The finest clay, the most precious marble-- man-- is here kneaded and hewn, and the chisel blows of the Dionysiac world artist are accompanied by the cry of the Eleusinian mystagogues: "Do you fall on your knees, multitudes,

do you divine your creator?"

As Gottlieb reiterated, the Abstract Expressionists' incorporation of mythic content has nothing to do with Bullfinch. Neither was it, as so many writers on the subject have called it, a "mythic phase". From the outset, it was a route toward creation of a new myth, invented for the present and in present terms of form as value, linked with our Greek heritage on the level of the idea. Once they had gained access to the archetypal rhythms through a labyrinthine route of interconnecting sources, Gottlieb and Rothko could push farther into what they called "the simple expression of the complex thought." Echoes of Oedipus remain in Gottlieb's later work. His Frozen Sounds, for example, alludes to the Pythagorean "music of the spheres" when it has reached the temperatures of outer space. And Rothko's veiled geometries cross known boundaries to recollect the Greek word "aer" with its three possible meanings of dark mist as veil to make a hero invisible, shining sky and bright air, and the vital spirit or breath.

More than any of the other painters who matured during the 1940s, it is Stamos who calls up associations most closely allied with those of Gottlieb and Rothko. Beyond these similarities, however, is a very different personality and feeling which gives Stamos's art a singular affinity with the mysterious forces personified in ancient Greek tales of the minotaur or the Titans, for example. Stamos was still a teenager when he began to paint. His earliest works, from around 1937, include a number of primitively painted imaginary Greek scenes. They exemplify his childhood experiences in the poor Greek household of the Lower East Side in Manhattan where he was raised. Stamos was only twenty-one when he had his first one-man show at Betty Parson's Manhattan based Wakefield Gallery and Bookstore. Around this time he met Gottlieb and Newman, both of whom were nearly twenty years his

senior. The older artists recognized in Stamos a self-taught painter whose primitivizing approach and mythic subject matter came from a naturally felt and experienced self-identification with the ancient Greek, the same connection which they had been developing from a more consciously thought out viewpoint. By the time of his meeting with Gottlieb and Newman, Stamos had already been looking to the work of vanguard American painters, especially Milton Avery and Arthur Dove, two artists also of special import for Newman and Gottlieb and also for Rothko as well. Over subsequent years, Stamos' friendship with these older artists was of great mutual benefit. All three found a special kind of reinforcement in the pictures of their younger contemporary. Stamos' work of the 1940s showed extraordinary natural painterly talent combined with a self-identification with the magic and rituals of the ancient mysteries. His visualizations in pictures such as Ancestral World, Impulse of Remembrance, The Sacrifice of Cronos and Vale of Sparta fused personal experience and familial beliefs in magic rites with understanding of their pertinence for the present, with the eye of a seer. It is interesting that Stamos, the most Greek of all the Abstract Expressionists, was drawn to American art and also to the art and ideas of the Orient more pervasively than any of his contemporaries. His early-felt pantheistic view was reinforced by these two areas in which he located fertile correspondences with archaic Greece and the third world Greece of the present from which he is descended. These channels of connecting points of view were reinforced by Stamos's first trip to Greece in 1948. Over the next two decades he continued to reinvent and perfect his pictorial language in various series which both interrelate with past work and openly explore new possibilities with a breadth far wider than the concurrent work of his older friends. Since his second visit to Greece in 1970, Stamos has spent at least half of every year living on the island of Lefkada, his closest friend being his

cousin, Theodossis Stamatellos, lifelong resident of the isle and olive farmer who paints true primitive landscapes and portraits with a striking magic unaffected by modern concept or polemic. Stamos's pictures over the past decade are vitalized by his experiences in modern/primitive Greece. Yet the Infinity Fields, Lefkada Series and more recently Jerusalem Series are no more specifically Greek than they are any nationality. They are the personally realized visions in paint of an Abstract Expressionist who, as the only one of our six artists still alive, continues to make contact with the world mystery, as alive today on a global scale as it was for ancestors.

It was the most intellectually bent and theoretically minded of his contemporaries, Barnett Newman, who, during the 1940s, wrote most passionately about Stamos' art. Newman clearly realized Stamos' more innately intuitive and painterly approach to the idea they held in common. From 1939 until around 1945-46, Newman stopped painting altogether, feeling an urgent need to rethink his future direction.

Like Stamos, Newman was a native New Yorker, but he grew up in the Jewish intellectual circles which met at City College where Newman attended classes during the 1920s. Newman thought of himself as a kind of Renaissance man, a thinker in a variety of disciplines. From early on, he aligned himself with anarchist politics and became an ardent admirer of Spinoza, whose scientific/mathematical approach to reaching the highest levels of knowledge remained that of Newman throughout his life. By the 1940s, in concert with Rothko and Gottlieb, Newman had developed a deep appreciation for Nietzsche, one which was reinforced by Nietzsche's pointed regard for Spinoza. Newman's writings of the early to mid 1940s were specifically aimed at clarifying his position as an artist with regard to geometric abstraction. His elliptical prose was filled with negatives, becoming most vehement with regard to his arch-rival Mondrian and to geometry as form. Through these sources, along with

others, prominently including the ideas of Herbert Read, Newman began to single out his challenge and his approach through a cultural line which always brought him to the Greek.

During this period, Newman's small pictures were concerned with the Orphic myth. Two drawings of 1946 come across as visual counterparts to the Orphic glittering sphere, the world egg floating on a boundless sea which had been limitless chaos. In his painting Pagan Void a black, circular shape bursts with microscopic life. During the same period, he was writing: "The artist's function (should be) on its rightful plane of philosopher and pure scientist who is exploring the world of the idea, not the world of the senses. Just as we get a vision of the cosmos through the symbols of a mathematical equation, just as we get a vision of truth in terms of abstract metaphysical concepts, so the artist is today giving us a vision of the world of truth in terms of visual symbols." In his long, eleven-part essay, "The Plasmic Image", written between 1943 and 1945, Newman does battle with the idea that "mathematics is a language that gives shape to thought", outlining his steps toward his mature visualization still to come.

In 1944, Newman used this quote from Heraclitus in reference to the work of Gottlieb: "The perfect soul is a dry light which flies out of the body as lightning breaks from a cloud." Three years later, the visualization of the Heraclitan tapering beam of radiant, spiritual light appears in Newman's work, Genetic Moment. He is working his way out of the more visceral and sensuous Orphic myth realm toward the geometric metaphysic of Pythagoras, as brought to fruition by Plato in his mythical story of creation, the Timaeus.

Along with his challenge of geometry as form/value/meaning via Mondrian, it was Newman's 1945 meeting with Tony Smith that was to cement his future conceptually and philosophically based artistic direction. Tony Smith has openly avowed his connection with "dynamic symmetry", acknowledging that

he was familiar with this idea as form through the writings of Jay Hambidge since before high school. In the 1930s, while in Chicago studying architecture, Smith encountered the book On Growth and Form, written in the early part of this century by the natural scientist D'Arcy Thompson. Hambidge's books, available and popular in New York art circles since the 1920s, outline geometrical composition according to the root rectangles whose basis is on the "golden section" discovered by the Pythagoreans and referred to in Plato's Timaeus. It makes the connection between these proportions and the patterns of growth in natural forms as well as discussing their uses by the Greeks. Thompson, an author mentioned in Hambidge, gives a penetrating and somewhat poetic analysis of the various aspects of biological form and growth in physico-mathematical terms. His study begins and ends with a passionate avowal of the origins of his ideas in the ancient Greeks. This knowledge of the relationships of these proportions with the natural sciences along with the visual constructions of the "mystical", irrational shapes in the works of Hambidge constituted the final clues for Newman.

He was naturally uncomfortable with the more intuitively based, organic route of Gottlieb, Rothko and Stamos, and his philosopher's mind preferred the more intellectually oriented route. Golden section geometry placed him in the long line of cultural heritage with which he identified, and it provided the visual form to express in abstract form his idea of tragic, heroic, sublime man as temple and cathedral. By simplifying from Mondrian's uses of this geometrical language and isolating the vertical, Newman could reverse Mondrian's objective metaphysic of equilibrium in favor of his more strictly western, Greek idea of man's relationship with the absolute.

Like his contemporaries, especially Rothko, Newman saw his art as an act of creation which fused man/artist/creator/nature. This idea of unity achieved through the painterly process is not different from what

Pollock meant when he said "I am Nature." Yet, Newman's route to express it visually differs entirely, as the personalities of these two artists do.

Spinoza, Nietzsche, Einstein, Herbert Read, Mondrian: these and more of Newman's mentors all lead him to Platonic ideas of the levels of becoming to being, of the spheres of the Different and the Same, of the creator as a constructor who, in the words of the Timaeus, "duly adjusted the proportions between their numbers, their movements and other qualities." The geometrical inference of infinite growth according to the one governing pattern inherent in golden section ideas fit perfectly with Newman's desire for conjunction of the infinite and the finite. His role as artist/creator organizing the actions of the elements express Newman's desire to create entelechies, in fulfillment of his teleological goal for painting.

It was not until the 1960s that Tony Smith began building his monumental sculptural presences. Yet it is evident from his relationship with the Abstract Expressionist painters, ~~in~~^{particular} from his strong influence on Barnett Newman, that he was attuned to the underlying idea of these contemporaries. Smith's basic forms are the tetrahedron and the octahedron. He uses these two of Plato's five regular solids to build looming, twisting shapes which are more the visualization of dark monsters of unknown origin than they are starkly geometrical abstractions. Smith came to his knowledge of geometry and its origins in Greek ideas through his relationship with architecture. His uses of geometry are more like James Joyce than they are like Mondrian. Smith works with small models of his chosen solids which he combines and recombines intuitively. He himself identified his process with Surrealism. "My own personal feeling", he said, "is that all my sculpture is on the edge of

dreams. They come close to the unconscious in spite of their geometry. On one level my work has clarity. On another, it is chaotic and imagined." In his role of artist/creator/constructor Smith opens up possibilities for endless differences within sameness. All his works are interrelated by uses of the same basic forms, and he carries this idea into the literal by using spare parts from previous works in the creation of subsequent ones. His is an original invention in line with the Abstract Expressionist idea of fusion on all levels, from form/value/content to individual/universal/timeless. Smith thinks of his works as "seeds or germs that could spread growth or disease." He vehemently expressed his love of the Hellenistic, and surely his multireferential presences are anything but classical. They refer directly to the present, the post World War II state of man/society seen through the vision of a futuristic Stonehenge and well into the Hellenistic period.

Although William Baziotes was the only one of this group of artists to share his Greek heritage with Stamos, their views of the shared idea take quite different directions. In his early work, Baziotes showed little direct usage of Greek mythology. Although he did paint a Cyclops, it was correspondences seen through Symbolist poetry which was his greatest involvement. There is in Baziotes, however, a feeling for the grotesque, the monstrous, which gives his Cyclops, for instance, the flavor of the evil eye. In his later work he drew closer to ancient marble sculpture, his pictures radiating with the hypnotic quality of stone in which a sinuous, erotic shape has been caught suspended. Baziotes led a hermetic life, finding his greatest adventures in his imagination. He was an avid reader and observer of the everyday sights in his life which did not take him far beyond the small geographical area between Reading, Pennsylvania and New York.

One of his favorite places was the Metropolitan Museum where he spent hours looking at the fragments of Roman walls and ancient sculpture. He closely identified with works such as a marble torso of Eros, a Roman copy of a Praxitelean work of the second half of the fourth century B.C. In late pictures such as Serpentine, Baziotes evokes the ancients' view of the nude as symbol of purity and the longing for metaphysical rebirth. His painting captures the magic of marble made flesh, gleaming and subtly shifting in an incredibly refined painterly surface of opalescent haze. Baziotes and Tony Smith, two such different personalities, yet both suggesting the Hellenistic decadence of the present and both locating a tense balance where oppositions of body/spirit, male/female meet as elements of the universal unity.

Human values, man's dignity and individual responsibility, problems raised by the existence of evil, conflicts of endurance and duty under stress. Ariadne's thread, the labyrinth, the great dramas of Sophocles, the Pythagoreans' concept of "eidos" in which form goes beyond look to value, Plato's triangular ordering of the levels from becoming to being. Baziotes, Gottlieb, Rothko, Newman, Smith and Stamos all found correspondences between these ideas originating in Greece and carried on through the past two thousand plus years. Have we outgrown the gods or have they simply changed their form?