



## Tsarouchis, Yannis (1910-1989)

by Tina Gianoulis

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One of the most important twentieth-century Greek painters, Yannis Tsarouchis (sometimes spelled Yiannis or Giannis) is one of a group of Greek artists who helped both portray and define modern Greek identity. A deeply sensual painter, much influenced by the French impressionists, Tsarouchis is also a significant gay artist who filled his canvases with homoerotic images of vulnerable men and (to a much lesser extent) strong women.

Born in the port city of Piraeus, near Athens, on January 13, 1910, Tsarouchis began his art studies in 1928 at the Higher School of Fine Arts in Athens. While still in school, he began to train in the studio of another influential Greek modernist, the Byzantine artist Fotis Kontoglou.

However, it was a trip to Paris in the mid-1930s that influenced Tsarouchis's art most deeply. Immersed in the bohemian lifestyle of the times, the young Greek drank in the art of such contemporaries as Renoir, Manet, Picasso, and Matisse.

Once back in a Greece torn by war, Tsarouchis began to paint the young men in uniform who were preparing to defend their homeland. During the 1940s, Greece was a nation both ancient and new, having won independence from the Ottoman Turks only in 1830. Tsarouchis was filled with a desire to express the complex ingredients that comprised "Greekness."

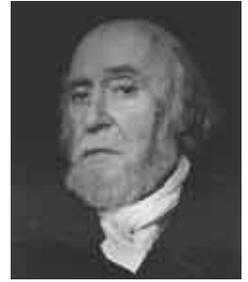
In this effort, his art became a similar synthesis of complex ingredients. He combined the technique and vision he had learned from the impressionists with the elements of classical Hellenistic sculpture and vase painting he had loved from his youth and of the Byzantine art that represents the oriental side of the Greek aesthetic. Even the folk arts of weaving, shadow theater, and icon painting influenced his work as he began to paint the soldiers and sailors he admired.

These paintings, such as "Young Man Posing as an Olympic Statue" (1939), "Sailor with Coffee Cup" (1954), and "Sailor Dreaming of Love" (1955), capture not only a Greek identity, but also a gay sensibility, with young men gazing out of the canvas with haunted eyes while their large hands rest gently in their laps.

In "The Thinker" (1936), Tsarouchis takes an impressionist classic and transforms it into an icon for his own culture. Unlike Rodin's imposing sculpture, the Tsarouchis painting depicts a modern young Greek sitting on a café stool, a faraway look in his eye and a cigarette in one dangling hand.

Tsarouchis had a lifelong love of theater and frequently worked as a set and costume designer. In exile in Europe in 1967, waiting out the years of military dictatorship in Greece, he designed sets for productions at Milan's La Scala and London's Covent Garden, as well as the Avignon Festival in France. After his return to his homeland in the mid-1970s, he designed an acclaimed operatic set for Franco Zeffirelli's production of Cherubini's *Médée* at the ancient amphitheater at Epidauros.

Tsarouchis was beloved in Greece for his contribution to and respect for Greek culture. In 1982, the Yannis



A portrait of Yannis Tsarouchis by Stathis Orphanos.  
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Tsarouchis Foundation was established. When the artist died on July 20, 1989 in Athens, he left money in his will to support the foundation named in his honor.

The Foundation runs the Yannis Tsarouchis Museum in the artist's home in the Athenian suburb of Maroussi.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.