The exhibition "Paintings of Stelios Mavromatis" reflects the Gallery’s commitment to exhibiting the works of innovative twentieth century artists, especially those with a special connection to northeastern Ohio. Since 1984, Kent State University has had an exchange program with Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece. This exhibit, hopefully, will mark the beginning of a visual arts exchange between Kent and Thessaloniki.

Stelios Mavromatis, a resident of Thessaloniki, has been exhibiting in Europe since 1959. The Kent State University exhibition of thirty-three paintings represents his American debut. As an artist, Mavromatis is intensely interested in technique and materials, which is especially evident in his early manner of expression. During this time, he developed his "mixed technique" in which he covers his canvas or board with a kind of watercolor fixed with varnish. When this layer dries, oil diluted with varnish is then applied. In 1965, he begins to incorporate real or specifically constructed objects onto the surface.

Between 1966-1981, Mavromatis's work is characterized by his steady attachment to trains. His first train is to be found in a 1961 ink drawing. Trains are often combined with stations, railroad symbols, or landscapes which from 1979 to 1981 were frequently flooded. Throughout this second period, Mavromatis’s color range of olive green, purple, grey, and ochre remains dark. In 1981, his colors begin to lighten, and by 1982, Mavromatis enters into his third period which continues until now. However, his most recent work is starting to show movement in a new direction. The work from 1982 is characterized by a looser drawing style, a lighter range of color, and a definite move toward expressionism. Red, pink, blue, turquoise, and light ochre become dominant. In addition, the strong use of red as an explosive element can be seen in his most recent works. New elements such as numbers, X’s, Japanese letters, and circular or curvilinear forms gradually emerge during the 1980’s. His work continues to take on new meaning and deeper levels of expression.

This project was made possible by the support and cooperation of many individuals and organizations. Without the generous support of the Ohio Arts Council, the exhibition, lecture, and catalogue could not have been possible. Additional assistance was provided by: The Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs; Research and Sponsored Programs; The Center for International and Comparative Programs; Friends of the Gallery; and Virginia Wojno (President, Friends of the Gallery). The exhibit was initiated by Dr. Thomas M. Davis, a faculty member in the department of English. His dedication, enthusiasm, and hard work deserve special recognition. I would also like to thank the Gallery staff as well as Professors Bruce Morrill for the catalogue design; William gk French for technical assistance, and Rick Newton for his advice on arrangements. A special thanks to Stelios Mavromatis and his family for their generosity and cooperation.

Fred T. Smith
Director
School of Art Gallery
Kent State University
In cities such as Thessaloniki where historical memory has been unceasingly evidenced for many centuries by material cultural remains (architecture, sculpture, and painting) since classical antiquity, through the Roman, early Christian and Byzantine ages, and the time of the Turkish occupation, the place of the contemporary artist is rather special. Expressing himself through a medium based primarily on vision, he has immediate contact with the past which may partially function as a limiting factor.

This introduction may be considered redundant for someone reviewing the artistic creation of Stelios Mavromatis (born in 1930) with thematic criteria only. However apparent, it may be that the archaeological dimension does not preoccupy him with its external characteristics; it is otherwise certain that it touches him with its inner life which determines to a great extent the atmosphere of the city, or its Stadtgeist, if the term may be allowed. There is no intention here of suggesting a “school” of Thessaloniki because such a thing does not exist.

For so many people, Mavromatis is the painter of trains, and justly so as he has not abandoned this subject for thirty years. As to how he approaches it, we shall see further down. We must note here, however, that he took interest in other subjects as well during his artistic course. He painted shipyards from 1956, the year of his first exhibition, until 1960. Even in his very first efforts we can trace the basic characteristics of his further development: his life experience as a starting point of his artistic research, his love for the tangible and the concrete, and his expressionistic disposition. In order to sharpen his vision and consolidate his plastic memory, he would spend entire days observing anchored boats. Thus he managed to convince himself and then in turn to convince us through his painting, that the disintegrated boat frames with salt corroded wood and broken masts, rusted anchors, chains, and nails follow a course similar to ours: their life is subject to the laws of destruction. From this point of view, his turn to the human figure, especially nudes from 1960-69 is not accidental. In addition, during the same period, he
tries his hand on abstraction (1960-1965); he paints bouzouki players in their old hangouts (1967 - 1971), and more significantly, he discovers trains as a subject matter (1961). The decade 1960-1970 is undoubtedly his most fertile, but also his most crucial because he slowly discovers his thematic approach, gains proficiency in his technique, and forms his personal style. As he essentially remains self-taught, he achieves all these through very hard work.

If we accept the premise that technique and material determine the esthetic function of the work of art to a certain degree, then Mavromatis’s very own “mixed technique” acquires special significance. The canvas or the particle board is covered with a kind of water color which is fixed with varnish. When this layer dries up it is ready for oil colors—green mainly, ocher, black, blue, and red—which however, are not diluted in linseed oil or white spirit, but in varnish for a very simple reason: since the endurance of a painting in time depends on the final varnish layer, what would be more natural than to mix varnish with the color itself? In 1965 Mavromatis takes one more step. He incorporates real objects on the painting surface thus inaugurating a construction procedure which continues until today. Wire, cardboard, wood, and smalt become the main materials which convey railway tracks, steam engines, telegraph poles, railway signs, and track levers. These new means borrowed from the domain of plastic arts, communicate more convincingly the material substance of things, while simultaneously raising them to the third dimension and allowing them to function in real space.

Mavromatis’s relation to trains is experiential. I would not say subconscious as in the case of De Chirico, but certainly very deep. His house was next to the railway station; consequently, audio-visual contact was self-evident, immediate, and constant. In an attempt to interpret the existence of surrealist elements in his work, we should not forget that he would listen to trains even in his sleep and that in some way affected his dream experiences. The sureness of realistic description and the objectivity of the constructions on the canvas are downplayed, usually because of the appearance of other motifs in unexpected places. For example, trees appear to establish themselves in the sky, especially after 1975 when Mavromatis painted a series of works under the general title Fall. Railway signs are transformed into huge cyclical, cross and x-shaped forms which “take off,” escaping from the proportional scale. Poles break away from the borders of the painted surface and stand free in space, whereas numbers, letters, words, and even entire phrases express momentary coherence, betraying perhaps a decorative disposition. In any case, to be exact steam engines and freight cars, remain a sine qua non presence which claim sometimes fewer, sometimes more rights to the painted surface, leaving accordingly greater or smaller role to the sky, which is almost steadily charged with dramatic tension, as well as to the rest of the elements of the composition.

Another remarkable aspect in Mavromatis’s art is his work with light material—usually tempera on paper—where he registers his experiences from various cities he visits from time to time, such as Amsterdam, Venice, and Santorini. About a decade ago, it was worthwhile to compare his series on Venice of 1978 with that of the same title of 1980, which was painted after a large series entitled Floods (1979); the stimulus being the destructive floods in the larger Thessaloniki area—in order to note the important qualitative differences in rendering water surfaces.

I think I could repeat today what I wrote in another article on Mavromatis in 1977: “In Mavromatis creative work one feels constantly that all happens after some movement or action. Thus boats always appear outside the water, after a voyage. Trains are usually stopped in deserted places, away from stations and they do not convince us of their power or their intention to travel. We never see who they bring or who they take away. Trees appear in late fall or at dusk, in the end that is of their natural prime and their existence in the light of day. Telegraph poles stand mute and lonely, without the possibility of carrying a message as they are not connected with wires. There are prohibitive signs and railway track levers which forbid every effort to approach. Almost all elements are caught in a moment of denial of their role which is combined with the complete human figure.”

After all this we must wonder whether
Mavromatis's painting is nothing more than the formalization of melancholy, pessimism, and loneliness of our world. Something like this is perhaps only the outside appearance...The experiential—therefore true—beginning of his works is the respect toward the inanimate, which is artfully and patiently realized to the last detail; the effort to escape from the hard, prescribed reality of his works which is materialized with a breakthrough of the borders of the painted surface, and the atmosphere of silence suggested by his painting; these become the conditions of the ripening of love toward the one who is apparently absent: man.

Professor of Art History
Aristotle University,
Thessaloniki

Alkis Charalambidis
Positive Test

1990
mixed technique
75 x 60 cm.
Composition 221

1990
mixed technique
80 x 100 cm.
Points

1987
mixed technique
75 x 60 cm.
The Number

1986
mixed technique
130 x 100 cm.
Skyros Island

1990
mixed technique
60 x 50 cm.
As 285

1988-89
mixed technique
120 x 100 cm.
Composition 224

1990
mixed technique
75 x 60 cm.
Kemuri Akai

1990
mixed technique
75 x 60 cm.
Lost Dreams

1990
Mixed technique
80x100cm
Reformation

1989
mixed technique
75 x 60 cm.
Our Internal Aspect

1988
mixed technique
120 x 100 cm.
Composition

1984
mixed technique
100 x 80 cm.
Stelios Mavromatis was born in Ptolemais in 1930. He is a permanent resident of Thessaloniki and a member of the Art Council of Greece. He is also a member of the Arts Committee of the National Theater of Northern Greece, and the Association of Artists of Visual Arts of Northern Greece. His works are found in the National Art Gallery of Greece, the Art Gallery of Cyprus, Nicosia; the Art Gallery of the Association of Macedonian Studies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Sciences, the Ministry of Macedonia and Thrace, and in private collections of Greece and abroad.

Individual Exhibitions

1959  YMCA, exhibition hall of the township of Thessaloniki.
1964  "Techni," Macedonian Association of Arts, Thessaloniki.
1964  Center of Technological Applications, Athens.
1968  Veitsos Gallery, Thessaloniki.
1971  "Techni," Thessaloniki.
1972  First City National Bank, Thessaloniki.
1979  Photothiki, Thessaloniki, Santorini.
1979  Citibank, Athens.
1980  Photothiki, Thessaloniki, Venezia '80.
1981  French Institute, Thessaloniki, Skyros '80.
1983  University of Thessaloniki. Law School board room, exhibition-presentation.
1984  Athens Gallery of Art, Athens.
1984  French Institute, Thessaloniki.
1984  "lanos" Gallery, Thessaloniki.
1986  Kuthaus "ELIM," Nonnweiler Germany.
1987  "lanos" Gallery, Thessaloniki "Venezia '86."
1988  Thessaloniki Passenger Railway Station. 100 years connection with Europe.
1989  Korn, Olivenbaum Feinkost GmbH, Germany.
1990  Ludwighausen, Sparkasse Coesfeld, Germany.
1991  School of Art Gallery, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, USA

Participation in the "Panhellenic"


Participation in Group Exhibitions.

He has participated in forty group exhibitions in Thessaloniki, Athens, Kavala, Edessa, Kozani, Florina, Larisa, Agrinio, Theva, and Volos in Greece. Also in Nicosia, Cyprus; Ludwigshafen, Stuttgart, and Dortmund, Germany; Bucharest, Rumania; Baghdad, Iraq; and other places.
Bibliography

- Pamboulouf, Dimitri. Izkoustvo (Sofia), June 1980: 41-42.
- Papanikolau, M. "Paratiritis." Catalog of Vafopoulio Cultural Center of the Municipality of Thessaloniki; May 1990.
Mavromatis Painting Checklist

1. Composition P, 1982-84 mixed technique 80 x 100 cm.
2. Composition, 1984 mixed technique 100 x 80 cm.
3. Composition, 1985 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
4. Agony, 1986 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
5. Composition, 1986 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
6. Dream, 1986 mixed technique 130 x 100 cm.
7. The Number, 1986 mixed technique 130 x 100 cm.
8. Absence 217, 1987 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
9. Reminder, 1987 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
10. Points, 1987 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
11. Ld 285, 1988-89 mixed technique 120 x 100 cm.
12. Our Internal Aspect, 1988 mixed technique 120 x 100 cm.
13. Composition 114/133, 1988 mixed technique 100 x 80 cm.
14. Composition 5289, 1988-89 mixed technique 100 x 80 cm.
15. Composition 12, 1989 mixed technique 120 x 100 cm.
16. If Ever, 1989 mixed technique 140 x 60 cm.
17. In Front of the Trains, 1989 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
18. Hirazuma, 1989 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
19. Reformation, 1989 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
20. Positive Test, 1990 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
21. Kemuri Akai, 1990 mixed technique 75 x 60 cm.
22. You’ve Already Understood It, 1990 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
23. Composition 224, 1990 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
24. It’s Your Smoke, 1990 mixed technique 60 x 75 cm.
25. Diptych 2512/1, 1990 mixed technique 110 x 60 cm.
26. Diptych 1226/2, 1990 mixed technique 110 x 60 cm.
27. Composition 286, 1990 mixed technique 100 x 80 cm.
28. Composition 211, 1990 mixed technique 80 x 100 cm.
29. Lost Dreams, 1990 mixed technique 80 x 100 cm.
30. No Crack, 1990 mixed technique 100 x 130 cm.
31. Skyros Island, 1990 mixed technique 60 x 50 cm.
32. Oh, The Teats, 1991 mixed technique 50 x 40 cm.
33. Composition, 1991 mixed technique 60 x 50 cm.
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Funded through the
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