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ARTIST THOMAS XENAKIS

The Evolution of an Artist

FROM THE FINITE TO THE INFINITE
BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY



“The only thing that remains eternal in culture is art. It has a permanence and a mystical, cosmic quality. I believe in that which goes beyond the earthly. I believe in the infinite.”

—Thomas Xenakis

For artist, teacher and two-time Fulbright Scholar Thomas Xenakis, there’s little distinction between art and life. “Creativity,” Thomas says, “is in our DNA. Each of us has it and we could not have evolved without it.” On reviewing the evolution of his work, it’s fair to say this painter has an abundance of creativity in his own DNA.

The arc of his work spans many different genres: from medical illustration, to sacred icons, to landscapes and contemporary mixed media painting. For Thomas, each step of his own evolution has been a progression from the concrete to the abstract, from the individual to the terrestrial and ultimately, the cosmic.

His own creative DNA comes from his ancestral home in Greece. Thomas’s father, a first-generation American, was a talented carpenter and craftsman who, according to Thomas, had remarkable drawing skills. His father studied art at the Pratt Institute in New York and, though he tried to steer his son away from the artist’s life, the siren call of the paint and brush was too strong for Thomas to resist. He credits his father with showing him “the joy of creating something with your hands, whether with a pencil, with paint or with wood.”

For Thomas, creativity comes from within, but it also can be aroused in the artist through education, which he calls “a catalyst that stimulates a creative evolution.” It may seem a bit unusual for an artist to use terms like DNA and catalyst—the language of science—to describe the creative process. But Thomas received an undergraduate degree in biology from Brooklyn College and an M.A. in art applied to medicine from The Johns Hopkins University Medical School. From there, he launched a career in medical illustration at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, which proved to be the right starting point for understanding the human condition.



When the medical illustration genre became too confining, he turned again to education to uncover the creativity buried deep within him. He credits his two Fulbright scholarships, both taken in Greece, and his work with abstract impressionist Grace Hartigan at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) as important influences that sparked his interest in Greek and Italian landscapes and contemporary



"Fog in Valley," oil on board, 10" x 12"

mixed media painting. He received his second master's degree, an M.F.A., at MICA.

An important part of his artistic journey includes helping others discover their own creativity. Thomas served as artist-in-residence at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. and taught at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. Now he teaches drawing, painting and design to students at George-

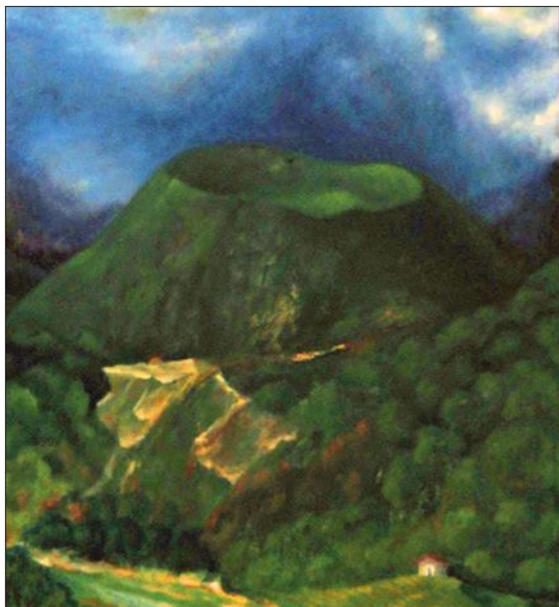
town and Marymount universities and other local schools of higher learning.

Some might consider an artistic journey that spans so many different genres unusual. Clinical, serene and ecstatic—Thomas's palette is broad and the swath of his work is vast. Yet, for all of the twists and turns in his artistic evolution, a stream of continuity flows through all of his traditional and contemporary



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paintings. For example, the layers of light in the setting sun, just moments before it slips below the horizon in “Church Tower at Dusk,” reflects a calm, intuitive optimism, an unforced sensibility and spirituality, consonant with his own views on art. “Being who you are,” says Thomas, “and communicating it with honesty and integrity—that’s what artists do.”

His contemporary works evoke a sensitivity and spirituality, too, though these feelings are expressed differently. In paintings like “The Web,” part of his *XPYSO* (gold) series, spirit is communicated more vibrantly as a series of connections between earth tones of green and blue, while more celestial elements are represented by a liberal use of gold leaf. “Every culture sees gold as divine,” says Thomas. “Gold doesn’t oxidize; it doesn’t rust—it’s eternal.” He also considers the act of creating art—expressing a simple idea and deconstructing it, often into something more visually complex—to be a spiritual exercise.



Above: "XPYSO # 166: When the Ice Melts," mixed media on gilded panel, 25.5" x 21.5"

At right: "DevalueNation: The Web," mixed media on gilded panel, 27" x 27"

Opposite, top: "Red Tower over Gubbio," oil on canvas, 12" x 14"; and "Mount Subasio in a Dream, Italy," oil on canvas, 23" x 17"



Thomas stays in touch with his creativity and those of his forebears, too, through the techniques he uses to create his art. Many of these methods, which Thomas mastered while studying in Greece, are derived from the Byzantine period. He uses layered media (varnish, bole and gesso) to add complexity to his work, which he says "echoes the complexity and layers of our daily life." He also draws inspiration from the scarred and reflective surfaces of sacred medieval and Byzantine iconographic images.

The thoughts Thomas expresses in his art mirror his own views of life. His work has a spiritual quality that goes beyond the terrestrial and reflects his views on the nature of art. "The only thing that remains eternal in culture is art," he says. "It has a permanence and a mystical, cosmic quality. I believe in that which goes beyond the earthly. I believe in the infinite." é

Thomas Xenakis | www.xenakisarts.com