

FRANK STEFANES 1932-1984

The parents of Frank Stefanès emigrated to the U.S. and Detroit from the Greek Island of Samos. Mrs. Stefanès brought family heirlooms from her mother country; among them was the pastoral scene that she painted in a Samos convent school. Frank hung this painting in his studio along with other folk art objects collected in his many travels. Mrs. Stefanès also brought family icons--this one is inscribed on the back with an 1836 date. These two paintings, one by his mother and the other by an anonymous Byzantine monk, are evidences of Frank's deep rooted heritage. His introspective tin framed self-portrait was created at Cranbrook Art School where he earned a Master's Degree in Art. The map of Greece indicates the location of Samos which Frank visited after his student years.

Frank's interest in folk art representing cultures from diverse parts of the world was continuous and passionately pursued through his adult life.

Byzantine aesthetic traditions dominate the contemporary Greek St. Nicholas church attended by the family of Frank Stefanès. The Byzantine style of architecture, murals and icons ultimately became a forceful influence in the paintings by Frank Stefanès. Jewel encrusted icons, richly embroidered robes of priests and the mystic rituals of Greek Orthodox rites were Frank's traditional heritage. However, Frank's intellectual curiosity propelled him on his own travel odyssey in search of origins and influences of Byzantine art throughout the Greek Islands, Turkey and , eventually, to the heart of the Soviet Union. Frank worked within the art mainstream as he experienced it, and collected potential icon imagery that he cut and pasted on boards embellished with bits of vitreous stones. He collected images of angels, devils, madonnas and saints along with assorted found objects incorporating into his art vocabulary. While traveling to Peru and Mexico, he found strong identification with similar church assembled altarpieces that shared the Byzantine taste. Recently, he visited India, Nepal, Southeast Asia, and Indonesian Islands where, too, he discovered visual imagery recalling the Byzantine aesthetic.

Classical Greek language and mythology was a perpetual frame of reference for Frank Stefanès. Greek language was nurtured in the Stefanès home and at the Greek Cultural Center where he studied Greek reading and writing with Mary Ball.

The inherent richness in his mother language invoked a passion for further linguistic studies of Latin, Spanish, French and Italian. He found revelation in Greek mythology, providing him with a constant classical frame of reference and vocabulary for visual metaphor. While he painted and sculpted within his own human experiences, he was inspired by the spiritual aspects of Greek antiquity. Frank Stefanès was an active member of the Michigan Classical Society and also enjoyed association with the Antiquaries, an auxiliary of the Founders society of the Detroit Institute of Arts. He was also an active member

of the Friends of Asian Art, and a member of the Mid-States Ceramic Study Group at Henry Ford Museum.

The Stefanos bronze sculptures were inspired by classical Greek mythology. The half-bird, half-female bronze Harpy figure is faithful to the classical Homeric tradition. The sculpture is small in size, yet evokes monumentality born out of its larger than life classical prototype. The male youth with bird and the linear Venus also suggest similar monumentality. The Stefanos ceramic sculptures could very well be newly discovered folk art from another planet, all of course invented by Frank.. Multi-textured surfaces celebrating the human form as equestrians, bird watchers, angels and ordinary people espoused a joy of life and a universal lineage to the great traditions of folk art.

The Stefanos ceramic (clay) sculptures were merely exemplary works created as learning devices for his students. Frank taught the Saturday morning classes for talented Detroit High School children at the Detroit Institute of Art. He also taught Art History at Michigan State University and in the Detroit Public School System. Students responded readily to his teaching and were regularly singled out for art awards in city-wide competitions.

The emotional trauma inflicted upon Frank Stefanos during his service in the Korean War affected his physical and psychological well-being. The tragic impact of war's horrors were immediate to his personal experience. As part of a M.A.S.H. unit, he collected the wounded and recorded the dead. His humanitarian intellect searched for some constructive meanings which he later expressed in paintings. This tragic drama of inevitable death played its role before his very eyes. Black is the predominate color force suggesting destruction and death.

The Asian white death mask is worn as in traditional ancient Greek drama. Frank saw the Alpha and Omega of life and expressed this in the metaphor of a caretaker (or thief?) of those Promethean Fires that might represent civilization itself.

Frank wore the emotional scars of war resulting in painful recurring colitis which he disguised beneath a comic mask in the drama of his own life.

COMIC RELIEF

Frank Stefanos was the "life" of every party that he attended. He wore the mask of the intellectual buffoon habitually poking fun at the sacred cows of his own body frailty, his beloved family, his country and the world. He enjoyed life and the staff of it, i.e. hot crusty breads, pitas, crepes, bagels, blintz, pastas and tortillas--with the expertise of an ethnic aficionado. The joys of eating good food was on par with the joy of discoveries in the flea markets, garage sales and thrift shops.

In the last two years, he was involved in the planning, research, collection and creation of dolls for the 1984 Doll Exhibition to be held in The International Institute. Three dolls show examples of his particular creativity. The tallest doll dressed in Greek costume was collaborative effort with Cyril Miles. Frank created the face in low fired clay an Cyril completed the doll. The white doll is created from a porcelain salt shaker as the head; the pink and beige wax faced doll was created out of a four faced candle.

The exhibition, especially in the European areas of France, Germany and England is testimony to the accuracy of his aesthetic eye. Most serious collectors were reluctant to loan us examples of their fragile porcelain wax dolls. So, Frank searched the doll shows and markets with a perseverance of purpose and found parts that he visualized as constructive basis for exemplary "collector type dolls". He carefully researched doll books for the best examples.

Composition head dolls he suggested be transformed into the Royal Historical Babies of The British Empire. He found Grosse Pointe Nora Asley, a member of the Daughters of the British Empire, and asked her to stitch the dolls for this section of the exhibition.

At an indoor flea market, he discovered Mrs. Nellitta Williams and her sister who created lively, well-made black dolls.

The assembled doll parts were found by Frank Stefanos to be constructed ultimately into Ethnic Dolls. His untimely death on June 1, 1984, makes it impossible for him to see and enjoy the completed exhibition that played so great a part in the last two years of his life.

We appropriately dedicate this exhibition to FRANK STEFANES.

Mary Ball
Executive Director

Cyril Miles
Folk Art Curator

The International Institute of Metropolitan Detroit