



Nikos Engonopoulos (Νίκος Εγγονόπουλος)

Nikos Engonopoulos (1907-1985) was a poet and painter and one of the leading exponents of surreal movement in Greece. He was surreally characterized as "the harsh rock of Elbasan¹ and the soft green lace of the Bosphorus by Andreas Empeirikos². He was known at second world war period for his surrealist poetry and for the surprising and unexpected associations and vivid colors, in his paintings.

During his teenage years he traveled to Paris, where he finished high school. He studied painting, he fought in the Albanian Front, was captured by the Germans and held in a labor camp, escaped and managed to arrive in Athens, after, as he said, "thrashing away more than half of Greece on foot". He taught painting as a professor at the School of Architecture at NTUA (National Technical University of Athens). He was involved in poetry, painting and stage design. From 1939 till 1983, Engonopoulos participated in many team and personal exhibitions in Greece and abroad. He also produced sceneries for plays.

The artist himself stated in his autobiography: "Fortunately I studied here (he means in Athens) at the School of Fine Arts...A place that benefited me in many ways and I owe deep gratitude to it".

Engonopoulos is inspired by the ancient Greek tradition and additionally by the byzantine tradition. Therefore, we can see in his paintings heroes of the Greek mythology and figures of the Greek history. He does not try, however, the so-called "return to roots", like most artists of his generation. He doesn't approach mythology neither with lust to ancient times nor with nostalgia, but as equal to

1. Elbasan is a historic city in Albania, where Engonopoulos fought against the Germans during World War II.
2. [Andreas Embirikos](#) was a Greek surrealist poet and the first Greek psychoanalyst.

equal. He records the visibility of legends in his time, revealing the subversive, dreamlike and erotic components. He often criticizes through his works.

"As a Greek" as he would say himself, but mainly as surrealist, Engonopoulos submits his own distinctive visual style of gods, heroes, feats, sidelines, acts, sometimes by being pure narrative, sometimes quite a pretext and sometimes paying version of his own.[1]

The pictorial world of Engonopoulos, part of which constitute the images of the appendix, is recognizable and unique. It is formed by explosive colors, where the sensual, faceless figures of his, with a mysterious stillness or (and) with priests gestures are usually structured by irrational premises, accompanied by several disparate items. The absurd and the dreamy nature of his surrealist painting refers to symbolic hints, which might have several interpretations. Sometimes, Engonopoulos escapes all recorded versions of myths and creates an own or, again, uses the compositions of famous mythological figures.

His figures look like puppets of the seams, which are rigid and do not have a profile. They are usually naked, like they want to remind us the beauty of the ancient Greek statues, but also sometimes dressed in clothes of various time periods, like they want to indicate a temporal continuity. Space has elements from ancient times, Byzantium, Greek nature and civilization (sea, sky, pillars, curtains). The colors are very intense, so the paintings are full of light.

Beyond his surrealistic works, Nikos Engonopoulos had also a contribution to Byzantine¹ painting. Engonopoulos attracted strongly to Byzantine art, perhaps because he both liked the feeling of tradition that was inside him, and the desire of acquiring a new way of expression (actually it was still unformed at the current time of his life). One way though, that would be both modern and clearly Greek. Besides, later scholars find, in his work, and highlight his relationship with the Byzantine painting.[2]

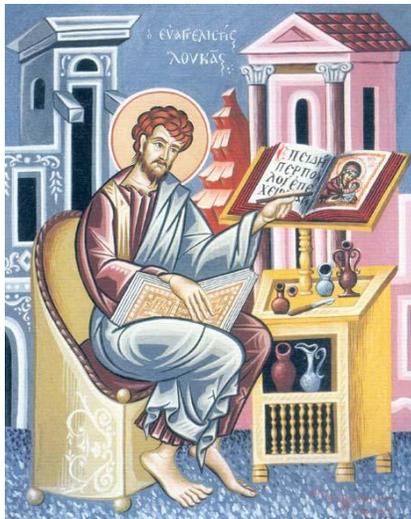
Engonopoulos started painting with the technique of egg tempera and byzantine style in the early '30s. When it was concreted in Greece a move to the roots and begins a recognition and acceptance of Byzantine art. His Byzantine style works range chronologically in thirty years, dated from 1933 to early 1963. It seems that in the last two decades of his works are not expressed anymore in this technique,

1. [Byzantine art](#) is the term commonly used to describe the artistic products of the Byzantine Empire from about the 4th century until the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.

and perhaps at this point becomes true his saying about quitting church painting.[3]

Nikos Engonopoulos believed that an artist is always alone but his role is necessary to the society. He never quitted writing and painting, although he faced many sorrows in his life. As he was saying: “It is impossible to imagine, in our home land, with how many difficulties, deprivations, sacrifices and sufferings, how these works are produced. Nevertheless, through his stubbornness, patience and mainly his love for his art, he achieved to be highly ranked in both arts, that he served. Namely art negates loneliness[4], as he believed.

Critique of 2 of his works, one from each style of his.



In 1952, Engonopoulos illustrated Christ the Almighty (see appendix) and Evangelist Lucas (on the right), using bright colors and rich architectural depth. Lucas, Evangelist and painter, in the open book at his lectern, he writes, on the left page, the beginning of his Gospel while on the right, there is from his painting work the picture of the Leader Virgin Mary. The design of his head follows the standard, in Greek tradition, formula portrait of his, with curly hair and relatively close, round beard. The molding of the face arises from the Cretan School¹, but it is much more rough, while the white lines below the left eye are of

much greater intensity of the Cretan School. Thus, this project is almost expressionistic.[5]

1. [Cretan School of religious painting](#) (hagiography is the Greek term)



“The Oath (conspiracy)”. In the creative imagination of a surrealist painter like Engonopoulos, the unexpected meeting of disparate forms creates a dreamlike scene from the Theater of Greek history. "I am Greek with the relevant forms that surround me" he has said. In a thoughtful composition of figures, a priest and a foustanelas² join their index fingers declaring a mysterious oath, thus forming the apex of an invisible triangle which can be the pediment of an ancient Greek temple. They could swear loyalty to the historical reality, as modeled after the Asia Minor disaster or collude against this, in order to defend the continuing historical memories of Hellenism³. The handshake of the Minoan axe warrior with the West European dressed officer could be a metaphor that the Greek heroism along with the dubious role of the Great Powers (England, France and Russia) affected Greek history over the last two centuries. Or all this mysterious ritual, the coexistence of myth and reality, the coupling of old and new, could reflect the concerns of the entire generation of '30s, but at the same time challenges these concerns, as it places the visual action in a manifestly theatrical space.

References

- [1] David Connolly, Nikos Engonopoulos Mythology, Introduction pages.
- [2]Al. Ksidis, Nikos Engonopoulos: a Greek surrealist painter, p. 41.
- [3]N. Loizidi, The surrealism in Greek art, Nikos Engonopoulos, p. 46
- [4]Anthoula Daniil, Aerostato Magazine, 126, p. 26-27.
- [5]N. Zias, Nikos Engonopoulos, The Byzantine, p. 2

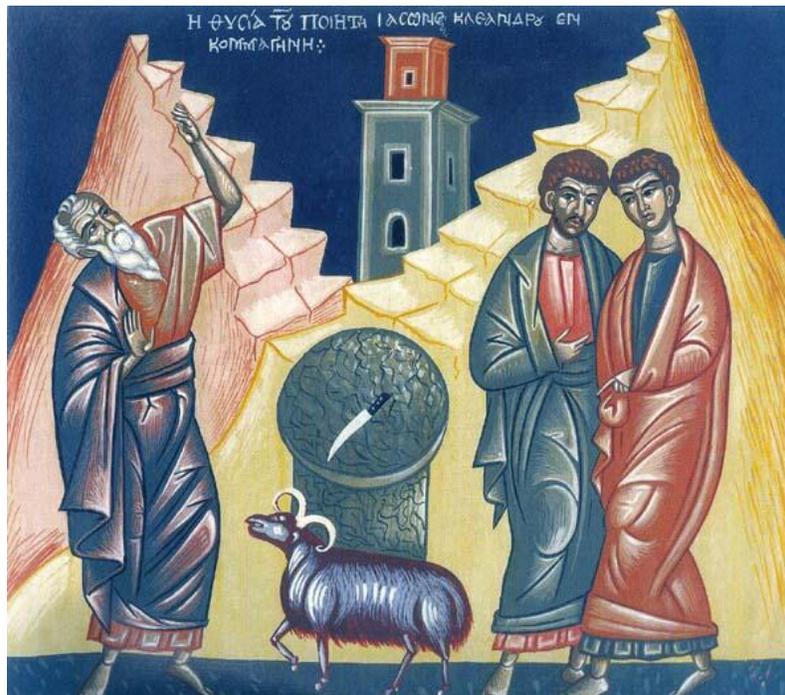
1. [Foustanelas](#) is the Greek term for the traditional Greek men of 17th and 18th centuries
2. [Hellenism](#) refers to the Greek term of Greek or Hellenic nation (from the term Hellas, as Greeks traditionally call their country).

Appendix

Nikos Engonopoulos works



The Last Supper



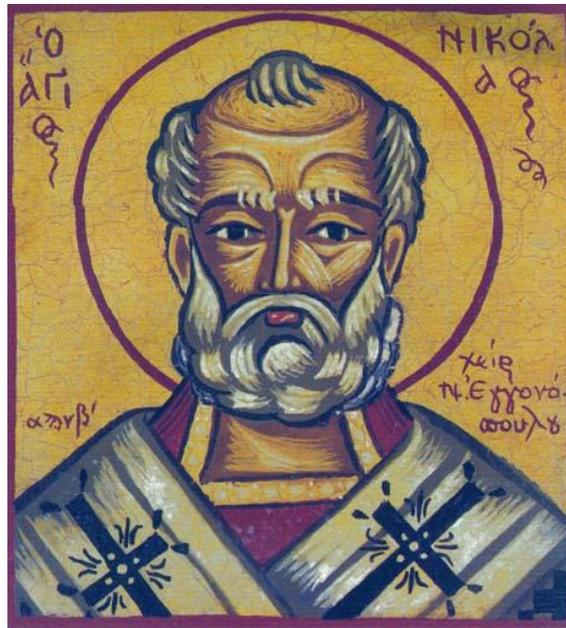
The sacrifice of the poet Jason Kleandrou from Kommagini



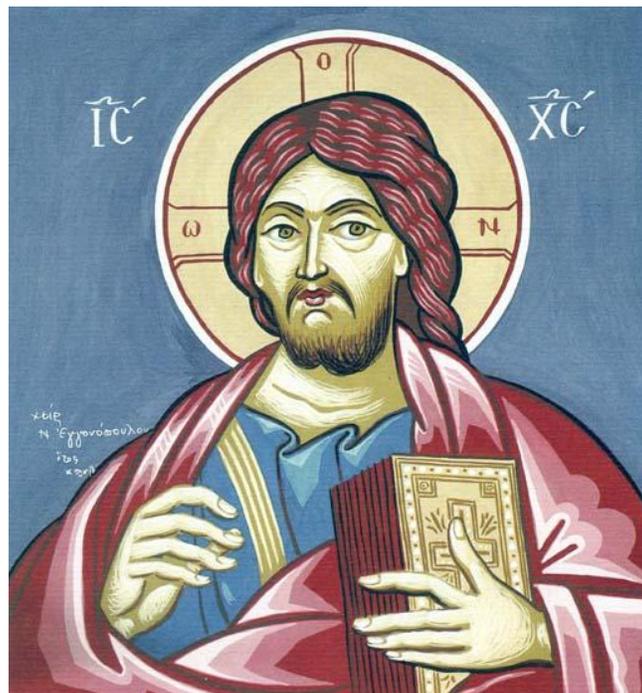
The Archangel Michael
Egg tempera on wood with gold leaf



The architect Sinan, 1934
Egg tempera on wood



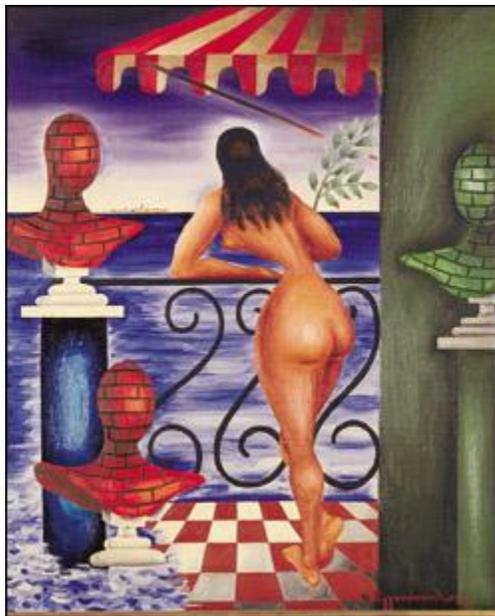
St. Nicholas, 1952
Egg tempera on wood with gold leaf



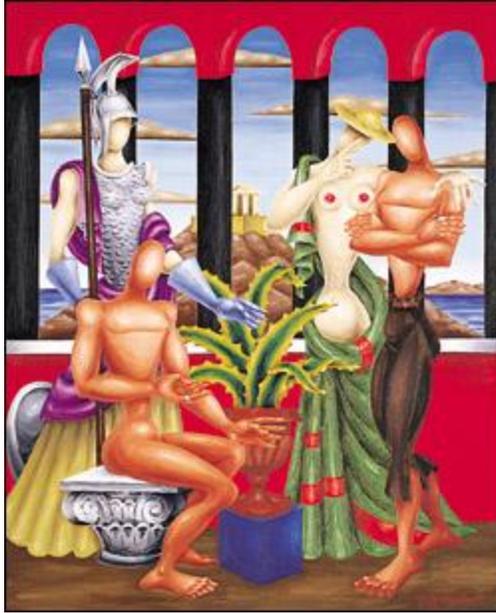
Christ the almighty, 1952
Egg tempera on wood



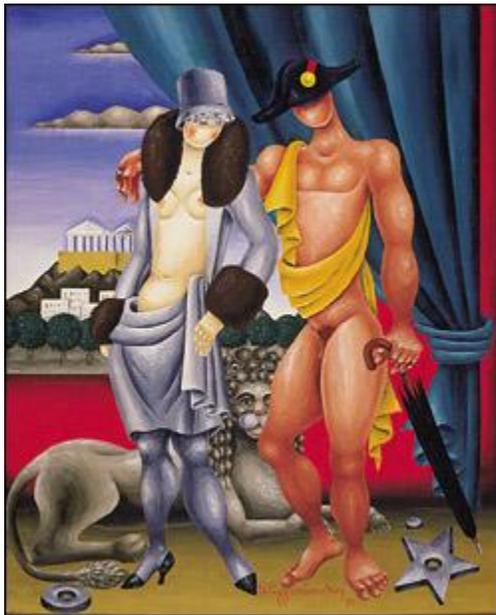
Au rendez-vous Allemand,
"Momento from the occupation. Athenian lady before the German conqueror"
Oil painting



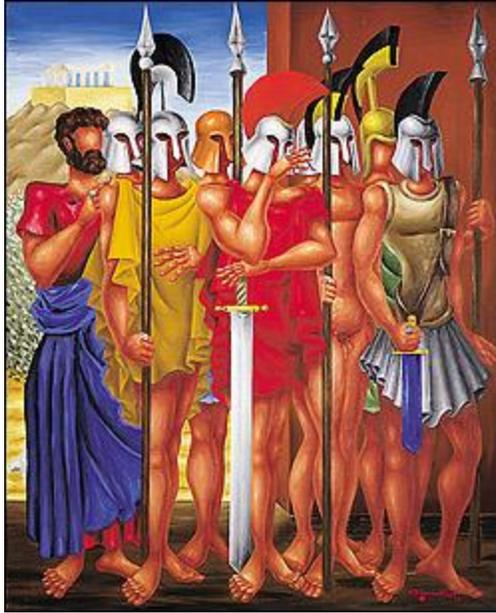
Mediterranean Muse
Oil painting



The history of Athens
Oil painting



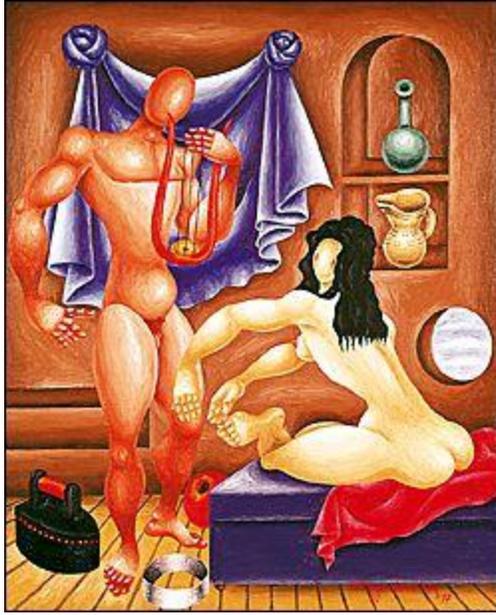
Thetis and Peleus
Oil painting



Alexandros Philippou and the Greeks without the Spartans
Oil painting



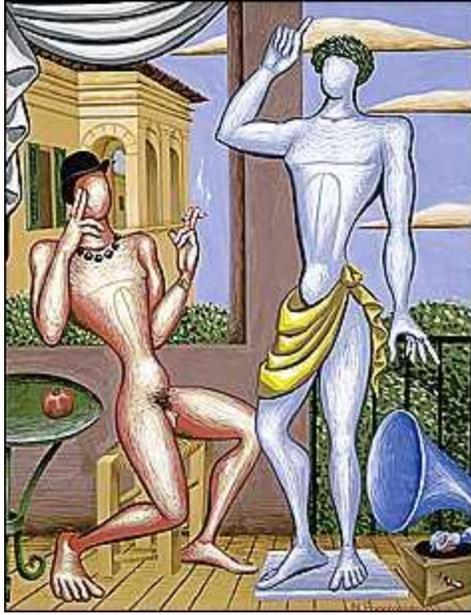
Argo
Oil painting



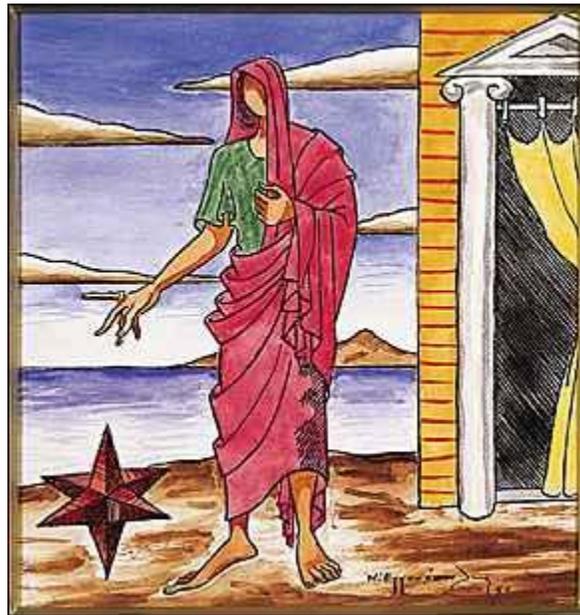
The Steam Iron
Oil painting



Poet and Hero
Oil painting



Composition with Hermes
Water-colour painting



Woman Figure
Water-colour painting