



Spyros Vassiliou, *In Search of a Subject*, 1966

art

Vassiliou in Retrospect

HIS DATE of birth is somewhat obscure. According to the records, a Spyros Vassiliou was born in 1902, but there was another brother of the same name who died at six months. The other was born in 1903. The painter explains, 'I do not know, nor do I wish to know, which brother I am'.

It is certain he was born in Galaxidi, a small, once prosperous port on the Gulf of Corinth below Delphi. In the old days it was famous for its sea-farers. It is not surprising that as a child Vassiliou fell in love with boats and as an artist has been painting them all his life. As a boy he worked as a chemist's apprentice — and painted in the cellar of his shop. Some villagers recognized his talent, got together, and helped him to study at the Athens Polytechnic.

The Faculty of Painting in the early Twenties was a stronghold of the Munich School, then in its final stages of academic exhaustion. Despite this the students were imbued with the spirit of the French Post-Impressionists. While most of the West at the time was absorbing the first shocks of the new school of Picasso, Braque and others, Cezanne (who had been dead for twenty years) was still thought avant-garde at the Polytechnic. Constantine Parthenis, the first Greek master of twentieth-century techniques in Western painting — and twenty years older than Vassiliou

Throughout November the National Picture Gallery presents a Retrospective Exhibition of Spyros Vassiliou, often referred to as the 'most Greek of the Greek painters'. This is a part of the continuing series of retrospectives at the National.

— was an important influence on these young painters.

Vassiliou's paintings of the late Twenties and early Thirties reflect these influences: small, serious works with their subdued browns, ochres and dark greens subservient to a strong and deliberate sense of form, as in 'Tourkovounia' (1930) and 'Exarchia' (1930). An underlying Cubism in these works re-emerges in later periods in which the objects that he paints always have weight.

In the middle Thirties Vassiliou entered a *fauve* period. Structure and colour blend. Colours grow both heavier and brighter with almost sombre, but always glowing, blues turning to purples and the surprising whites in the middle ground of his pictures add both to the works' depth and mystery as in 'Zappion' (1935) and 'Carnival' (1935).

In 1930 Vassiliou had won the Benaki Prize for designs for decorating the church of Saint Dionysios the Areopagite on Skoufa Street. The execution of this decoration took nine years and the reflection of the influence

of Byzantine techniques in his lay paintings grew during the decade, his *fauve* Byzantine period culminating in 'Hydra' (1939-45), a work interrupted by the war and the consequent unavailability of paints. This harrowing and austere period forced him to explore other outlets: illustrations, woodcuts and illuminations of manuscripts which he himself also wrote in Byzantine calligraphy. This period of activity — whose severity is best seen in 'The Lyre Player' (1942) — also taught him both a fine and a bold sense of line, and again, this linear quality marks much of his later work.

After the war Vassiliou returned to a sunny period and his pictures emerge with a brightness not seen before. For a number of summers in the early Fifties, he painted on the island of Aigina. These Aigina pictures pick up the homely subjects of his earliest period, domestic objects and genre scenes. Now, however, the Cubist element merges with the linear and takes on a Surrealist focus as seen in 'Clean Monday' (1950), 'The Straw Hat' (1953), 'Dried Flowers' (1954). The *fauve* colouring separates and reflects more light giving these Aigina paintings an atmosphere of great cheerfulness.

During the Xylocastro period which follows, Vassiliou worked extensively in watercolour which allowed him speed and expressionistic freedom. (Xylocastro is a town on the south side of the Gulf of Corinth where he was decorating another church.) Now in larger tempera paintings he picked up this free, almost hasty, style to depict heaps of objects like gramophones, umbrellas, sewing machines and bric-a-brac, all of which give the impression that they are talking, even arguing, with each other, as in 'The Old Gramophone' (1957). Wit was now added to cheerfulness and became humour, one of the most memorable qualities of his art.

Quite suddenly — even unexpectedly — in 1960, an air of serenity began to move into his pictures. At first it was largely due to that phenomenon, known today as 'Vassiliou blue', which is both deep and brilliant, but it was also due to a new feeling for the immensity of space. The wide stretches of sea and sky in these Molyvos pictures have a calm made hypnotic by a sense of their being carried outside the frame of the paintings. This tranquility became monumental throughout most of the Sixties. All influences of the past join into a single and original vision in which it is superfluous to say that the works are Byzantine, Surrealist or of any other traditional school. 'A Glass of Water'

