

282

YIANNIS TSAROUHIS

24. vii. 89

Painter who evoked the essence of Greek life

Yiannis Tsarouhis, Greek artist, stage designer and sometimes director, versatile writer and wit, died in Athens on July 20, aged 79.

He was an outstanding landscape and figure painter, but it is his forceful portrayal of Greek youths and sailors, radiating an erotic mysticism that was so much part of his own life, that established him as one of the great contemporary artists in Greece.

Inevitably, he will be remembered for his trenchant witticisms about the collective foibles that his compatriots practise rather than admit to. He himself seemed to have maintained a philosophical distance from such complexes without ever losing his essential identification with Hellenic culture, just as his works never lost the sharpness of colour that is so exclusively Greek.

Born in Piraeus in 1910, he

developed an early interest in painting and stage designing. After graduating from the Athens School of Fine Arts, he worked under Photis Kontoglou, master painter of frescoes and icons who bequeathed to him the Byzantine elements so evident in his early work. In 1935 he discovered and was captivated by the colours of Ingres and Renoir's play of light.

But on his return to Greece in 1937 his work betrayed the influence of Matisse whom he had met. It was not long, however, before the home-grown inspirational elements reasserted themselves creating an unusual blend which he described as "oriental expressionism".

His career as stage designer began at the age of 17. It reached a climax in 1961 when he designed the sets and costumes for Maria Callas's *Medea* in Epidaurus. His

association with the theatre dated back to his close co-operation with Karolos Koun's Art Theatre in the early 1930s and later the National Theatre of Greece. In recent years he designed and directed *The Trojan Women* and the *Seven Against Thebes* which he himself had translated into modern Greek. He detested authoritarianism in any form, so when the military seized power in Greece, he sought refuge in Paris between 1967 and 1974. Before his death he had set up a foundation to ensure that his paintings, personal belongings, and manuscripts, exhibited in a museum that had been his home, would be accessible to all. Three volumes of largely autobiographical material have been published, containing unconventional thoughts on life, death and the Greeks. He never married.

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