GIANTPOSTERS
OF CINEMA

BY GEORGE VAKIRTZIS

*THE GIANTPOSTER*OF CINEMA IN ATHENS*

The fact that I decided to publish part of my work for the Giantposter of Cinema in Athens (1946 – 1963) does not imply that I mean to represent in any way all that has been done in this field.
I am only happy that in this way, I have the opportunity to refer to historical data, to people and facts, to acts and events that spell the course of this craft. Furthermore, I am happy because this edition opens in a more official manner the way to all those friends and colleagues who worked and still work in this field, to present their work in some way.
Now, without claiming to be either an objective critic or even observer for all that has been done and still is in this field – especially for the times that I was personally involved in this business – I would like to begin with the personal assertion that the Giant Poster of Cinema in Athens has created a School, a School which by virtue of its quality, claims a prominent position in this field world-wide. If this is true, it is due to many different reasons that together weave its history. Some of them – historical phases and thoughts – I aim to cite further below.
The Giantposter of Athens, lives, works and develops itself for more than 45 years now, uninterupted, within the regular weekly change pattern of decor, that keeps step with the change of cinema programs.

It first appeared on the facade, the display windows and entrance halls of the movie theaters in Athens around 1920-25 in the form of scenic decor.
In the course of its existence, the Giantposter has developed through the creative talents and techniques the able craftsmen and masters that worked on it had to offer.
It has assimilated elements of folk art and decorating both in the picture and lettering.
It has been influenced by the printed American and European poster that follows international film production.
It has also been indirectly affected by the Munich School of Painting, the style of which was adopted, before World War II, by our Academy of Fine Arts. After the War, it walked together with the new aesthetic trends of European Art. And, through these and beyond these, it evolved its own form. The cinema halls Orpheus, Titania, Rex, Atticon, Kotopouli and some others, helped it in its pioneering days and became its ramparts. Evidence of its troubled course still exists today.
Scenographers Theodore Armenopoulos, John Ambelas and painter-scenographer Mitsos Makris represent the first phase of this work.
A group of Greek-Russian folk painters under N. Kmindowitz and later the great self-taught master craftsman Costas Couzounis represent the second phase.
Then, Stephanos Almaliotis, the talented painter, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts, opened the third phase establishing with his inspiration, his tremendous drive and his unceasing efforts throughout the decade 1930-40, what came to be known as the Athens School.
I think it would be useful to offer some thoughts in this introduction on the main characteristics of our School, as we see it. In this way, our purposes will be better explained and the dialogue with the reader and the «viewer», our audience, will be opened on a more constructive basis.
It can be said that two of the main features of the Athens School of the Giantposter, are: evolution of plastic formulation and consistency to its aims. Plastic evolution is characterized by the gradual transition of the form of the display from the sphere of scenographic decor (realistic theatrical scenography) to the dynamic presentation of two-dimensional pictures and letter-

ing which are the result of the combination of the rhythm of editing in the cinema and the form of large-size posters.
Consistency to its aims is characterized by a deep knowledge of the laws governing the environments in which its product functions (outdoor or indoor large space) and comprehension of the principles of the limited-time impact of the product to the viewer, the measure of which depends on the simple composition and the strength of colour in accordance with the demands of artificial night lighting.
For the Athenian Masters of the Giantposter, who know their trade, these two points – plastic formulation and aim – form the golden rule that guides their every move. They have become convinctions, a kind of faith. A faith that drives them to constructive rivalry that produces results with quality, plastic quality. This quality is what moves, creates interest, mobilizes. It is the aesthetic result from within the whole process.
Once, some years ago, maybe even today, students of the School of Fine Arts, artists, art-lovers and the common people, would givé every Monday morning before going to work, a look on the «decors» of the main Athens cinemas. These cinemas represented in a way a weekly exhibition of an art that had neither demanded nor did it ask for any justification. It functioned in its own way. It lived. (At this point, I would like to mention the definite assistance of some employers and employees in the cinema to our work. Personally, I owe a considerable lot to Spyros D. Skouras who embraced me with love, confidence and understanding).
Another characteristic of this School, which is worth mentioning, is the conquering of the technique of mixing watercolours with fishglue. This difficult, sensitive, uncontrolable material, found the most ideal conditions under which to expand on the cheap yard-paper all of its chromatic and tonic glamour and all its other numerous potentialities depending on the experience, sensitivity and temperament of the user.
I should also add that among the characteristics of the Giantposter must be included the use of rich and varied movement, plastic, light and other gimmicks produced from a variety of materials which helped to create the spectacle quality a poster of this kind needs.
Furthermore, always in my opinion, the Athens Giantposter gave by the simplest

means for limited periods of time—usually a week—high quality results in the fields of promotion as well as aesthetics.
Finally, I believe that the Giantposter of Athens justified its existence as a special plastic communication medium in a sufficiently touching and dedicated manner.

GEORGE VAKIRTZIS

**Under the title «GIANTPOSTERS by George Vakirdzis», ZYGOS, a magazine devoted to Fine Arts, presented for the first time (issue III/66) parts of my work in this field.*
I thank ZYGOS once again.
This term – Giantposter – seems to be replacing for good the previous and well known term «decor» which – quite rightly – had been established by older generations of artists and craftsmen of this profession. Also, I think, this new term expresses the contemporary form of this work in a much more correct way. For this reason, the term Giantposters of Cinema has been adopted for this book.

AN EPISODE WITH «REMBRAND»

It was nearing dawn of a winter Monday, around 1938-39, in a studio in Constantine Paleologue street. Stephanos Almaliotis was preparing, with great care and a lot of emotion, a display for Orpheus cinema. It was for an American movie on the life of Rembrand starring Charles Laughton. Around two in the morning Stephanos looked up at me and said «Come. Go home, you can return in the morning to tidy up the place». Who knows in how bad a shape I looked to be. The situation as far as the work went, was not really desperate. All backgrounds were ready, prepared with exeptional zeal. However, the results were not up to his standard. Not up to the standard of the occasion either. It seems, the title and the story of the film, sort of worried him.

On the well-stretched paper, amidst the colours a demanding image moved that scared him. The memory of the «silent wizard». The painter he admired from childhood. The name that meant Painting. The image of Rembrand.

I bade him goodnight and went on my way. As I left, in the night, I knew well that except for a few final touches here and there, he had to do the foreground. A big piece. A cut-out head, around 10 feet high.

It was the leading actor's portrait in his impersonation of the great master.

This was left for last.

He shrunk from it and I knew why. He was struggling to overmaster it, bring it around.

And so, he decided to wrestle with it at the end, rallying for the purpose all the concentrated force of his tension.

I returned in the morning, worried, with eyes swollen from sleeping, my conscience twinging me a little for leaving my master almost all alone.

Everything had been finished, ready to be put up. The hang-up gang, just woken up, waited around sleep still clouding their eyes. In a corner sat Stephanos smoking – as always. But now he was serene, smiling, relaxed as if he had not worked all night. It was the first time I saw him, without eyes red from staying up late. He felt consistent with everything, with all, with himself. The perfection of the foreground, the portrait that had been done at dawn, made me look at the creator full of admiration. He smiled again, and accepted this form of congratulations from his young assistant. The first for his victory.

It is a rare and happy moment, to see and feel the outcome of a released artistic tension. A freed tension that knowing its power, forgets itself with force, virility and vigor on 25 square feet of paper, where colour, shades, light and shadow, become through their clash, Harmony, Painting, Art.

Time went by. I was always on the look out for this portrait.

Of course I did not expect to find it in an Art Gallery. This kind of luxury never even crossed my mind. More likely and for us naturally, it would have ended torn up from been dragged after its official first, here and there in the neighbourhood cinemas of Athens. And this, with the best of luck. It wouldn't be the first no the last incident of this kind. And we never had any real complaint about it. After all didn't Stephanos paint it just for that? What other values could be attached to it at these times?

Finally, one day, noon time, I chanced to walk in a long narrow corridor of a studio, next to the National Theater, with an atmosphere that smelt of kindness mixed with decadent bohemianism. They were making signs, advertising billboar and such like. Haphazardly, with what materia they could find. Everything in there existed transit. A veritable corridor.

In this place, where everything was accommodate in the easiest and most careless fashion, I sa Rembrand's portrait, standing near the end of t corridor acting as a screen separating the wo quarters from the sleep and make-love ones.

I was happy to see again this head reappear o of nowhere and immediately I felt that inspite everything it was put up there with affectio With some love. Maybe even with a lot of lo But above all, dominant over everything t portrait shone just like the moment it was born. showed to be a proud piece of work with ind structible power. It showed to be a work of A

HOW I CAME TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE «GIANTPOSTER»

As if I knew what is painting!
I thought that what's made with brush, paint and ardent desire was a painting. And what smells of turpontine and oil was a studio.

One day I lingered in front of the small window of a shack, with various pictures, gold patterns of decoupè letters for signboards etc., in display. It was a tiny workshop, very very small, where signboards, number plates, Madonnas and all sorts of advertisements were produced. The master craftsman, the boss, was a Turk by the name of Kiamil. There, I got my first job around 1936. There, I learned how to paint signboards, with all the trimmings, to write on walls and in ouzo-bars with water colours, in restaurants and Banks, going about with my ladder on my shoulders. I was proud for all these, so much that I used to smear purposely my trousers with paint, to look for the benefit of the neighbourhood, like a real painter. I didn't care if I was making elaborate signboards and letters or what-have-you. I believed I was painting.
The same, more or less did another boy the Turk had working for him too. His name was Serkos, he was Armenian.

Sometime later, Kiamil took to producing advertisements for a couple of local cinemas near his «shop». Then I heard for the first time that these were called «posters».
We made them together, the master and I, on cheap paper bought by the yard, using fishglue paint, that in summer stank horribly. This then, was my initial contact with today's «Giantposter» of the cinema. Meanwhile, we were also doing all sorts of other things, down there in Kokkinia. Constructions for fares, for terrible and marvellous spectacles, for circuses – featuring monsters, snakes, dwarfs and siamese brothers, – even magicians, jugglers and peddlers,

wise men and town criers going around in their appropriately decorated buggies crying out announcements about all kinds of wares and business.
On Sundays I'd put on my best clothes, and go by myself or with friends to Athens, just to give a look-see and spend my pocketmoney.
My eyes devoured the pasted up advertisements, the signboards, the various outdoor exhibits but mostly I was drawn by the big, beautiful cinema posters. The ones I liked best, really admired, were the ones outside movie theaters Orpheus and Kronos – today it is named Kotopouli. I'd forget myself admiring, time passed and then I,d take the bus home, full of burning desire and schemes on how I would manage to come to Athens and become an apprentice to those masters I admired.
I had heard from a union man, his name was Tsitsakis, signboard painter by trade – he may still be alive – that the artist who did the posters for Orpheus was tremendous, that he painted with both hands at the same time. He also said that no one was nearly as good as he in this business. His name was Stephanos Almaliotis.
Then, I got carried away, and employed all means at my disposal, to obtain an introduction to this fantastic amphidexterous painter, to have him take me with him so that some of his mastery might rub off on me. Finally I made it. I became his apprentice, assistant and later collaborator and friend. He did not have his own studio then in 1938, and painted his Giantposters, in the «studio» of Mitsos Makris, in Sophocles street. This studio was an abandoned machine works or possibly carpenter's shop, its roof covered with tin-sheets. When I first set foot in this studio, I got lost in a chaos of billboards and such like, old and new with which craftsmen and assistants were doing things. I remember it was a weekend. Weekends there,were an unbroken period without distinction between days and nights. Work was done in a frenzy. Everything should be ready and in its place by Monday morning, at crack of dawn. I was lost. I didn't know to whom or where to look. Here, carpenters built up hoardings, there, sign painters were writing letters, furtherdown painters brandished huge brushes; everybody working frantically amidst jokes and laughter, on these mamoth boards.
I was little then you see and to me they looked even bigger.
Sunday morning found me still with them. It was Monday noon before I got

home after a last inspection, which we all did together, of the work finished and put up in the positions intended for it.

From them on I forgot all else and learned to follow their rhythm. I learned to work the days they worked, keep the hours they kept and rest when they rested. I learned to construct huge boardframes, cut-outs and silhouettes, to glue-on papers properly, to prepare beautiful colours, to design heads with the method of squares, 3 and 4 times bigger than me, to write the kind of letters these things need, to help out the craftsmen in the difficult moments when work was flooding us, to set-up sets in the middle of winter, to use the jargon of the business, to judge people and characters, to compare these men and to love their work according to my feelings for them.
From the older ones, I singled out from the first moment, Mitsos Makris, the one who owned the studio (he died during the Occupation swollen-up from starvation and T.B. in the arms of our National Theater).
He loved me well, he helped me, he was proud of me. The same I felt for him. He was lean, just and a rare master in his art. He came from Rumania and sang rumanian songs which he accompanied with his guitar. He was very good at it.
Everywhere, always he made his presence quitely felt with his capacity for work and his enormous technical experience.
Naturally, my own master, Stephanos, I loved in a different way.
The younger ones, near my age, were Memas (Gerassimos Touliatos), with whom I still work, Vazopoulos, Sisis (Sisak Etelekian) – he too died like a dog – others that left us soon and I don't remember them well and others yet, whom I don't know why, I don't seem to find it convenient to mention here.
about some scenographers who got involved in the business, about some White There I heard, for the first time about how the sets were made in the old times,

Russians that painted on the floor corny-sugary things, about late nights-out, drinking, money and art schools where they taught painting.

Later I met others, of the same profession, like the good craftsman Costas Kouzounis, his younger brother George, Manolis Panagiotopoulos, Vaggelis

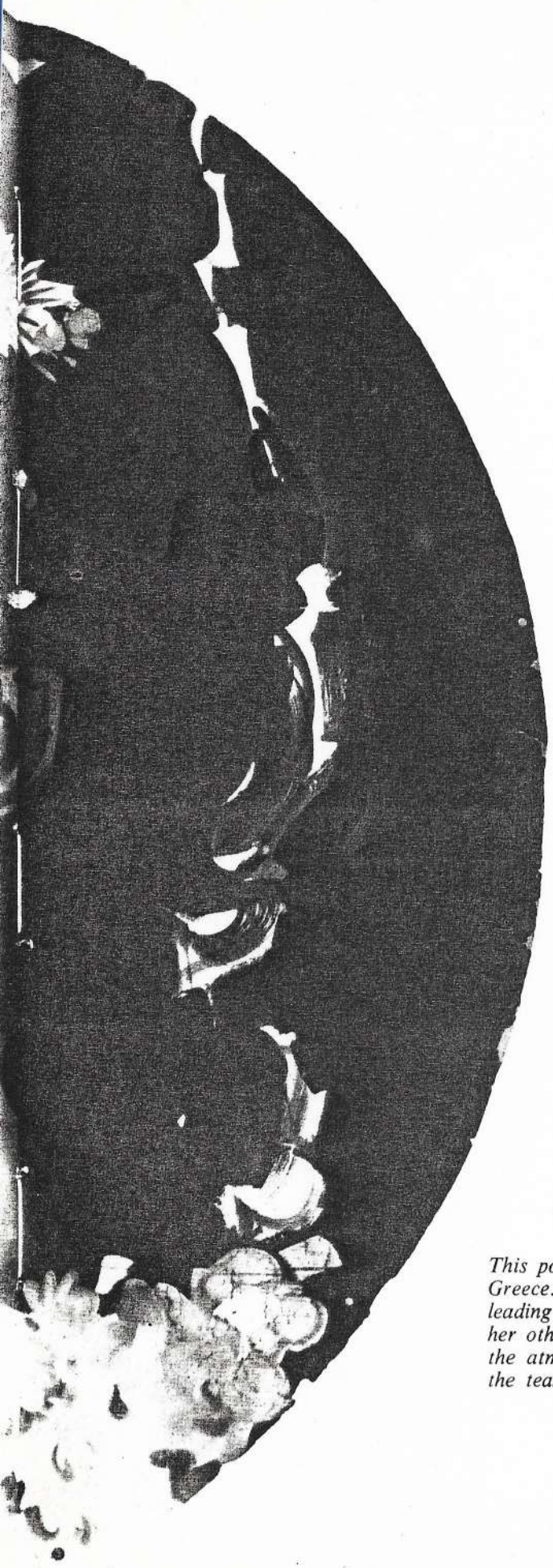
Fainos and Charalambos Serasis the man with the super-sensitive heart. With these last two we cooperated a lot.
In 1939, after many advendures, Stephanos finally opened his own studio, first in Constantine Palaeologue street, and then in 15, Zoodochos Pigi street where it still is.
The set-up changed, became more highbrow, everything got better organized our conversation began to expres learned thoughts, we tightened our lations with real painters, poets, writers, aeshteticians, actors. All these were fine. But our atmosphere, the work itself had lost that alive, warm, unaffected team-work feeling.
Serious conversations began about studies, Fine Arts. The modern art trends and their aims were discussed, criticised! We started to become interested in the, unknown to us then, Graphic Arts...

G. V.

DOCUMENTATION AND DISPLAYS

Many times, for various reasons, we had to work without any documentation (photographic or other material from the films).
Teasers especially were made as a rule while the films were being shot. Then we had to make up our compositions based on the information we had at our disposal, i.e., the title, the type, the stars of the film.
In order to be able to materialize, realistically this information we could ask, if we wanted, for characteristic material from other older films, which of course we adapted to the new conditions.
In these cases, the results were almost always better than those achieved when the authentic background material was available.
The reason was that as there were no prototypes or patterns binding us to follow a specific course, our imagination worked free. We also adopted more or less the same tactics in cases of immediate jobs, (i.e., films scheduled to appear the following Monday), where no documentation existed.
This however, was different as we had sometimes the opportunity to see the actual film which was indeed very helpful.
Nevertheless in either case, the information or background material could not create by themselves an independent and meaningful composition. The simple, apathetic placing of one item next to the other was of course not enough.
These documents had to assume meaning with rhythm and measure, so that they could become themselves motives and with suitable and proportionate interchange, out of symbols or abstract forms would result the indispensable, practical and aesthetic factor: Meaning.

G. V.



This portrait was made one year before the film came to Greece. We only knew the title, the story outline and the leading star. I took a photograph of the star from one of her other pictures and made the necessary changes to suit the atmosphere of the new one, so that we could launch the teaser.