

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



ART
and
LANDSCAPE

Edited by **GEORGE L. ANAGNOSTOPOULOS**

II

PANAYOTIS AND EFFIE MICHELIS FOUNDATION — ATHENS

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
PANHELLENIC ASSOCIATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS - IFLA SYMPOSIUM ATHENS - 1998

ART
and
LANDSCAPE

Edited by **GEORGE L. ANAGNOSTOPOULOS**

II

PANAYOTIS AND EFFIE MICHELIS FOUNDATION — ATHENS

PICTORIAL APPROACH TO THE ROCKY INSULAR LANDSCAPE: THE CASE OF THE AEGEAN ISLANDS*

E. GEORGITSOYIANNI, M. ANASTASSIADIS, Greece

'Then he spoke and the sea was born
And I gazed upon it and marveled
In its center he sowed little worlds in my image and likeness:
Horses of stone with manes erect
and tranquil amphorae
and slanting backs of dolphins
Ios, Sikinos, Serifos, Milos...'



Figure 1: 'Karpathos', Minas, K. & Makris, M. (date unknown) 'Olympus and Diafani of Karpathos': Karpathos: Community of Olympus: 35. Photo by G. Anastassiadis. Reproduced by kind permission of the Community of Olympus, Karpathos

With this verse in Odysseas Elytis' *Axion Esti*¹, a window is opened to the cosmogony which took place in Greece and shaped the physical features as well as the history and culture of the Aegean Islands. The Aegean Sea is interspersed with both small and large islands which form a unique archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea. These islands emerged when the land of the Aegeis was swallowed up by the sea, which explains why all of them, despite their morphological diversity, are mountainous². This is a peculiar natural space, mainly characterised – as far as most islands and espe-

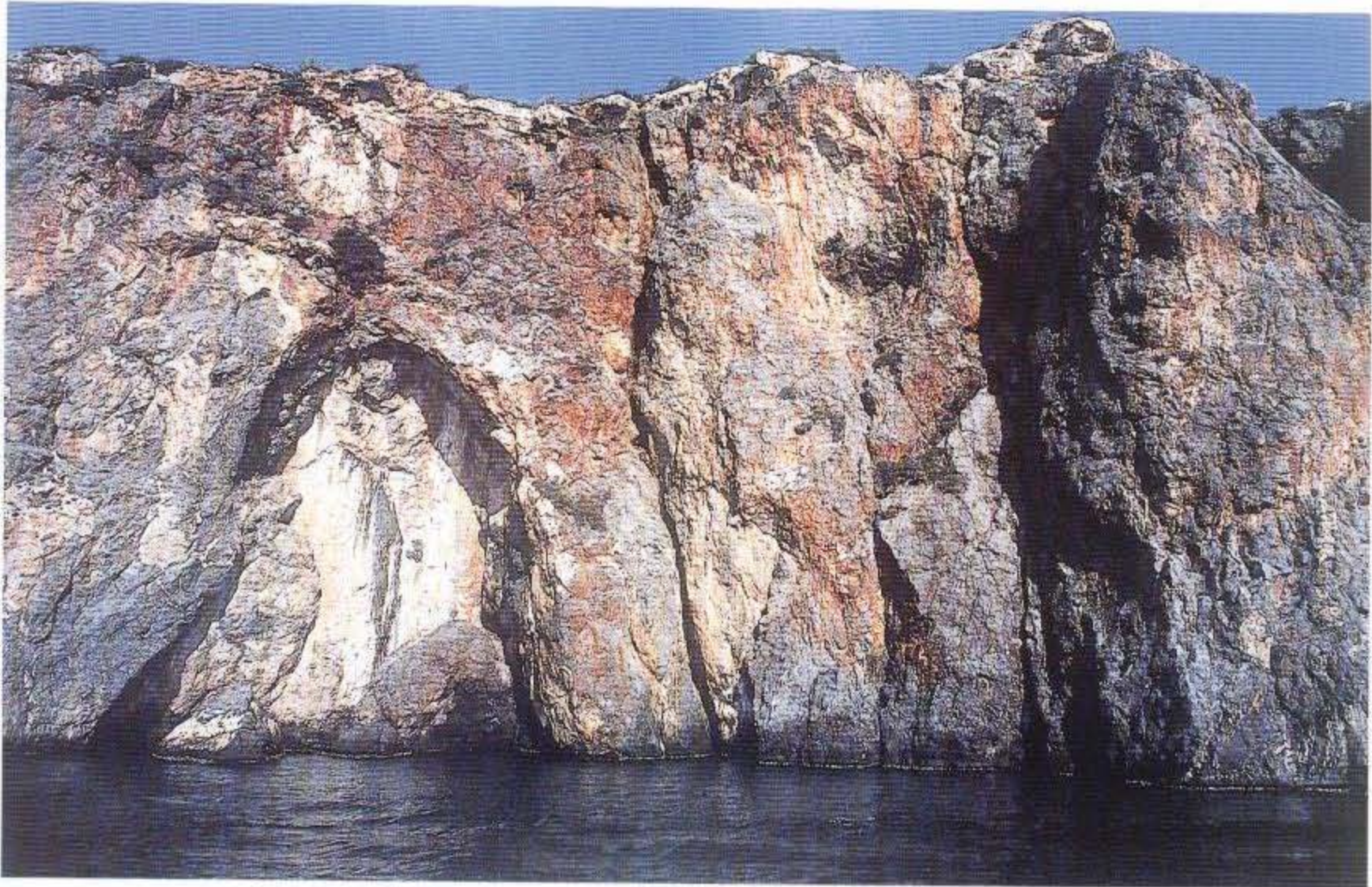


Figure 2: 'Rocks on Leipsi', Kasseris (1995), in 'Dodecanese Travel in Space and Time': Athens: Rodos Image. Permission for reproduction granted by Kasseris and Rodos Image

cially the smallest among them are concerned – by a rocky arid landscape, scarce arable land, a large variety of coastlines, strong winds, a dry climate, a rough sea, a clear atmosphere and a bright light.

This physical setting has played a crucial role in moulding the character of islanders and has determined their activities and culture³. People have learnt to be content once they have secured the bare necessities of life and they have become strong-willed, resourceful and adventurous. They are attached to their homeland in a relationship of affection and equilibrium, which is evident in every manifestation of their culture. The Aegean islands, owing to

their position between Europe and the East, have always been bridges for communication across cultures. In fact, they were the cradle of Greek civilisation and a place of continuous cultural creation dating back to prehistoric times.

A unique landscape

The particular natural features of the Aegean Islands and the spiritual aura surrounding them make this a unique landscape in the world.

This unique character is evident in the pictorial qualities of the landscape. First of all, the unity of contrasting elements, the composition of rocky mountainous

formations on one hand and sea on the other, give the place a very distinct profile (see fig.1).

From a distance, the islands look like solid masses hovering between the vapid bright sky and the fluid blue sea. Each island is outlined by bold mountain ridges and a wide variety of coastlines. The surfaces of the mountains are clean, almost bare, and the parched, austere, hard landscape of stone, the *matière sauvage* of limestone, is predominant. However, where this landscape is interrupted by small valleys, there are optical contrasts between soft and hard surfaces of plains and mountains respectively. Where the land slopes down to the sea, rocks of various sizes can be seen (see fig.2). Surfaces shatter into cubist shapes and into 3-dimensional bulks of rocks. On the shore, the tone is set by other smaller figures, namely the curvilinear shapes of pebbles, rounded by the waves. Beside them lies the sea, sometimes calm and sometimes – or rather, more often than not – turbulent. Here figures and masses are not definite but ever changing, giving an effect of abstraction and eternal movement.

This non-definition effect is also given by the sky, although the line of the horizon is not infinite as various forms, either stationary (nearby islands and coasts) or moving (ships) can be discerned.

Light and colours

A very important pictorial element of the space is the light⁴, the ample, bright, pen-

etrating light of the Aegean Sea. It is a 'sculptural' light, enabling a view of clear-cut figures and volumes, allowing for no illusions and creating strong chiaroscuro effects. This strong light will not let the artist use mellow and soft halftones or blurred outlines.

Predominant are the earthy colours of stone, spotted by the green of the scarce vegetation and the brown of the earth and surrounded by the blue of the sky and the blue-green of the sea. But the pictorial impressions created by the Aegean landscape are not constant. They alter, in response to changes in the physical setting and the atmosphere, not only at different times in the day, when the varying amount of sunlight from dawn to dusk makes the landscape change a thousand faces, but also at different times of the year.

In the summer, the strong sea winds, the etesian winds, make the atmosphere dry and clear. The sun is very hot and the light very strong. The summer colours of the stone, ranging between ochre yellow and orange or violet-grey, coexist with the cold colours of the sky and the sea, which span the entire spectrum of blue and green; while the neutral colours, the white foam-crested waves and the black seaweed can be discerned from under the sea. Colours are crystal clear because of the very clear atmosphere. In autumn and winter, however, the picture changes. South-west winds bring much more humidity. The atmosphere becomes wetter and

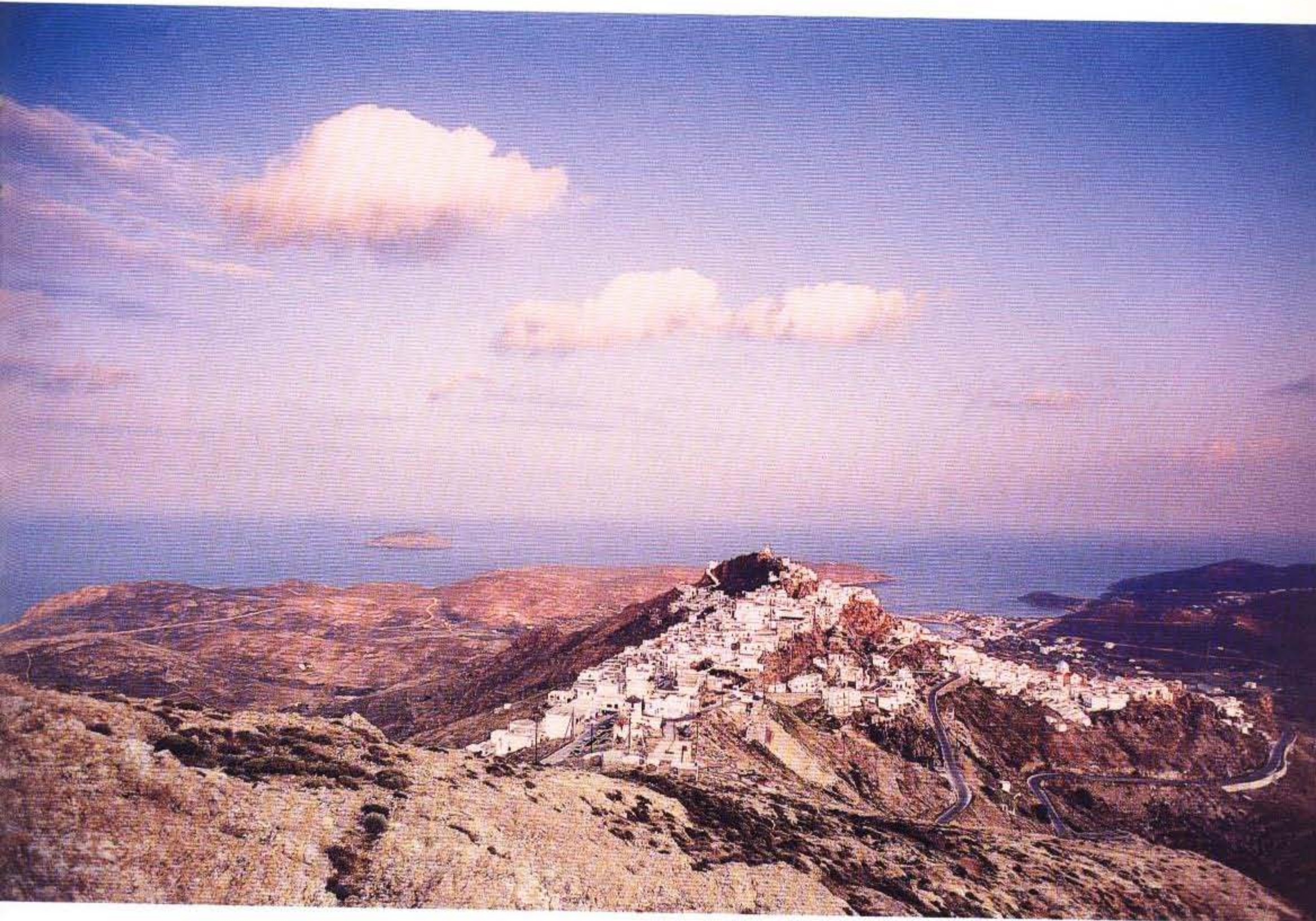


Figure 3: 'Serifos',
Dessylas (1993) in 'Vista of the Aegean Sea': Athens:13.
Reproduced by permission of N. Dessylas



Figure 4: 'Landscape of Hydra', Parthenis.
 Reproduced by permission of the Nees Morphes Gallery

the light fades, leading to a change in colour shades. Grey-white and grey-blue shades prevail in the sky and the sea, while the earthy colours of the land are not so vivid any more. In the spring, the landscape is enlivened and enriched by the colours of plants.

The built-up element

The pictorial elements of the built up area match those of the open landscape⁵ (see fig.3). The buildings in Aegean set-

lements, designed on a human scale and with a good sense of proportion, are aesthetically in harmony with the natural environment, both in terms of form (rather rectilinear than curved) and earthy colours (white, ochre yellow, ash grey, brick red, indigo blue and their derivatives) and in terms of the layout and organisation of masses. This natural and built environment forms a rich composition based on harmonies and contrasts, an austere landscape, permeated by a

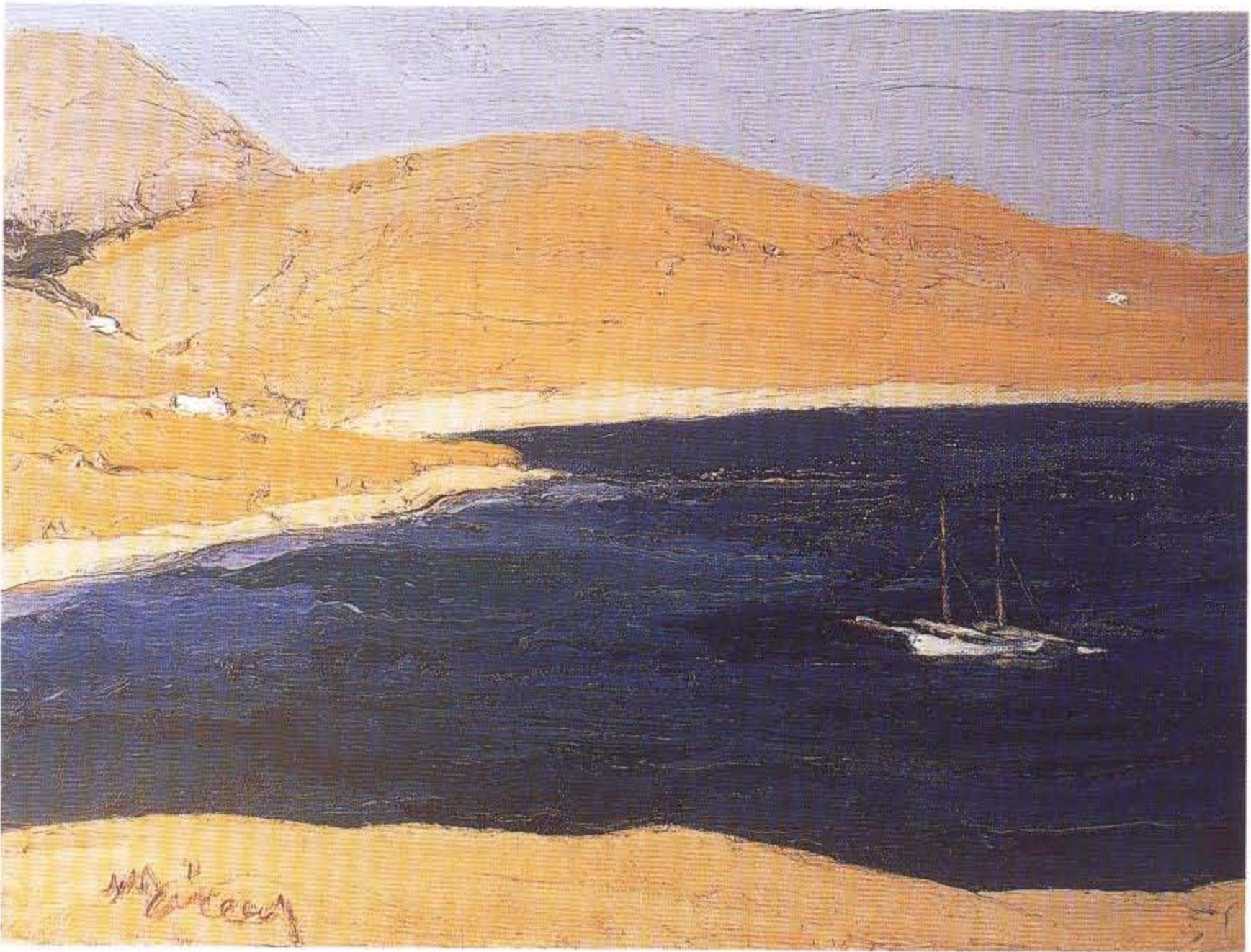


Figure 5: 'Seascape', Lytras.
Reproduced by permission of the Nees Morphes Gallery

sense of moderation and order, which ensures more richness at less cost. This, in conjunction with the intellectual and the historic dimension of the area, enables the artist to access all morphological values and attain inner truth, since imagination, in order to open its wings, or even refute the realistic view of the world, needs strong visual stimuli and emotions⁶. Only then can genuine creation emerge, integrating both the material and the spirit of this land, which has

been a source of the most divergent inspiration to artists.

Painting the Aegean landscape

Let us look, then, at some typical pictorial approaches to the Aegean landscape, as expressed by Greek painters.

Constantinos Parthenis (1878-1967), in his *Landscape of Hydra*⁷ (see fig.4), renders the rocks and buildings of the island with impressionist clearness, in an intrinsic unity of colours and forms



Figure 6: 'Homeric Beach', Steris.
 Reproduced by permission of the Nees Morpheus Gallery

overarched by the clear sky. The image of this heavenly and human harmony is reflected in the waters of the Aegean Sea.

Constantinos Maleas (1879-1928), in his *Seascape*⁸, depicts a rock standing against the waves of the Aegean Sea. The rock, painted in impasto with alternating warm colours, dominates the centre of the composition amidst the loneliness of the sea.

Nikolaos Lytras (1883-1927), in his own *Seascape*⁹ (see fig.5), renders a small bay of some Aegean island, in impasto and with vivid brushstrokes. The yellow of the stone, with a shade of a faded golden ochre, is interlaced with stretches of a bright sky and a rough sea. The bare landscape is only adorned with three houses, like small fires, and a little white ship which has found shelter in the bay.



Figure 7: 'Sea Rock Rising from the Foam', Anastassiadis

Spyros Papaloukas (1892-1957) paints the *Islets of Paros*¹⁰ as golden and spotted, forming a lacework of a coastline. Rocks reveal the geomorphology of the Aegean, with intriguing strange figures appearing through the sea.

Pericles Byzantios (1893-1972), in his work *Another view of Hydra*¹¹, dematerialises the buildings and the volumes of mountains in the light in a genuine impressionistic style.

Gerassimos Steris (1898-1987) paint-

ed *Homeric Beach*¹² (see fig.6), which must have been inspired by the landscape of Santorini, with its vertical volcanic cliffs, the forgotten houses and the ships with their sails furled. It brings us back to the myth of ancient times, still surviving at certain moments when waters stand still and everything is calm, conscious of their heavy heritage.

Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas (1906-1994), in his *Large landscape of Hydra*¹³, adds a touch of real life through

his rendition of the flight of swallows and kites and windmills abandoned to Aegean winds.

Yannis Spyropoulos (1912-1990), in his *Landscape of Andros*¹⁴, breaks the space down into geometric forms in warm colours, spotted by the dark cold colours of pines, olive and cypress trees. The actual theme of this painting is the inner pulse of the island scenery, through a rhythmical arrangement of mostly rectilinear geometric figures whose lines, mostly rectilinear, are blunted by trees and strong sunlight.

Yiorgos Mavroidis' (1912-) painting of *Myconos*¹⁵, with its quick untidy strokes and expressionist mood, has captured the turmoil of summer winds blowing over the Aegean islands.

Panayiotis Tetsis (1925-), in his *Sifnos*¹⁶, and Markos Venios' (1946-) *Folegandros*¹⁷ communicate the atmosphere and the vivid colours of the Aegean space.

Lastly, Manos Anastassiadis (1948-), in his painting entitled *Sea Rock Rising from the Foam*¹⁸ (see fig.7), inspired by the island of Karpathos, uses the rough surface and form of the rock to reveal, by way of abstraction, the forces underlying cosmogony, the power of winds, the heat of the sun, volcanic eruptions, the power of time and the cosmic space, the rock's own life and aquatic inhabitants.

Epilogue

The static and dynamic features of the Aegean islands have been clearly demonstrated by the preceding few examples,

which are typical of modern Greek pictorial expression. Although there has often been scepticism expressed as to how effectively landscape morphological elements can really express the essence and the spirit of a region's art – and undoubtedly there is a basis for this scepticism – nevertheless the preceding analysis has resulted in the following findings which pose the whole question once again:

The topographical characteristics are still depicted in contemporary Greek paintings mainly because of the rich pictorial elements and the strong emotional and aesthetic inspirations they provide. These elements are reconverted into multiform – not simply realistic or representational – pictorial expressions. The topographical characteristics of a region like the Aegean no doubt contribute to the formation of the characteristics of the art directly or indirectly inspired by them. The observation and conjecture of these characteristics, the shaping of the myths and legends with their surrounding atmosphere all affect the creator.

The rocky island landscape of the Aegean, as presented in the paintings which have been analysed, includes all the topographical characteristics which have contributed to the mentality of the people who inhabited, and continue to inhabit, the islands. Indirectly and implicitly, the islands' landscape seems to contain both the matter and the spirit in one undivided unity.

* translated from Greek

ENDNOTES

¹ Elytis Odysseas (1964) *Axion Esti*: Athens: Anvil Press Poetry:16

² (1971) *History of the Hellenic Nation*: vol.I: Athens: Ekd-
dotike Athenon:10-28; Doxiadis, C. A. (1947) *Dodecanese*:
Athens: Ministry of Reconstruction: 23-24, 32-34; Kasseris,
N. (1995) *Dodecanese, Travel in Space and Time* (text by
M. Makri): Rhodes: Rodos Image: 141-3 (all in Greek)

³ (1992) *The Aegean, The Epicentre of Greek Civilisation*:
Athens: Melissa

⁴ On the subject of the light in Greece, see Spiteris, T.
(1979) *Three Centuries of Modern Greek Art 1660-1967*:
vol. I: Athens: Papyros: 15-16; Lambraki-Plaka, Marina
(1998) "Greek Landscape Painting", *Greek Landscape
Painting XIX-XX century*; the collections of the National Art
Gallery and the E. Koutlidis Foundation (Exhibition Cata-
logue): Athens National Art Gallery and Museum of Alex-
andros Soutzos: Athens: 11 (all in Greek)

⁵ Bouras, C. (1992) "Architecture and urban planning in
traditional settlements of the Aegean", *The Aegean, The
Epicentre of Greek Civilisation*: *ibid*: 201-240; Philippidis
D. (1984) *Modern Greek Architecture*: Athens: Melissa: 52-
55; Hellenic Technical Chamber (date unknown): *Guide to
Residential Buildings*: Athens: 50

⁶ For the influence of the Greek landscape on Greek
painters, see Spiteris T.: *op cit*: 15-18. A different view is
expressed by S. Lydakis (1976) in "History of Greek Paint-
ing XVI-XX century", Vol III of *Greek Painters*: Athens: Me-
lissa: 15-16 (in Greek)

⁷ Christou, C. (1992) *The Sea in Greek Painting*: Athens:
Nees Morphe Gallery: 41 (in Greek)

⁸ *Ibid*: 47

⁹ *Ibid*: 50

¹⁰ *Ibid*: 57

¹¹ Christou, C. (1991) *The Mountainous Landscape in
Greek Painting*: Athens: The Art Workshop: 54 (in Greek)

¹² Christou, C. (1992) *op cit*: 74

¹³ Papastamos, D. (1991) *Painting 1930-40*: Athens: Astir:
95 (in Greek)

¹⁴ Christou, C. (1991) *op cit*: 92-3

¹⁵ *Ibid*: 99

¹⁶ Lambraki-Plaka, *op cit*:147

¹⁷ *Ibid*: 128

¹⁸ Kasseris, *op cit*: 225