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COLOUR AND CHESS

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Retro-shah *Zurich 1953*
Chess Players
Ancient Moves

AENAON
1999

TEXTS
STELLA LAVVA
ZOI GODOSI

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Artistic Advisor: Nicolas Sphicas
Photographs: Manos Stefanidis
Colour separation: de novo
Printing: Thanassis Altintzis
Bookbinding: Ioakim Trikaliaris
Printed in Thessaloniki, Greece, 1999

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From the tiny squares
With their opposing colours
False idols rule without respite
The players' lives.

N. S.

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Born in 1961 in Cairo, where he studied painting and drawing at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Nicolas Sphicas has lived in Thessaloniki since 1987. He has exhibited his work in Cairo, Switzerland, Cyprus and Greece. His life and creative work are rooted in two different worlds: the spiritual world of the East, which invented and perfected the art of chess, and that of the West, which adopted the same art and elevated it to the supreme form of intellectual exercise and communication.

Himself a passionate player of chess, Sphicas belongs to a long line of visual artists who have been fascinated by the game¹, experiencing with intensity

¹ A tradition which dates back to the 15th century, and finds its clearest expression in the artists Daumier, Klee and Duchamp.

the player's constant striving to perfect his game. And chess, whether as an art which manifests itself in the form of a game², or as a means of both opposition and communication, has for a number of years appeared as a recurring theme in his work as a painter.

The works in this collection all date from the years 1995 to 1999. They are executed in a variety of techniques (oil, acrylics, aquarelle, mixed technique, etc.) and can be divided by subject into three individual groups.

The title of the first group of works, **Retro-Shah Zurich 1953**, employs a term coined by the artist himself in 1993 to describe those paintings which depict historic games or individual phases in such games; the term Retro-Shah combines the word 'retro' – return' and the word 'shah' – king. In the album of this name³ Sphicas elaborated his theory of the thoughts underlying the metaphysical world of movement. The paintings in this group depict moments from the celebrated Zurich tournament of 1953, one of the most significant in the history of chess.

It was this tournament which played the decisive role in demonstrating the superiority of Soviet methodology, both in the preparatory stages before the match, and during the match itself. It was instrumental in establishing Soviet dominance of the game during the second half of the 20th century. The tournament was also distinguished by play of exceptional quality, involving as it did the participation of all the world's top players, with the exception of the world champion, who was to meet the winner of the tournament in a final match to decide the title. Intellectually alert to the significance of every move made by the opponents and aware of the intensity of emotion beneath the surface of this supremely logical game as it reaches the fever pitch of battle⁴, Sphicas has captured and reproduced specific movements on the chessboard, the movements referred to in the titles of the works: Rivalry of Defence, Caissa (the Muse of chess) on the Field of Battle, The Campaign of the Pawns, The Disarming of the Knight, In the Heart of the Desert, The Journey of the Horses and the Elephants, Departure with Red Elephant, Opposing Moves, The Tale of the Hare, The Dance of the Butterfly, Chess Valley, Maneuver, Free Castles, Rapid Draw, The Ballad, Zugzwang?, Endgame with Pawns. A characteristic feature of all these works is the dominant presence of figures from the animal kingdom, representing the power of thought, the speed of movement and the ferocity of competition between the two players.

In the second group, Chess Players, the artist focuses on the game of kings itself, rendering in expressionistic style both the tension of the game itself and the players' agonizing over their next moves. The group includes paintings in aquarelle, oil and mixed technique, on both canvas and paper (Critical position, Rapid, Opening – Middle – Endgame, Difficult Game, Will White Win?, Light Game, Unknown Endgame). These works were presented in an exhibition in Thessaloniki in 1994.

² Antony Saily and Norman Lessing, *The World of Chess*, Ridge Press, London/Glasgow 1974, 12.

³ N. Sphicas, *Retro-Shah*, Thessaloniki 1994

⁴ Elias Kourkounakis, 1999 [from an unpublished text on Nicolas Sphicas].

The works of the third group, Ancient Moves, take a different subject matter. These are nine recent paintings heavily influenced by ancient Greek vase painting, especially in the movements, the rendering and the stance of the chess-playing figures. It is clear that the works repeat to some extent the artist's experience from earlier phases, particularly in the use and blending of colours. However, the combination of the highly intellectual game itself with the human figures, figures taken from ancient Greek art, elevates the game from mere intellectual exercise to a symbol of introspection, opposition and communication. This 'anthropocentric' conception of the subject is reflected in the titles: Flank Opening, Night Spectator, The Difficult Position, On the Altar of Analysis, The Game Must Be Played to the End, Aromatic Move, The Next Move?, Relation in Abeyance, Hidden Contact.

Stella Lavva

Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Applied Arts

School of Fine Arts

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

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Retro-shah Zurich 1953

In Nicolas Sphicas' painting, the central concept, the content of the picture, is the game. In his *Retro-shah* series he does not depict historic games of chess only symbolically. He proceeds through an *intuitive understanding of the game* to a representation of the spiritual and intellectual energy which accumulates as the pieces move about the board.

In this oils and acrylics, he evokes the chequered surface by erecting a vertical chessboard, a two-dimensional area teeming with colours and shapes. But the black and white squares have lost their regular shape and their bichrome polarity. The colours are doldly allied and, sometimes in low tones, sometimes in cool tones, they serve the painter's symbolic conception. There is gold everywhere-this is the *royal game*, after all-covering surfaces large and small. In this two-dimensional space the pieces are three-dimensional, organised in a strange perspective. The game's protagonists are not alone; amongst them terracotta figurines, female figures-queens of other games-, cupids assisting the heroes' *ascension* or falling aslep, oblivious of the colours, the shapes, the energy which enfolds them. Here organic figures define the area of the mental chess board, there decorative shapes in between the organic and the inorganic flood the space. These shapes-which sometimes recall figures by Klimt and Miro-spring, the painter says, from his roots in the East, the place of magic and fable where he was born, grew up, and studied. As for the pieces' terracotta companions, their origins lie in his involvement with archaeology. The only living figure to make an appearance is Caissa, the mythical queen of chess who controls the secret laws of desire for strength and harmony.

In Sphicas' watercolours the atmosphere changes. The medium demands a different visual interpretation. The outlines dissolve and the space becomes ambiguous, through there is a frequent tendency towards delineation.

Submissive to the fluidity and translucence of the medium, the colours undergo a sensitive escalation. But again there is no lack of density and intensity, which are conveyed in such a way as to make the colour values less distinct but more decisive. The watercolours arouse a curious sensation: they allude to the duality which governs the universe of chess, but they also reproduce the player's uncertainty about the correctness or otherwise of his prediction, the anguished suspense of the triumph of will over destiny.

When he created the *Retro-shah* series, Sphicas began with a game in black and white, and discovered colours and qualities in it that a passionate chess player could recognise, capture, and convey, while at the same time pursuing a quest for the harmony of the movements and combinations, the perfection of the game.

From the critical notes on the album, *Retro-Shah*, by Nicolas Sphicas, Thessaloniki, 1994.

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Chess Players

Hunched over the board
They journey towards a black and white horizon
From one side to the other
In company with the figures on the board
And finally return.
Do not betray their calmness
It is full of memory.

N.S

Page 32, 33, 34, 35 & 36

Ancient Moves

As an artist working in the museum world Nicolas Sphicas is in daily contact with the products of ancient Greek visual expression, experiencing them as a source of both inspiration and creation. His approach to these works, as is only natural, is above all an aesthetic one. This can be seen in a comparison with the works of ancient Greek vase painting which have inspired him: the artist appears to work selectively, isolating human figures and transferring them to a new visual context. In more than a few cases the cultural and intellectual features of the ancient representation find their way, consciously or unconsciously, altered or in their original form, into the modern painting, creating a new subject matter. Such works display an intensely allegorical character. Dominated by earth tones, which harmonize with the royal colours, royal blue and purple, as well as the black and white of the chessboard, they form a fascinating chromatic complex.

In *Flank Opening* (page 37) there is only the slightest formal relationship between original¹ and modern representation. Against a dark blue background a female figure moves, clothed in shades of flame red, to be identified with Athina from the helmet she carries in her left hand. The association between the goddess of wisdom and chess, the most intellectual of all games, is pronounced, as is the absence of a worthy opponent. On the ideal chessboard created by the

opening of the cloak on the right-hand side Athina moves the pieces of the chess set – in her thoughts – in a flank opening, playing cautiously, in a personal game with Fate.

The figure of a young man wrapped in a broad cloak, reading a column on a red-figure kylix by the Ancona artistⁱⁱ, provides the original for the figure in the *Nocturnal Spectator* (page 38). A young passer-by pauses for a while in delight to watch the beginning of a game of chess. He studies the board in interest, but without venturing to intervene. The scene is bathed in the light of the moon – another nocturnal spectator. Despite the stark contrasts in colour, the playful atmosphere of the original is preserved.

The tragic figure of Orestes at the moment of his purification by the god Apollo, a scene from a red-figure vase in the Louvreⁱⁱⁱ, is the original of the lonely figure before the chessboard in the painting *The Difficult Position* (page 39). The modern work presents a reversed but parallel image of the original. Unlike the purified hero of the ancient Greek tragedy, relieved of his torments, the solitary chess player is in an agony of suspense over his next, perhaps fatal move. His internal world is mirrored in the mosaic of colours. The expressionistic rendering of the figure is in stark contrast with the clear outlines of the rest of the scene, where the earth colours are successfully blended with the dark blue, red, yellow and black.

In *Altar of Analysis* (page 40) a young female figure, dressed in a purple chiton, approaches with slow, ritual movements a post decorated as a chessboard. In her outstretched hands she holds two pieces, a castle and a pawn. The movements of the figure are serene, almost solemn, while the figure's stance manifests the tension of the player during preparation for the game and planning of the moves. This same absolute solitude of the player before the confrontation begins is also hinted at by the depiction of the sea above the chessboard-post.

Of the original, a figure of Athina in a black-figure vase scene of the 6th century BC^{iv}, Sphicas has preserved the almond-shaped eye of the ancient design, with its abstraction of the pupil. This feature underlines the dreamlike quality, the figure seeming suspended in a world between memory and oblivion.

The Game Must be Played to the End (page 41) is an interpretation in chess terms of the tragic history of Achilles and Penthesileia. The original, a red-figure kylix by the Penthesileia artist^v, depicts the dramatic moment in which Achilles recognizes the beautiful Amazon at the instant of her death. In Sphicas' painting the suspense is protracted until the dramatic end of the game. Both Penthesileia and Achilles know the truth, and yet he insists on continuing the fateful game. The defence of life against death is symbolized by the shield formation (a weapon of defence) on the chessboard, while the figures watching the game, and occasionally intervening, evoke the ancient Greek mythological pair, Hypnos and Thanatos. The earth tones of the figures harmonize well with the dark blue background and its various shades, creating a highly evocative atmosphere, dominated by the idea of fate.

A scene from a red-figure oinochoe by the Meidias artist^{vi}, depicting women preparing garments, is the inspiration for the work *Aromatic Move* (page

42). Two figures facing one another, one male and one female, each dominate a light-coloured metope. Between them, against an olive-coloured background, is suspended a chessboard with three pieces (two kings and a pawn). The dominance of the vertical lines and the clarity of the outlines endow the scene with a solemn, ritual atmosphere. All the painting's features are arranged around the game. The theme is echoed by the column, in the form of a chessboard, occupying the right-hand side of the picture, and also by the royal colours – purple and royal blue – in the garments of the chess players.

The Next Move? (page 43) shows a man reclining on a couch with a young woman seated at his feet; he invites her to a game of chess, indicating the board with his right hand. A more earthy tone is given to the couple's relationship in the original, a scene from a red-figure kylix by the Kodros artist^{vii} depicting the intercourse between Pluto and Persephone, the earthy quality being underlined by fertility symbols – the horn of Amaltheia and the wine jar held with both hands by the god. In Spiccas' work the erotic atmosphere is conveyed more delicately, less stated directly than hinted at by the subsidiary features: the *varvito* (a kind of lyre) which frames the female figure, the pot in the shape of a marriage basin, with the climbing plant which frames the male figure. At the centre stands the game of chess, selected as a means of communication by the man in an expression of male singularity and love of contest. The woman gently declines the invitation; her intuition tells her that true communication is less complicated and less cerebral.

In *Relationship in Abeyance* (page 44) the young lovers are wrapped in the dark cloak of night, spangled with little stars against the pink background of dawn. The erotic element manifested in the lovers' close embrace and the depth of feeling in their eyes is the dominant theme of the painting, but this primitive emotion is tempered to some extent by the reference to chess, implied rather than obtrusively stated in the pieces which decorate the young woman's skirt. In a sense the chess reference operates here as a primarily decorative element, yet all the same it does evoke the enduring opposition of male and female, thus referring back to the picture's central theme while at the same time asserting the anthropocentric dimension of the game.

In *Hidden Contact* (p. 45) chess is presented as the point of opposition, but also of introspection, between two young people facing one another, a man and woman. The figures appear absorbed in the game, and yet at the same time indifferent, as if the game's unbelievably protracted duration has robbed them of the ability to react with any immediacy. The mood of the scene, static but with an erotic undercurrent, echoes something of the spirit of primitive scenes, since the model for the male figure is taken from the white lecythus by the artist of the Reeds^{viii}, while the corresponding model for the female figure is to be found on a wedding bowl by the Athens 1454 artist^{ix}.

Stella Lavva

RETRO-SHAH Zurich 1953

Front cover *Maneuver* (Detail), 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X60 cm

2 *Rivalry of Defence*, 1996

Aquarelle, 47X29 cm

5 *Caissa (the Muse of chess) on the Field of Battle* Observing the Games, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X90 cm

6 *The Campaign of the Pawns*, 1998

Oil on canvas, 22X40 cm

10 *The Disarming of the Knight*, 1995

Oil on canvas, 90X70 cm

13 *In the Heart of the Desert*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X90 cm

14 *The Journey of the Horses and the Elephants*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X90 cm

15 *Departure with Red Elephant*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X70 cm

16 *Opposing Moves*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X60 cm

17 *The Tale of the Hare*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 60X90 cm

18 *The Dance of the Butterfly*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X70 cm

19 *The Valley of Chess*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X60 cm

20 *Maneuver*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X60 cm

21 *Free Rooks*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 90X60 cm

22 *Rapid Draw*, 1996

Aquarelle, 52X36 cm

23 *The Ballad*, 1996

Aquarelle, 33X45 cm

Rear cover *Endgame with Pawns*, 1996

Mixed technique, 16,5X27,5 cm

Chess Players

25 *Critical Position*

26 *Rapid*

27 *Opening – Middle – Endgame*

28 *Difficult Game*

29 *Will White Win?*

30 *Light Game*

31 *Unknown Endgame*

Ancient Moves

- 37 *Flank Opening*
- 38 *Nocturnal Spectator*
- 39 *The Difficult Position*
- 40 *On the Altar of Analysis*
- 41 *The Game Must be Played to the End*
- 42 *Aromatic Move*
- 43 *The Next Move*
- 44 *Relation in Abeyance*
- 45 *Hidden Contact*

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nicolas Sphicas was born in Cairo in 1961. He studied interior architecture and painting at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts of the Helwan University in Cairo. In 1982 he was awarded First Prize for painting by Helwan University, and in 1983 received a money prize in the Pan-Egyptian Art Competition for his work *Tourism on the Banks of the Nile*. In 1985 he worked with Isaak Fanus and his team on the mural for the Museum of the Mosque of Mohamed Ali (Cairo Acropolis). In 1985 he was awarded an honorary commendation by the Ecole des Beaux Arts for the series of works he contributed to the group exhibition *The African Drought*, and in 1989 the Administrative Committee of the Greek Community in Cairo recommended him for the special prize established by the Greek Ministry for Culture for expatriate Greeks who have distinguished themselves in the field of the arts. In 1994 he published the album *Retro-Shah*, in which he expounded his theory of the metaphysical dimension of painting and chess, based on the evolution in time and space of movement across the chessboard. In 1998-99 he organized the exhibition *The Art of Chess* at the Museum of Sport, Thessaloniki.

Occupied himself with:

- (a) interior space, in Greece, Cairo, Switzerland and Cyprus
- (b) industrial design
- (c) drawing on computers
- (d) jewel designing
- (e) advertising, and
- (f) artistic care of publications of municipalities and prefectures, of Ministry of Civilization and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

One-man exhibitions

- 1984 *French Cultural Center, Cairo, Egypt*
- 1986 *Greek Center, Cairo, Egypt*

1990 *Ruth Balmer Gallery*, Berne, Switzerland
1990 *Odos Athinon Gallery*, Nicosia, Cyprus
1994 *Vafopoulio Cultural Centre*, Thessaloniki, Greece.
1994 *Chroma*, Thessaloniki, Greece.
1995 *Spiti tis Kyprou* (Cypriot Cultural Centre), Athens, Greece.
1997 *-Byzantine Tower*, Chalkidiki, Greece
1999 *Aenaon*, Katehaki, Athens.
Has taken part in many group exhibitions.
Many of his works can be found in private collections and Art Galleries.
Is a member of the Artistic Chambers of Greece and Cyprus and of the ICOM (International Council of Museum).

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Address in Thessaloniki: Al. Mihailidi 1-b
564 40 Thessaloniki
Greece
Tel. 031-0944045, fax. 031-0836391
Address in Athens: Lokridos 54-58
114 74 Athens
Greece
Tel. 01- 06425670
E-mail: sphicas@arch.auth.gr

ⁱ New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, Portugal, 1982, 179.

ⁱⁱ John Boardman, Athenian Red-figure Vases, Classical Period, Athens, 1995, plate 79. Interior of red-figure kylix by the Ancona artist.

ⁱⁱⁱ New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, Portugal, 1982, 164.

^{iv} New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, Portugal, 1982, 177.

^v John Boardman, op. cit. plate 80.1. Interior of red-figure kylix by Penthesileia artist.

^{vi} John Boardman, op. cit. plate 288. Red-figure oinochoe by the Meidias artist with scene of women anointing garments with scent.

^{vii} John Boardman, op. cit. plate 239. Red-figure kylix by Kodros artist depicting Pluto and Persephone.

^{viii} John Boardman, op. cit. plate 279. White lecythus by artist of the Reeds.

^{ix} John Boardman, op. cit. plate 299. Wedding bowl by Athens 1454 artist showing wine festival.

www.chess.gr/sphicas
<http://www.logicalchess.com/info/graphics/sphicas/>
<http://www.ert.gr/gallery/sphicas/>