

# The Greek Outsiders: Artists Lost to Helle

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## PART THREE

At least five Greek-Americans are now internationally recognized American Folk and/or Outsider artists. To date these individuals are Helen Contis, Peter Contis, John W. Perates, Tom Stefopoulos, and Drossos P. Skyllas. There may be additional Greek American artists that should be included in their number. In classic Greek style these five artists have crossed or blurred all the boundaries between American folk and Outsider art. With each passing year these Greek American artists are receiving ever greater critical distinction in American art circles. Yet just as these artists are gaining in prestige and overall recognition among art collectors and museum curators the world over, so in near equal measure are they all but forgotten among the modern Greeks everywhere.

Peter and Helen Contis are for the moment, the only Greek-American Outsider artists who have had a book length study devoted to their work and lives. Aside from David Lewis' 'Byzantine Butterflies: the Folk Paintings of Peter Contis and Helen Contis Greek Immigrants in America' (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1995) no academic or art critic is writing about any of the other artists; aside from the stray gallery folder entry, review or encyclopedia entry.

Not unexpectedly, much of this published material tends to repeat itself, as it is based on previous texts rather than new investigative research. Yet even Lewis' finely written and beautifully illustrated volume never considers that there might be other Greek American Outsider artists.

Most unexpected of all, perhaps, is the fact that Peter and Helen Contis, noted artists today, led lives very similar to most other Greek immigrants of their generation. On May 28, 1890, Panagiotis Athanasios Kontogiannis was born in the village of Vlahokerasia in the Arcadia region of the Peloponnesus. Vlahokerasia is approximately an hour south of Tripoli by car and about six miles into the winding foothills of the Parnon from Sparta. In 1910, as with so many of his generation, poverty and family obligations drove young Panagiotis to work abroad. Following relatives to



Peter A. Contis in 1973, aged 83. When the restaurateur retired in 1962, his son bought him a paint set, and a new life began.

Pittsburgh, Panagiotis was preceded by at least one elder relative and three of his brothers: Eustratios, Kristos, and Giorgios. Once in America the Kontogiannis brothers anglicized their names to Jack, Chris, George, and Peter Contis.

In time the Contis brothers opened The Buffalo restaurant on Smithfield Street. Then, Peter and his brother George opened The Chicago restaurant on Penn Avenue which eventually drew all the Contis brothers together, again, including two others, Dino and John.

In late 1926, Peter left for a return visit to Greece upon hearing his mother was in failing health. Peter spent the year of 1927 in Vlahokerasia working in his parent's olive groves and generally improving their overall holdings. As with so many others of his generation Peter sought and found a Greek maiden to marry, the twenty-one year old Helen Georgiou Stamatopoulou from Kollinas, a village high in the Parnon Mountains. Married in Kollinas, the Contises spent several months in Greece before returning to Pittsburgh.

Upon his return in 1928, Peter Contis had been gone for a year and a half. Working long hard hours Peter and his brothers had The Chicago on a sound financial footing when the Wall Street Crash

of October 29, 1929 brought all to ruin. Peter Contis and his brothers lost everything. Peter was lucky. He immediately found a job washing dishes. Not all was gloom and doom for the Contis couple even in these difficult times. On February 17, 1930, the Contis' first son Athanasios (Art) was born.

Undaunted, Peter tried on three separate occasions to start another restaurant—to do avail. Then, with his brother Dino as a cosigner, Peter opened The Neon Grill on the corner of Penn Avenue and Euclid. As Peter Contis reestablished himself, in July 1933, a second son George was born and then in September 1935, a daughter, Artemis Cristina.

During the Depression the Contis family moved to the Oakland neighborhood of Pittsburgh, as had in fact several other Greek families. Unquestionably a main attraction for these Greek immigrants was that the Greek community had purchased a Baptist church on Forbes Avenue, near the university, where they established the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox church. The St. Nicholas parish, which is now a cathedral, soon became the center of the city's Greek community.

The Neon Grill, was not 'a Greek Family Restaurant' as we understand such an establishment today but as David Lewis describes it,

# nism – Chicago's Peter and Helen Contis

rather a place that consistently served generous portions of American cooking at low prices and served with impeccable cleanliness."

As times changed, Peter Contis sought and received a liquor license and the restaurant also featured a bar. As a restaurant/bar there were regular customers who ate there everyday, sometimes three times a day. Here, once again, is David Lewis' concise thumbnail sketch of this community institution:

"Most of Nick's suppliers were Greek. He bought meats from one of his second cousins who owned a butcher's shop; he brought coffee from Mr. Katsafanas who ran a wholesale supply operation for restaurants and who came from Vlahokerasia. At The Neon Grill Peter also created a strong interpersonal network. He not only made room for Jack and John (his brothers), but he employed Helen's first cousin, Nikolas Goumenis, as a cook, and Tony Zachos from Vlahokerasia as his bartender. Jack also worked at the bar, but only part time, as his health began to fail. Tony was full of fun, and knew everybody. In a touchingly human sense, the employees at The Neon Grill were Peter's extended family. They bonded, partly because each one was lonely; in his or her own way, they needed this tie.

Peter's two waitresses, Isabel and Margaret, were Polish. Working in the kitchen with Nick was Abraham Lincoln Neal, an African American who was lame as a result of polio. Perhaps, because he would 'lurch like a drunken sailor' he had an infectious sense of the absurd; but he had a college degree in music, and the church choir he conducted was the first black choir to sing in Constitution Hall in Washington. Another African American in The Neon Grill kitchen was Slim, an enormous man who baked the pies and acted as a bouncer if there was a rowdy customer at the bar who Tony couldn't handle. They all worked for Peter from the 1930s until The Neon Grill was demolished in 1962; and through all those years everyone would come to Linden Avenue for a traditional family sit-down Sunday dinner, and for Thanksgiving and Christmas (1995: 78)."

Does all this sound strangely familiar? Don't just think about your personal experiences, your family's or those you know from your community. There is a wider and large-

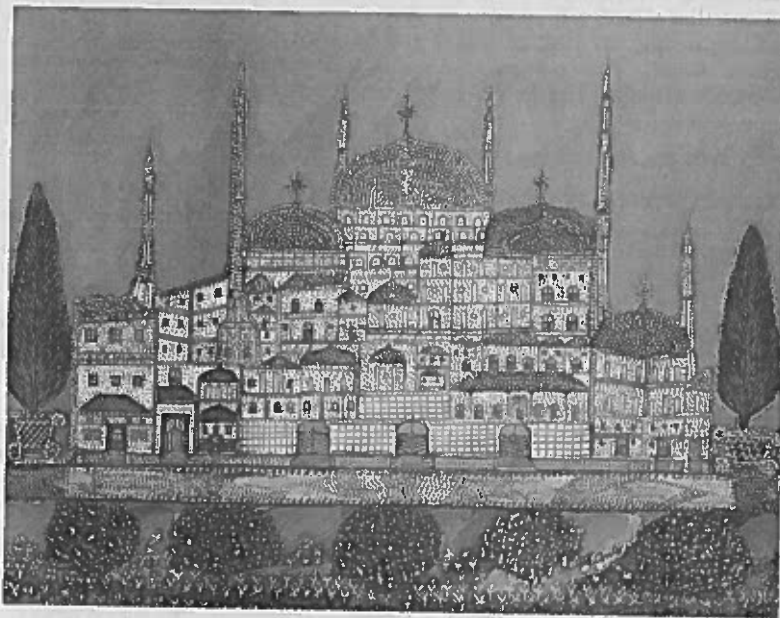
ly unexamined social pattern at play. If you read through Dan Georgakas' memoir 'My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City' or George Pelecanos' novel 'Turnabout' you'll find this same kind of complex and very personal small restaurant 'business structure' described.

In 1962, with what was to be called by politicians across the nation, 'Urban Renewal' The Neon Grill was swept away and Peter Contis finally decided to retire. It is no exaggeration to say that Peter Contis, always a dynamic worker, was at a loss when he retired. Knowing his father had always enjoyed writing the menu signs for his restaurants George Contis, on a whim, bought his father a paint set for a Christmas present. Over the next ten years of his life Peter painted. Then in 1974, a year after his death, Helen began to paint.

colored plates all on the work and lives of Peter and Helen Contis, even to the extent of traveling to Greece to see where they were born and raised, if you are interested enough in this couple you owe it to yourself to find and read this book.

Anyone can buy a copy of 'Byzantine Butterflies: the Folk Paintings of Peter Contis and Helen Contis Greek Immigrants in America'. New and used copies are advertised all over the Internet. I leave it to you to locate your own copy, should you wish to buy one.

As in any commercial venture be aware that prices on this specific book vary greatly. For those of you who would like to simply look at this volume just go to your neighborhood library and ask for the reference librarian. Show that person the author's name and title of this book and they should be able to have an inter-library loan copy



**Aghia Sophia. Peter A. Contis. 22 1/2" x 28". In 1974, a year after Peter died, Helen, his wife of 44 years began to paint.**

Admittedly I have not spent any time here discussing the paintings the Contis couple came to create. You can see them all for yourself. As David Lewis says at great length in his book's descriptions, Peter Contis' paintings are not representational but mergers of buildings and locations from different parts of Pittsburgh, and frequently, from Greece. Helen's work is more clearly devoted to memories of her personal past. Since David Lewis wrote an oversize 160 page book filled with illustrations, photographs and

made available for you.

The simple and colorful paintings of Peter and Helen Contis gain in prestige and value with each passing year. Yet how their art has captured the interest and attention of other artists, curators, and art critics the world over is a subject yet to be even recognized by the vast majority of Hellenes anywhere on the planet.

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