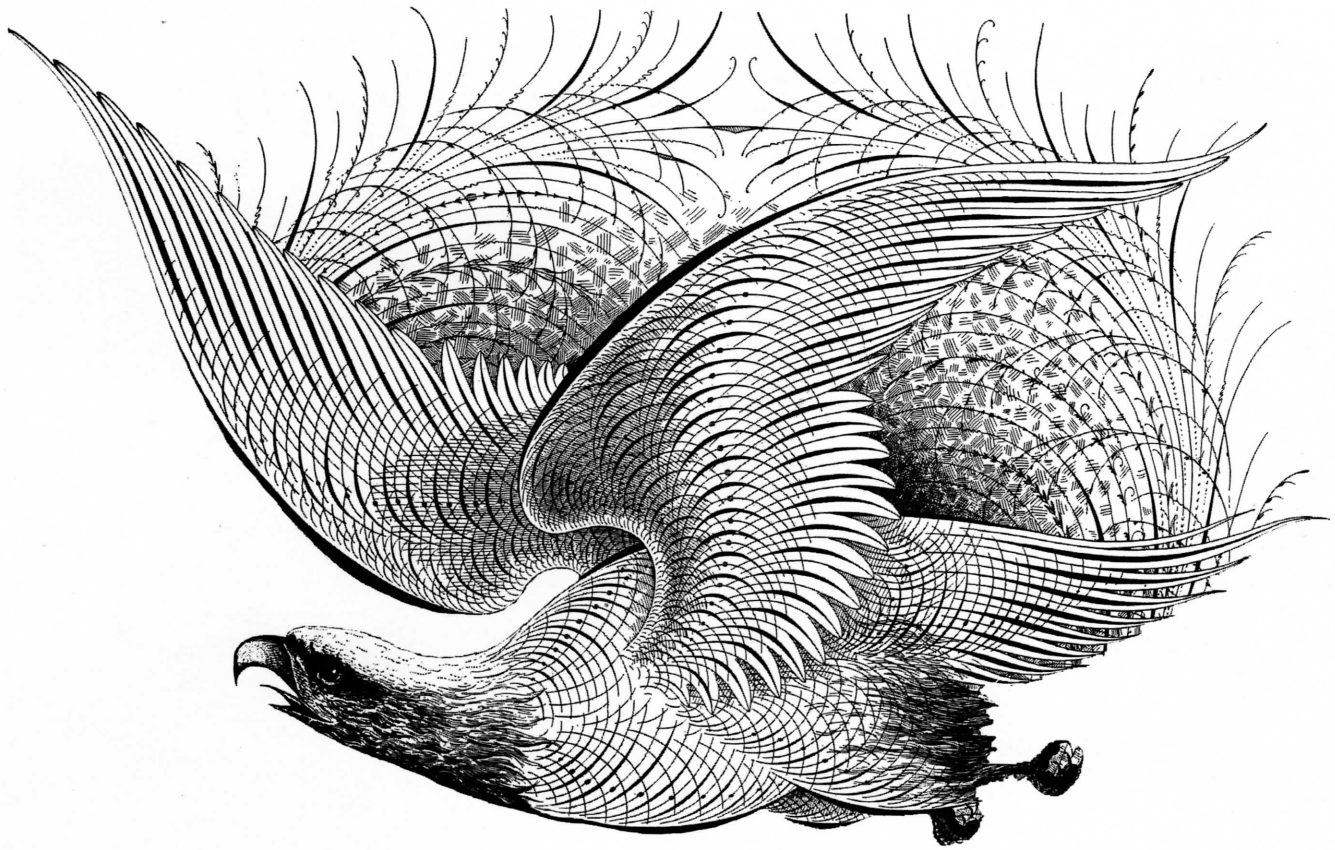


Master
Penworks
of
Tom
Stefopoulos

Hellenic Artist of the Lovejoy Columns



HELLENIC-AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER & MUSEUM
OF OREGON & SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON

This exhibit was funded in part by a grant from


 Regional Arts & Culture Council

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Photo by Joan Peacock

 HELLNIC - AMERICAN
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Master Penworks of Tom Stefopoulos

Athanasios (Tom) Efthimiou Stefopoulos was born in Greece on June 30, 1882. His father was an attorney in Lamia, a town in central Greece, and his mother a teacher. He had a brother and two sisters who were all artists. Stefopoulos studied seven years at the Greek National Art Institute in Athens before leaving Greece. In 1910 he immigrated to the United States and sought work wherever he could find it. He worked as a factory worker, railroad man, commercial artist and as a champion penman. Art was his first love, but pursuing this was difficult for a young immigrant in an adopted country where he did not even speak the language.

Upon coming to the United States, Stefopoulos first lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. From Milwaukee he moved to Duluth, Minnesota, where he worked for a railroad. In 1920 he went to Seattle, Washington, eventually opening his own art studio. He taught classes in penmanship and built a thriving commercial art business, painting posters and decorating everything from letterheads to greeting cards and invitations. While working in Seattle, Stefopoulos also used the name Tom E. Brown, which explains the different signature appearing on some of his work.

Stefopoulos taught himself practicing hour after hour, day after day with a language he scarcely knew. He was intrigued with the fancy scripts and flourishes in vogue at the time and used a rapid, rotary pattern as he designed his art. He made signs for restaurants and saloons.

One of Stefopoulos's specialties was decorating the vaults of safe doors found in many old buildings. First in gold paint, he drew the fancy border around the door. At the corner he placed clusters of arrows or cupids, eagles, doves and such decorative images. He was a master of art nouveau lettering techniques, but by 1930 companies no longer wanted lettering styles in flowing lines. New forms emerged that were foreign to the styles Stefopoulos knew.

Stefopoulos also had developed a large body of work defined as pen art or paintings such as the George Washington, the Abraham Lincoln, the General Douglas MacArthur, the Progress and the Diogenes on display in this exhibition. The certificate of a portrait head of George Washington within a 3-inch diameter circle is a fine example of a single, continuous line, beginning at the center of the circle and moving out in a tight spiral. Each circle of the spiral is separated from the other by less than a 1/16th of an inch. The features of the Washington head are achieved by varying the width of the line from thick to thin. It is a marvel of precision and control.

The spiral portrait of General MacArthur is another example of the continuous line of a pen, a style perfected by Stefopoulos. The pen art entitled "Progress" depicts Stefopoulos's best loved subject, "birds." It is one of the few paintings where he incorporated his name into the subject.



"I HAVE ABSOLUTE CONFIDENCE IN COMPLETE VICTORY!"
By Message to Congress, 1943

“The technical strong point was his sense of line. It was sensuous yet strong and where it pervaded and was consistent, the composition could be very charming indeed.”

Andy Rocchia

Oregon Journal, August 27, 1971

The Diogenes is one of Stefopoulos’s best-known works. In one panel Diogenes is presenting his lantern to Uncle Sam and in the adjacent panel Uncle Sam is presenting the lantern to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The use of color is unique to this piece of pen art. The figures are bold, strong and yet thoughtful as if skeptical of finding truth and peace.

Even with the master skills Stefopoulos had developed, time and taste had begun to pass him by, and he now found himself without work. During World War II Stefopoulos moved to Vancouver, Washington, to work in the shipyards. After the war, he joined the Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railroad (SP&S) in Portland, Oregon, as a crossing watchman under the Lovejoy ramp of the Broadway Bridge. While waiting for trains, Stefopoulos began drawing on the tall, blank pillars under the bridge. Now began the story that earned him the title “The Artist of the Lovejoy Ramp.” He was in his late fifties.

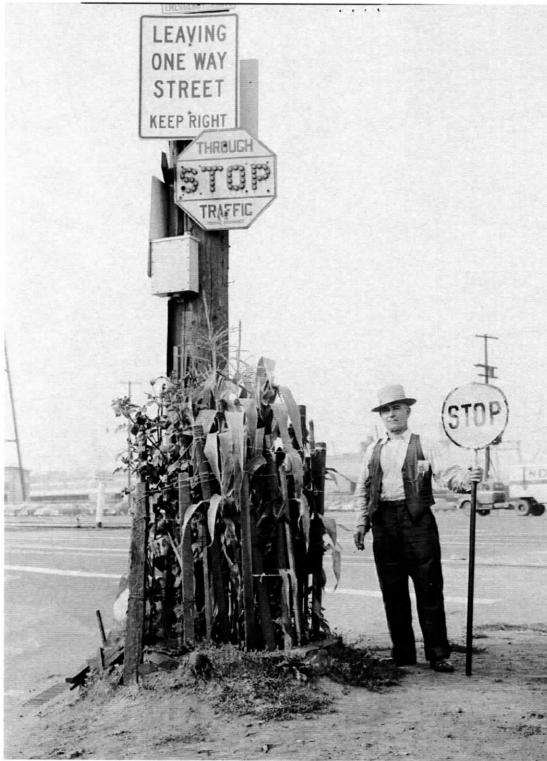


Photo by Hugh Ackroyd © Thomas Robinson

“When trains stop at the crossing, waiting for other trains to switch,” he explained, “I climb on top of boxcar next to painting, reach out like this and paint. Sometimes when I’m not finished, the train wait a minute. I paint – then climb down and wave her on.”

The paintings measured ten feet in height and were a mix of Greek mythology, Biblical imagery and Americana. Most of the paintings were a system of white lines against the dark, grey concrete. They were largely of one color and had a visionary quality executed with a calligrapher’s precision.

Originally there were over a dozen paintings on the columns. The murals included exotic flora and fauna, songbirds with dragon-like wings, lions attacking deer, a gargoyle with a dove perched on its nose, characters from ancient Greece, The Bible and American politics. The best known of these “column paintings” was of Diogenes walking the streets of Athens with his lantern looking for an honest man.

Stefopoulos worked on the Lovejoy paintings until 1952 when the railroad transferred him to the NW 14th and Thurman crossing.

Little is known about his life from this point except that he lived in Old Town in northwest Portland. He frequented many Greek establishments in the area especially the Tacoma Café, his primary headquarters. Athanasios Stefopoulos died August 7, 1971 at the age of 89. He is buried at Rose City Cemetery in an unmarked grave. “The watchman who painted museum quality pieces on railroad ramps” is now a part of the fabric of Portland’s history.

The Lovejoy Columns

The story of Tom Stefopoulos does not end here. His legacy continued to be recognized as Portland moved into the last years of the 20th century. In 1989 the murals served as a backdrop for Gus Van Sant's movie "Drugstore Cowboy." In 1998 the city of Portland decided to demolish the Lovejoy ramp as plans for a new ramp into the Pearl District were executed. In an attempt to preserve the columns, architects from the firm RIGGA and other interested parties formed the "Friends of the Columns" committee. Attempts were made to restore the ten columns which stood 30 feet tall and weighed 27 tons each. The committee proposed placement of the columns in new parks and buildings but \$1.5 million was needed to complete the project. For five years city, nonprofit and entrepreneurial groups were all involved. The Regional Arts & Culture Council wanted to preserve the columns, but the columns were not part of the city's official public art collection. The Department of Transportation also wanted to save them, but no money was available. Efforts to raise the needed funds were unsuccessful. Vanessa Renwick, artist and film producer, developed a documentary entitled "Lovejoy" which helped focus the efforts to save the columns. Renwick chronicled the turbulent years to restore and preserve the columns and brought the plight of this story forward. With the attention the film brought and the hard work of the "Friends of the Columns" committee, developer John Carroll offered space for two columns at the Elizabeth Plaza on NW 10th Avenue between Everett and Flanders. The two columns were subsequently moved and protective exterior covers with photographic duplications of the actual painted surface were added. The remaining columns were placed in a storage yard at NW 14th Avenue and Savier Street. Wind, rain, vandals and time have all taken their toll on these murals. Today little artwork remains.



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The archival collection of articles donated by James Harrison, chairman of the Friends of the Columns Committee, to the Hellenic-American Cultural Center & Museum.



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