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“...HERE THE WHITE COLOR WOULD FIT, BUT IT IS BETTER TO USE YELLOW”: THE ISSUE OF HARMONY IN THE WORK OF ALKIS PIERRAKOS

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ABSTRACT

The creation of a work of art is a complex procedural system that is on one hand independent but at the same time dependent on the experience of the artist, his personality, and the social conditions in which he lives. The repetition of a subject in different visual ways and colors by an artist may eventually lead to the production of works in which harmony plays a primary role in the gaze of the creator and secondary in the researcher-spectator. The above are just some of the findings that have been identified through scientific research, which is still ongoing, and concerns the study of the work of the artist Alkis Pierrakos. Through the interviews with the artist's intimate environment and the analysis of his work, the aesthetics and the harmonious use of colors can be perceived, which start from his way of thinking and then are transmitted to his canvases. Through this study, it is argued that the work of art is a "logical" derivative of the creator since the composition of its colors is presented in a specific and not random way. It is a behavior that by extension is presented in the subject matter and the technique he uses to express his subjective reality and it finally becomes part of his identity that clearly presents balance and order within his chaotic brushes.

Keywords: Harmony, Pierrakos, Art, Line, Color

INTRODUCTION

At the most crucial moments in the history of art, it took at least one artist to present their reality which contributed to the discovery and redefinition of the ways of handling the materials which would create a work of art. Several artists of the 20th century, such as Matisse, Cezanne, Rothko, Riley, Kokoschka, etc., reintroduced the public to the value of colors, shapes, and lines, using unexpected combinations and creating compositions which, despite being completely different in terms of style or technique from each other, do not cease to be harmonious. (Farthing, 2010)

As a term, harmony refers to the pleasing arrangement of the parts that make up a whole. (Babiniotis, 2002) Setting the above statement in the context of painting, we refer to the structural elements of a work - points, lines, shapes, materials, colors, values, textures, etc.- which are combined with each other to create a visually "pleasant" painting. To achieve this, it is necessary to create a balanced arrangement of the parts in terms of the overall composition of the artifact and ensure that no element is developed contrary to another. However, excessive harmony may create a sense of monotony or even indifference to the viewer. In some cases, viewers may even choose to reject

the work that will be presented to them, as it may seem chaotic, disharmonious or even “ugly”. (Jordan, n.d.; Your Art Path, n.d.; Fine Art Tutorials, n.d.) Of decisive role in all of the above cases is the visual experience of the individual and the extent to which they have been trained to distinguish patterns familiar to them. The artist's gaze is of primary importance, as it is the artist who is both the creator of the work and its first judge; when the work is completed, each viewer individually is invited to evaluate the final product, without, however, being affected by personal preferences which often make them draw the eye away from the object. (Heinich, 2014; Elytis, 2009)

Studying the works of Pierrakos, it seems that this particular artist has experimented a lot and has created balanced works through different combinations of compositions. The present study, which is still in progress, will present some of the artist's works - mainly those whose main material is Chinese ink, without, however, degrading the value of his oil paintings-, as it was observed that the colors and lines used by the artist in each part of the paper are the product of rational thinking and are not just randomly placed. This is a method followed by other famous painters of modern art as well, such as Pollock for example. (Belcher, 2015) This logical placement of colors creates a sense of consistency and balance in their works, something that is also witnessed in the works of Pierrakos. Due to the lack of sufficient written evidence from the artist himself regarding his painting, it was deemed necessary to highlight and document a number of his paintings based on Kandinsky's theories regarding color and line which are mentioned in the books *Point and Line to Plane*, *On the Spiritual in Art* and *Essays uber Kunst und Kunster*. In order for the documentation to be complete, it is necessary to analyze some of Pierrakos' selected works, which were

based on these views and were considered important for his work by the artist himself.

Pierrakos case study:

Alkis Pierrakos was born in Thessaloniki in November 1920 and until 1947 he spent his time both in Greece and abroad. From a very young age he studied color and specifically watercolor with the help of his grandfather, while from 1948 to 1951 he attended the Gewerbeschule in Basel, where he first studied painting. Between 1951 and 1953 he continued his studies at the Slade School of Fine Arts and the Central School of Arts in London, England. During those years he met and got closely associated with the artist Oskar Kokoschka. In 1954, together with his wife Maria, he settled permanently in Paris and from 1980 until the end of his life (2017), together with their two children they shared their lives between Paris (France) and Oxyolithos (Evia, Greece) where Pierrakos kept his studio.

«In my laboratory I am surrounded by prisms: I may look here, but there I actually see reality. And if I want to look there, I don't see anything anymore. It's like a very big lesson that tells me that if the work doesn't have that crazy element in itself, it can't be good (...). In the painting you bring out a care that is completely yours» (Papayiannis, 2007)

The mention of the term "care" signifies the importance of transferring his ideas onto the canvas for the artist. This concept could draw a parallel with the love of parents for their children, expressed through the care they provide for them. In a similar way, therefore, Pierrakos presents the canvas as the medium that needs to be taken care of, as it is where the "being" of the artist is transferred, as well as the space in which he can experiment freely.

Changing the way works are approached

Starting the study from the artist's first works, before he even began to study art, one can notice that he does not create strong contrasts with colors, but presents his subject in a very descriptive way. In particular, in the work *Psychiko* (fig.1), which he created at the age of twenty-one, the use of contours can be distinguished in most of the objects presented, as for example in the trees, the road, the houses, etc. A closer observation of the work will reveal that each color he places is thus demarcated, but without being confused with the one next to it, this way creating different shapes. However, in the church he places in the center of the painting, he uses different tones of brown and beige to highlight the volume of the building. The most intense color element in the painting can be said to be the dome of the church, painted with a red color, as well as some plants, in which he uses different tones of the green. A few years later (1953) and after he had finished his first studies, he painted the same subject in a different way (fig. 2). Here the church and the trees can be distinguished at first glance, as they are the only elements that are clearly visible in the composition due to the volumes created through the colors and outlines, while the rest of the landscape looks as if it has become a mass of colors. His palette has changed and he now uses more vivid and intense colors. Brown tones have been replaced with orange, brick red and yellow, while the red dome is now rendered blue. Observing the entire painting, one realizes that the artist wants to create color combinations and harmonious contrasts in the entire work. For example, while on the lower side of the painting it goes from yellow to orange using lines of opposite colors, such as green and blue, on the other side, he uses all shades of red. In this way he continues and sets up his entire composition.



Figure 1 - Psychiko, 1941. Aquarelle on paper, 49X52 cm. PIERRAKOS, 70 years of painting (pp.41)

According to Kandinsky, in addition to representing objects or scenes from the natural world, artists can harness the power of the elements of art, such as color, line, and form, to focus and ultimately express their inner-self truth. Kandinsky analyzed the psychological dimension involved in each color, showing that color harmony can be presented through many unexpected combinations. After all, it is no coincidence that color is one of the dynamic structural elements in a painting, perhaps even the first that attracts the viewer's gaze, making them stop in front of the work, and then go on to interpret the rest of the composition. The minimal use of colors, as well as the different combinations that can be made in a painting, have the potential to affect the viewer's perception emotionally and aesthetically. Artists follow certain general principles and frequently used techniques that help create harmonious works. When structural elements are used in such a way as to complement or relate to each other – use of color combinations (monochromatic harmony -various shades of a color-, complementary harmony - colors opposite each other-, triadic harmony -colors with equal distance in the circle), repetition of patterns and shapes, use of contrasting elements (light-dark, small-large), etc.- then rhythm, movement and coherence are created in the work,

thus enhancing the feeling in the viewer that the painting they see is harmonious. (Rowley, 2002; Kandinsky, 1981; Kandinsky, 1986)



Figure 2 - St. Dimitris Psychiko, 1953. Oil on canvas, 55X66 cm. PIERRAKOS, 70 years of painting, Benaki Museum, 2007 (pp. 42)

By comparing these two works, we understand that Pierrakos' primary concern is to achieve a color balance. In the first work of 1941, the colors he uses are close in tone, and he tries to distribute the most intense color elements, such as the red in the dome or the green in the trees throughout the composition, so that they are not only located in the central part of the painting. Here, it becomes clear that he knows the value of colors (brightness) and how to use them appropriately. The different shades of a color have the potential to create playful tricks with light and shadow in the composition and thus it is possible to create a variety of effects, such as the volume and depth of the church in the work. Observing the work of 1953, it seems that there is more tension compared to that of 1941, and this is because he dares to create a color variety in every part of the painting using different combinations, of either primary or complementary colors - such as blue with orange, yellow with green and blue, and so on. Harmony is therefore created due to the different tones of red and blue, which seemingly unify all the other elements, while contrasting shades create a dynamic

and balanced composition. This affects the way in which color is perceived by the human eye, creating either a sense of calmness (in fig.1) or a more energetic and lively unity in the whole composition (in fig. 2). (Kandinsky, 1981)

Line - Color

Apart from the fact that Pierrakos' color palette changes over time, as was seen earlier, his style also changes. Looking at a set of works of the same type - such as those in ink - it seems that there is a repetition of basic elements in his style, namely, the line in a straight, curved and swirling form. Sometimes it becomes sharp - borrowing a term of music we could call it "staccato" - or more exuberant - using the curved line. This is very often done, whether the subject is a bit more figurative or not. This repetition in the works is part of the artist's personal style and later we will compare it with the style of his oil paintings, which is different from his works with Chinese ink. Thus, a chaotic style is created, which can evoke emotional reactions, along with a sense of flow and movement created by curved lines.

In the first works he did at the age of 11, it seems that the lines he used were simply to describe the landscape in front of him. In the work of 1932 (fig.3), he captures the depth and defines the objects he sees using the pencil in a soft manner, which results in what could be considered a calm style and soft tones. A similar approach was witnessed in the work with the church (fig.1), where the tones were soft, and where he simply represented everything he saw around him. According to the archive that contains works from his personal collection, he begins making ink sketches around 1951 (fig. 4-5). Later, his approach becomes more decisive and denser in many parts of his work, compared to previous works which seemed more lacking in tone. Certainly, this change also coincides with the media

he uses, the reed and ink in many of his works, as well as the very object he uses, as they all drive him to render the shadows and depth of the landscape in a different way. His movements become faster and sharper, maybe now he is more certain of what he is doing. Over the next few years this style evolves, and wavy lines, dots and other shapes are incorporated into his works. The expressiveness found in the original sketches is largely lost and replaced by abstraction (fig. 6-7).



Figure 3 - Landscape, 1932. Pencil and coal on paper, 24X32 cm, Private collection



Figure 4- The couple, 1951. Chinese ink on paper, 24X32 cm., Private collection



Figure 5 - The model, 1951. Chinese ink on paper, 24X25 cm., ISET Archive (<http://www.iset.gr/el/iset-home/#P2>)



Figure 6 - The happy sea, 1996. ink on paper 32X24 cm., Alkis Pierrakos: Drawings from the Period 1949-1998, APOAP, 1999 (pp. 52)



Figure 7 - Composition, 1960. Chinese ink on paper, 21X32 cm. Alkis Pierrakos:

Drawings from the Period 1949-1998, APOAP, 1999 (pp. 42)

Kandinsky approached the line as a means by which he could express his feelings. It wasn't just a way to create geometric shapes. Through his experimentation he realized that any kind of line can convey a mood, for example curves can convey calmness, while sharp lines can convey a dynamic. The direction, length and thickness of a line play a role in creating a rhythm - a movement, and using them in different compositions grants a different character to the work - as for example in *Yellow-Red-Blue* (1925) where he used abstract straight lines and curved lines and shapes to create movement and rhythm. (Kandinsky, 1996; Rowley, 2002)

Therefore, observing the works *The model*, *The happy sea* and *Composition* (fig. 5-7 respectively) we can divide the lines used by Pierrakos into two groups, in both of which the lines are either wavy, or straight, or like swirls. In any case, however, the way he uses the thickness of the lines is important in creating certain impressions. For Kandinsky, the thick line can create tension at a certain point and can be used to hierarchically guide the viewer's eye to specific points. In fact, in the work *The happy sea* (1996, fig.6) Pierrakos uses thick curved lines in three quarters of the composition in order to emphasize this specific part of the work, and separates it from the sky, where he paints with a thin line, perhaps a cloud. In this way, he creates a sense of movement, which is an intrinsic element of the sea itself. This sense of power and tension is reinforced at all points, as he paints the thick lines repeatedly and alternates them with thin ones. It draws the viewer's eye slowly upwards where finer lines emerge, giving the impression of a breaking wave and the water moving upwards. In this way, he does not leave the sky drawn with

only one cloud. According to Kandinsky, thin lines are just as important as thick ones. They can create the feeling of elasticity and mobility and an impression of "lightness", compared to thick lines which can make a work «heavier». If used in uncertain or unsorted lines, they can create a sense of dynamic movement; if used repetitively, they can cause a sense of chaos. Observing the work *Composition* (1960 fig.7), it becomes clear that Pierrakos manages to convey these feelings only by using thin lines. (Kandinsky, 1996) We therefore realize that for Pierrakos, the line was no longer just an element to create contours and figurative forms, such as a house, a mountain, a church, but it is used as a means of expressing movement, dynamics, emotions and mental states of the artist. The variety of line types and the way he combines them creates interesting and multi-dimensional results.

According to Kandinsky, the point is an energy space. In fact, Kandinsky played many times with the dots placed in different parts of the paper in order to provoke the gaze of the viewers and to enhance the tension where he wanted to. For Pierrakos, it is the color that takes on this role. In several of his works, while he uses the lines in a way which is familiar to him, he also incorporates color to create interest where he wants. After all, it is no coincidence that he once said to his daughter: "White color would fit here but it is better to use yellow". (Pierrakou, 2021) Possibly he did this because he envisioned the tension that would arise at that point and wanted to depict it in a certain way. Pierrakos' own reality is transferred to the flat white paper which defines the space in which the artist will paint. It is there that he will depict his vision, starting with the black lines and shapes. For him, ink lines are a powerful means of expression and he uses them to create various aesthetic effects and convey his emotional impressions. He may then

return to the composition to place some color which he feels will fully match the idea he wishes to convey. (Pierrakos, 1984) The plane now for Kandinsky is not just a surface; it is the space where lines and colors were combined to create emotional and spiritual experiences. (Kandinsky, 1986; Kandinsky, 1996)

The painting *Synthesis* (fig. 8) seems to have many elements that are worth considering in relation to the previous ones. Initially, this is a painting that was created in 2013 and could be considered to be structured in three main levels. At first sight it seems that here too, Pierrakos uses the same repetition in his style, either with the thin or thick movements and lines he makes with the reed, sometimes from right to left and sometimes the other way round. Observing the work closely, one can see that on the first level he has used some lines to define the spaces in which he will mostly move. However, these have been covered by different tones of the blue color he has chosen to use on the second level. When he is done with the colors he has placed, he goes back and with the stick he draws more black lines and curves, scattered across the board. After he is done with this stage, he creates parallel lines with different color tones, which act as a transitional element between the black line and whatever colors are underneath. Finally, wherever he considers it necessary, he will correct some more black lines, with a little white or some other color.



Figure 8- Synthesis, 2013. Chinese ink and gouache on paper, 23X36 cm., Private collection

Observing the way he has worked and the colors he has chosen to use, we can realize that his every move is weighted, aiming to create a work with balance. He is well aware that Kandinsky regards orange and yellow as bright and pleasant colors that express joy, energy, freedom and dynamism, and for this reason he chooses to place them in the center of the painting and draw the viewer's gaze there in order to make them feel these vibrations. However, on the upper right corner of the painting, he places some shades of pink and a little green, and on the lower left corner he does the reverse. These color choices are not random, but they create a triadic harmony with the orange color in the center, because they are equidistant on the color wheel. Thus, a balance is created between the alternation of these three complementary colors - orange, green, pink - which comes into perfect balance with the use of different tones of blue and black lines. (Kandinsky, 1981; IDEELART, 2017; Briot, 2012)

Texture - Color

Although the surface that is to be used for a painted creation - be it canvas, paper or anything else - has its own real texture, the mediums that will be used to give shape to the artist's idea play a decisive role and give a different aspect that affects the final aesthetic of the painting. (IDEELART, 2017) Looking at Pierrako's works, it seems that the brushstrokes, the shaping of the colors and the handling of the reed are well thought out when they are to be used on paper. But what happens when he moves to the canvases and more specifically to his oil paintings?

The artist knows that his choice of color and the method of its application can create different textures that add depth and

interest to his paintings. Comparing the work *St. Dimitris Psychiko* (fig. 2) with *In 1930* (fig. 9), it was noticed that although both works are oil paintings, they seem to have a completely different approach to handling the brush and color palette from the artist. In the first work (fig.2), it can be seen that intense colors are used - mainly red, yellow, blue - and Pierrakos' strokes are more delicate, while in some places they are slightly thicker and sharper. In combination with the thin trees and the elongated church, they give the viewer an impression of flowing towards the sky. If we now move to the second painting (fig. 8), this dramatic effect derives not only from the colors and their placement on the canvas, but mainly from the gestural strokes used by the painter. In this way, he gives a sense of movement to the painting, especially the liquid element, as he alternates thick and intermittent strokes with thin ones, thus creating the impression of waves. In this work he uses layers of color in different tones, mainly of blue, while in several places green, white and brown appear. The use of different overlapping layers of color creates a three-dimensional impression on the viewer and provides the work with a rich texture. Looking at these strokes as a whole, they appear to be a recurring element in the painting, which in some areas follows a specific direction, while in others it is placed in a more abstract manner.

These repeated elements emerge through Pierrakos' style and may show the artist's need to express his desire for stability, security and control over his work; after all, as we have already seen, this is done in the lines and the color when using the cane. However, their repetition can create flow and movement in the painting and become an aesthetic mode of expression that gives harmony to the work. (Suma, et al., 2018) It is worth mentioning at this point that the repetition can be uniform on the surface of the work, as is done for example in Vincent Van Gogh's

work *Olive trees under a yellow sky* (1889). The artist uses this technique following the movement of the basic shapes of the trees and the sun, and creates a rhythmic flow in this work through short and almost fragmentary strokes that compose his subject. (Van Gogh Museum, 2022) The strokes may give the impression that they are randomly placed, as is done in the work *In 1930* (fig. 9) by Pierrakos. However, looking more closely at the painting, one realizes that the movements formed by the movement of the boat - which creates smaller wave oscillations in the water - are depicted with fine strokes and are opposed to those coming from the sea itself and the ship towards the object. There, the strokes are longer, irregular and thicker. Thus, the painter invites the viewer to feel the energy of the sea by presenting the uncontrollable mobility of the dynamic nature of its flow in the painting.

The movements that Pierrakos chooses to make with the brush in this particular work are a familiar way of expression for him. If we compare this oil painting with the work "*The happy sea*" (fig. 6), there are some common elements in the depiction of the sea that we need to focus on. In this particular work, the curves of the line used by the artist give a sense of movement to the painting itself, as mentioned earlier. At the same time, if we compare the way he uses his thick strokes in the Chinese ink painting with those in the oil painting, they seem to show a consistency in the movement of the artist's hand. We understand that his purpose is to depict the texture of the sea in motion in both works, by transforming the colors and lines to achieve his goal, but we need to dwell on this consistency of movement. In a way, it is a repetition of an element of style that needs to be studied further, compared with the paintings of other subjects that the artist deals with, whether the medium he uses is oil, or Chinese ink, or whatever. Thus, it will become clear if this element

is the result of his personal style or if it is simply a repetition that appears mainly only in the paintings of Pierrakos' mature artistic period. In this way, it will be documented if the painter wanted to depict the texture of specific subjects of his environment in a specific way or if it is his personal style which makes him stand out, and ultimately differentiates him from the style of the rest of his contemporary expressionist painters.



Figure 9 – In 1930,1992. Oil on canvas, Private collection

CONCLUSION

During the production of works of art, the action of the artist is divided into two stages, according to Dr. Papadimitriou. The first stage, which pre-exists, involves the idea, the imagination and the design-sketch. Here, concentration and study are needed, so that the artists can decide upon the materials they will use; here it is necessary to combine the "tangible" material that is directly related to the idea - whether they will use ink, paint, paper,

etc. - and the experience they have acquired over the years, i.e., the "intangible" material. In this the consciousness of the artists is placed which is connected to the observation of the world around them, their personal experiences, their values but also their awareness of themselves, their ideas and beliefs. These factors may affect their imagination and the subject matter of their work, which acts as means of presenting their opinion and decisions regarding aesthetic approaches in their works. This means that the vision of the result he is thinking about comes from his experience and insight. In the second stage of creation, the artists turn into "a worker" and needs to exercise control over their thoughts: their original idea turns into a form in the real world. Depending on the individual's mood and consciousness, the work of art, in addition to quality, will be realistic - idealistic, optimistic - pessimistic, progressive – decadent. The techniques they will use to implement them are acquired, as artists are affected by external factors, such as education, technology, culture, trends in art, etc. Thus, the artist who wants to develop will experiment, make sacrifices and use different approaches, until they discover the one that inspires them during their work. When the artists focus on the same style and combine their aesthetics, then and only then, they can contribute to the creation of a recognizable "personal language" in their works. In this process, their skills are enriched and they themselves develop through their engagement with art; thus, technique becomes a creative process. (Dr. Papadimitriou, 1964)

"Controlled chaos" are the words used by Jacque Laccariere to describe Pierrakos' works. Considering that chaos encloses immensity, Laccariere states that in the artist's work this immensity is clarified and adapted to the human eye by the use of distinct elements. Observing

Pierrakos' works made with ink, one realizes at first glance that his writing is chaotic. Perhaps, however, if one looks more carefully, they will be able to recognize familiar elements in this chaos, such as a boat, a mountain, a man and so on. "Control" is the other word Laccariere used to describe the artist's work. (Laccariere, 1999) Pierrakos followed a more abstract rendering of his subjects in his work; however, he kept the figurative element in several of them.

Lines and colors are Pierrakos' main guides in each of his compositions. Sometimes he starts from the lines and they "show" him the way towards placing the appropriate colors next to them; there were times when the color itself directed him to paint the curves he wanted in order to complete, according to him, the composition he had in mind. If you remove the color, the "chaotic" writing is visible. If you remove the lines, the colors are balanced. Perhaps after all he wants the former to contain the latter, because he knows that chaos coexists with harmony. Now, the viewer is coming to evaluate the artist's work. Will they finally be able to state that they like the work they see, and what is it that may discourage them from stating something like that? Is the work attractive, and if not, is it harmonious? Is harmony itself in a work something subjective or does it need to be objective and follow some rules in order to be able to convince the rest of the audience? There are many questions that are posed under a specific framework that has the potential to be extended to other different areas of interest.

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