

Portrait of A Western Australian Artist: Vlase Zanalis

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ABSTRACT

This paper was originally given as a PowerPoint presentation. It highlights particular aspects of Vlase Zanalis' work, notably his landscape and Aboriginal themes, helping to show his ability to operate in three different spiritual domains: Orthodoxy, Christian Science and Aboriginal spirituality.

Vlase Zanalis was born on the Greek island of Castellorizo in 1902 and migrated to Western Australia in 1914. In the 1920s he studied art at Perth Technical School under the guidance of Robert James Linton. At a time when his compatriots sought to advance themselves by entering small business and ethnic community politics Zanalis chose to be different, forging an alternative path which would see him become a noted iconographer, portraitist and landscape artist. He would gain national acclaim in 1934 for his "The Birth of a Nation", but it was his work after 1949 on the Australian landscape and Aboriginal themes, notably his memorial to Aboriginal Australians consisting of 88 images, that dominated his life paintings.

Zanalis'² contribution to the Greek dimension of Australian culture may be seen in the Byzantine decoration of churches in Sydney, Perth, Geraldton, Bunbury, and Innisfail. Beyond the religious paintings Zanalis captured in sweeping landscapes the contrasting red soils and white trees of the Pilbara, the rugged grandeur of Central Australia and the unique character of the Kimberley. Midway through his career, Zanalis began a romantic relationship with Aboriginal culture, which dominated his art for the last twenty years of his life. He became one of the first non-Aboriginal artists to incorporate the symbols of indigenous art into his own work, and to value indigenous Australians and their culture.

Palassis (Vlase) Ioannis Zanolis was born on the remote Greek island of Castellorizo on 12 January 1902. His father, Ioannis, was a sailor. His mother, Eleni, was a skilled gold embroiderer in her youth. In 1914, Vlase accompanied his uncle, Antoni Poneros, to Western Australia. A few years later Poneros brought out his wife, their two children and his sister, Eleni Zanolis.³

After about two weeks at Saint Patrick's Catholic School in Fremantle the twelve year old Zanolis left school to work for his uncles in their city oyster saloon. Vlase slept in a converted wooden box in a storeroom. It was while working here as a kitchen-hand that Zanolis lost the sight of his right eye after caustic soda splashed into it. The disfiguration resulted in Zanolis becoming sensitive about his looks and, although he eventually had a matching glass eye fitted. One rarely sees a photo of him that is not a profile of his good side. He never publicly discussed the loss or voiced an opinion that it had impaired his artistic skill.

When Zanolis was in his late teens he gained the patronage of Michael Michelides. Michael Michelides and his older brother Peter were prominent Perth businessmen, operating Michelides Tobacco Ltd. Peter would go on to dominate local Greek community politics for many years, serving as President of the Hellenic Community for 16 years. With Michelides' support Zanolis enrolled at Perth Technical School in St George's Terrace, where he came under the tutelage of renowned WA artist Robert James Linton.

While Zanolis continued to work in restaurants and sold daily newspapers in his spare time, he showed skill at portraiture and began to accept commissions to help make ends meet. The earliest Zanolis paintings we were able to locate included three portraits completed in the mid-1920s. The early portraits that survive are in oils with a dark, sometimes mottled, background devoid of any distractions so as to highlight the subject. Though in the style of Rembrandt, many critics saw his portraits as "old fashioned" and "static". Despite these remarks, his major income was soon derived from commissioned portraits and personal icons, mostly for the Greek community.

With the advent of the Great Depression commissioned portraits were hard to get but he was able to paint one major work, **The Birth of a Nation**, in 1934. Industrial scenes, paintings of buildings and landscapes became more common art forms for Zanalís during the 1930s. The earliest surviving Zanalís landscapes are a coastal scene at Trigg's Beach painted in about 1932 and a small mural of tobacco growing at Manjimup with kilns in the background undertaken for the Michelides brothers.

A major commission that came Zanalís' way in 1936 was to decorate the Greek Orthodox Church of Saints Constantine and Helene being completed in Northbridge, near central Perth. He had previously painted, in 1935, icons in the Greek Orthodox Church at Innisfail in North Queensland and decorated St Sophia's Cathedral in Sydney. His icons are also to be found at the Greek churches in Bunbury, Geraldton and the Annunciation of Our Lady (Evangelismos) in West Perth as well as the Serbian Church of Saint Savas in East Perth.

Positive reports of Zanalís' iconography for the Innisfail church led his commission to decorate the new edifice in Perth. His first task was the iconostasis or sanctuary screen. These icons, painted on transportable boards, took months to complete. Before commencing the works Zanalís observed the Orthodox requirements of prayer and fasting to prepare spiritually for the task. By April 1937, Zanalís had also finalised the 24 small paintings on top of the iconostasis depicting episodes in Christ's life, the large cross on top of the sanctuary partition, three large wall murals and the panels for the Royal Doors. The large paintings of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel were commissioned by Peter Michelides and presented to the Church in April 1939.

Zanalís' engagements to paint personal and public icons earned him a favourable reputation as an artist among Perth's Greek community, but tended to overshadow his later accomplishments. He saw iconography as his "bread and butter", but considered that it limited his artistic self-expression.

During 1940, Zanalís and his mother had moved to Adelaide. Here he worked in a munitions factory until his mother's passing when he left for Sydney, where he met and married in 1947 Mary (Molly) Arnold. She was originally from Perth and like Zanalís, a Christian Scientist. He had abandoned Orthodoxy in about 1938 to embrace Christian Science, to which he remained loyal until his death in 1973. Whether or not Zanalís still felt any strong spiritual attachment to his Greek Orthodox origins is difficult to ascertain. He continued to accept commissions to do church iconography and would prepare himself accordingly. Was it however, nothing more than a commercial interest? Whatever the answer, it does seem that he was able to operate comfortably in more than one religious sphere: Orthodoxy, Christian Science and Aboriginal Dreaming.

Back in Perth in February – March 1948, he exhibited 47 paintings, displaying his first outback works: 26 of the Pilbara, twelve from New South Wales, eight from Perth and **The Awakening**. Though not a landscape, it was an allegorical painting with the only known self-portrait of Zanalís, **The Awakening** and was the central piece of the exhibition. Completed in 1946 it reflected a spiritual awakening and shift in Zanalís' world. He had become convinced that a divine hand was guiding his future and it is in this mood of new discovery and encouragement that he completed **The Awakening**.

In 1950 he took 49 paintings to Sydney. These included works of the Kimberley – where he had spent eight months in 1948 camping at Derby, Cockatoo Island, Yampi Peninsula, the King Leopold Ranges and Fitzroy Crossing – and the Northwest as well as his first Aboriginal subjects, painted at Forrest River Mission in the east Kimberley. As a Christian Scientist he was encouraged to seek God's perfection in nature. The visit to Forrest River Mission in 1949 was the artist's first contact with traditional/remote Aborigines and their art, and began a twenty year fascination with Aboriginal themes for Zanalís. Here he was told that Brimera, the Rainbow Snake, had created the meander of the river.

The subjects of his outback and Aboriginal art were drawn from the fringe-life of Darwin, from visits to Kimberley cattle stations and three Western Australian

missions: Forrest River Anglican Mission, west of Wyndham, Mowunjum, a Presbyterian Mission on the outskirts of Derby and Jigalong in the Western Desert which was administered by the Apostolic Church.

Baobab trees, or boabs, feature in several of his Kimberley paintings. The ancient boab at Dadaway lagoon, near the Forrest River Mission village appeared, in at least two paintings, **The Medicine man and Patient** and a painting of the tree presented to Frank Wise, Administrator of the Northern Territory. Zanalís knew of the historical significance of the tree. He had been told that the first pastoralists venturing into the area built a slab stone homestead near the tree in 1887. He was shown the cross, carved into the trunk that marked the grave of the first white child born in the east Kimberley. Missionaries followed ten years after the pastoralists left until they too were driven out by local tribesmen.

Vlase Zanalís' second visit to Forrest River Mission took place a few days before the feast day of St Michael All Angels. After the morning mass the Christian community assembled behind the priest and banner-bearing choristers. Singing favourite hymns, the procession circled the church then proceeded to the river bank along the dusty, boab tree lined road. The procession stopped at a large wooden cross that marked Bishop Trower's arrival in 1912. The single painting of this procession, known as **Procession, the feast of St Michael, Forrest River Mission**, is distinctive for the woman in the foreground with her head turned away as though rejecting all that the procession represented.

Another striking painting drawn by Zanalís a few years later on another visit which has been included in this paper is: **Two boys dancing, Forrest River Mission**.

We can identify from his art and interviews three men now deceased who were Zanalís' cultural mentors: His old friend Robert Unjamurra (Roberts), Ronald Morgan and Crispin Mitchell. Ronald Morgan, whose grandfather had been the traditional owner of the land surrounding the mission, was the custodian of many of

the most important spiritual sites in the area. His father was one of the tribesmen who drove away the pastoralists and missionaries in the nineteenth century. He became a hero in June 1932, when he ran 400 kilometres across rugged countryside to bring Wyndham, and the world, the news that the missing German aviators, Hans Bertram and Adolph Klausmann, were alive. The two airmen, on a flight from Europe to Australia, had been forced to land on the north Kimberley coast and endured six weeks of incredible hardship before being rescued.

Robert Roberts had been associated with the mission since 1914. He was a respected law-man and a warden of the church. Crispin Mitchell was a tall athletic young man who appears in at least four paintings with the gallery at Almara icons – sometimes referred to as Camera Pool, in the background.⁴ Almara, on the mission side of the river, consists of hundreds of ochred images adorning a cliff face. Here at Almara, some ten kilometres up river from Forrest River Mission, the story of Aboriginal creation was told through the images on the walls, somewhat like the murals and icons in a church. It was here that Zanalís had his first encounter with traditional Aboriginal wall paintings.

Roberts, Morgan and Mitchell blindfolded Zanalís and led him to a ceremonial ground and, having cleansed him with smoke, showed him secret dances. In later interviews, Zanalís claimed to have been initiated at Forrest River and given the tribal name of Kalaroogari. Through his initiation he gained “the right to witness, as no other white Australian artist has witnessed, the secret rites of the Aborigines.” He refused to disclose details of the ceremony or the rituals of initiation to reporters as he regarded the Dadaway people as his brothers and said that it would be unethical to reveal what had been given in trust. He was, however, given permission to paint ceremonies and even men with the ceremonial boards.

While Zanalís no doubt saw himself in a pioneering role of the artist as anthropologist, it is necessary to consider just how well, or poorly, he represented Aboriginal people and their culture in his paintings and whether he remained true to

the originals. He had a fascination with the icons Aboriginal people painted on sheltered cliff walls ten kilometres from Forrest River Mission. But when he applied these to his art, he was not always true to the original. He selected details from the original and realigned them for symmetry or impact. The only representations of Aboriginal cultural life in the Zanalís paintings are via male figures. This is not unexpected as Zanalís would have been in the company of men and attended the ceremonies of men. But his art did not always do justice to his associations with these men.

Nevertheless, his fascination with this subject is important, for he was the first non-aboriginal artist to see the spiritual significance of icons in Aboriginal belief and his Aboriginal portraits form a unique collection in Australian art. Zanalís' Orthodox background and commissioned iconography from an earlier time gave him a sense of understanding and appreciation of the spiritual depth of traditional Aboriginal wall painting.

The first black and white image of the wall paintings at Almará, near Forrest River Mission, was taken in the 1930s and displays only a section of an extensive gallery. Zanalís took photos of the gallery, but it should be noted how images appear in the photos and then in his paintings. The men in chains at the top were painted by Crispin's father Herbert, who accompanied a police patrol in 1926.

Zanalís transformed the random icons into an orderly stratified form in the manner of church icons. The men in chains were relocated to a different level.

In a particular painting of a man with two spears, Zanalís has touched up the icons to make them recognisable as crocodiles. The spears shown are true to Forrest River, using materials such as glass and metal, which had been introduced by pastoralists soon after they arrived in the region.

For about ten years after 1956, John Sands Ltd published twenty-one Zanalís

paintings for a very popular Christmas card series. Five were Australian scenes including the Olgas and Emily Gap. The rest were Aboriginal themes based on his work at Forrest River and Darwin. The art of Namatjira had made city Australians accept that the hills of the Centre reflected the moods of the day in blues and purples and reds. Zanalis brought this heart of Australia and images of indigenous people into thousands of homes in Australia and overseas.

Today, Aboriginal culture is more widely studied and people familiar with Aboriginal anthropology will detect inaccuracies that Zanalis would have considered artistic licence. This was not the case in Zanalis' day when assimilation was official policy and the indigenous culture of Australia was unappreciated. It was unusual for Europeans to overly concern themselves with indigenous culture. Zanalis saw the indigenous Australians as a proud and dignified people and imposed elements of classical Greek culture on his portrayal of them. In a number of his paintings their stance and appearance are reminiscent of ancient Greek statues of the Olympian gods.

One painting shows men before a wall decorated with icons that are mostly from Zanalis' imagination. The rays emitting from the wandjina were taken from his Fossil Downs sketches. He added black eyes, the suggestion of feathered wings and a single emu footprint to create a bird-like figure. The rest of the wall art, though 'aboriginal' in appearance, is too carefully arranged and not true to the original.

Zanalis captured two children, **Vicky and Annette Umbulgarri**, whom he befriended, on canvas a few years before the Forrest River Mission closed in 1971. Vicky was Intermediate champion girl in the east Kimberley. Annette, her sister was Junior girl champion. Despite Vicky being sent to Kenya to study community development, when she returned to Wyndham, there was no opportunity to apply her knowledge. She became trapped in a spiralling descent. Both girls are now dead.

Black Madonnas are another significant category of work from this period. As in the

Orthodox tradition, the Madonnas are portrayed with little background or ornamentation. It is not surprising, given Zanalís' Greek Orthodox background, that the idea of an Aboriginal Madonna would have a special appeal for him. Mother and child – purity and innocence: Nature and Indigenous Australians.

As with **The Birth of a Nation** almost forty years before, Zanalís believed his *Aboriginal Memorial Collection* would secure him the place in art history he so earnestly desired. The paintings follow on from the period 1949 to 1967 and include images related to Forrest River Mission, Derby, Mowanjum Mission, Jigalong Mission and Darwin. During the next five years, Zanalís painted from the colour slides and photographs he had collected over the previous two decades. The paintings, oil on masonite board, were arranged in tiers around the walls of the Kalamunda studio. The collection was completed in 1972 but never exhibited in his lifetime. The sad fact was that no single institution wanted the whole collection of 88 paintings and Zanalís showed no interest in breaking it up. Again the portrayal is of proud people and this interpretation shows another dimension to the understanding this migrant had of the indigenous people of the country, which many Australian born could not appreciate.

In 1967, Vase Zanalís qualified for the age pension and although he accepted occasional commissions and tutored art students at Kalamunda, in Perth's foothills, he ceased to sell his art for a living. In a letter that year to the Assistant Commissioner for Taxation he explained the memorial collection:

Since retiring and receiving my pension I have devoted my time to the study of the life and customs of the Aborigines. Within the last two years I have had two expeditions into the Western Desert. My intention is to record the life of this fast vanishing race, and I happen to be the only artist in the Commonwealth who has penetrated into their life and secret ceremonies.

In 1955 I was a full member of the Dadaway tribe, Forrest River, East Kimberley. So I have covered in the last 20 years most of the

Kimberleys, part of the Northern Territory, and the Western Desert.⁵ Zanalís wrote to Robert Edwards, the acting Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra in 1973, inviting the Commonwealth Government to buy the entire *Aboriginal Memorial Collection*. Edwards replied that he could not accept the whole collection and suggested that a small selection be housed in the National Museum or that a private gallery might sponsor a caretaker for the collection to be retained in Perth. After viewing photographs of the paintings Edwards wrote, “Seldom has an artist portrayed with such feelings the Aboriginal people of Australia. Obviously Mr Zanalís has a sympathy with the Aboriginals and is able to record on canvas their character and inner emotions. I am really very impressed by his work.”⁶

Sadly, after a short illness, Vlase Zanalís died on 8 November 1973, and was cremated at Perth’s Karrakatta Cemetery.

The collection was exhibited for sale at the Winthrop Hall undercroft in 1974. The majority were unsold. A second exhibition was held at the Rigby Gallery at Nedlands. Eventually Molly Zanalís donated thirty-three paintings to the University of Western Australia and eleven to Curtin University (then the Western Australian Institute for Technology). Three ceremonial painting were given to the WA Museum.

Despite his prolific output, Zanalís has been neglected by the major art galleries of Australia. His true worth is also lost on his Greek compatriots who see him primarily as an iconographer, not appreciating his importance to Australia as a landscape and outback artist. Nevertheless the Literary Journal of the Greek Cultural League, in 1988, citing an unnamed art critic of the *West Australian*, said of Zanalís:

With the death of Vlase Zanalís, the northern Aborigines have lost a true friend, and Australia one of the most dedicated and sincere artists; a man able to get to the inner truth of a subject and put it on canvas. He was a pioneer of

the north and of Australian art and his endurance and dedication were in the best European tradition.

Endnotes

¹ When this paper was presented at the 2005 Conference it was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation highlighting aspects of Zanalís' life and examples of his art. This paper in isolation does not do justice to the artist's work.

² For nearly ten years I worked with Dr Neville Green to complete a biography of Vlase Zanalís that was published in 2003 by La Trobe University under the title, *Vlase Zanalís: Greek Australian Artist*.

³ The family name Zanailís was changed shortly after his arrival to Western Australia, probably when he was enrolled at school, to avoid humiliation that could stem from the mispronunciation of a Greek name in an Anglo-Celtic society.

⁴ Camera Pool near the Almara gallery was a huge reservoir of fresh water.

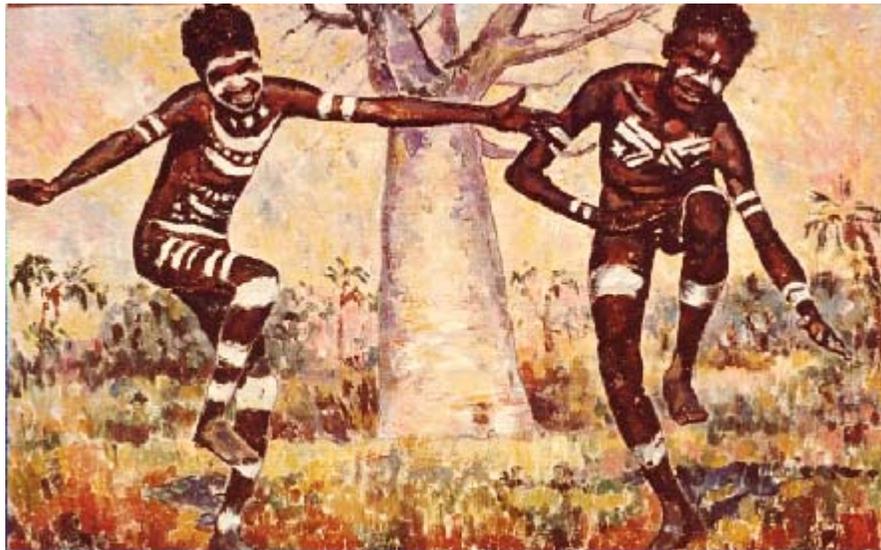
⁵ Vlase Zanalís to the Assistant Commissioner for Taxation, undated, Zanalís collection (held by Neville Green).

⁶ Robert Edwards to Alex Bortignon (acting for Zanalís), 9 April 1973, Zanalís collection.

"The Awakening" 1946



Two boys dancing, Forrest River Mission



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