

# Ancient and modern, it's all about Greece

## Vassilis Lambropoulos lives his specialty

BY JO COLLINS MATHIS  
News Staff Reporter

If Vassilis Lambropoulos feels at home walking up the steps and past the Greek columns of Angell Hall toward his office, it only makes sense.

As director and professor of modern Greek and Comparative Literature, he's part of both worlds at the University of Michigan.

"Although I remain a passionate Athenian, I chose to come here and never regretted it because when it comes to an academic environment that fosters originality, collaboration and reflection, there's nothing better in the world than the American campus," said Lambropoulos, who speaks with enthusiasm in a melodic Greek accent.

Although he misses the beauty of Greece and the large-scale, passionate political environment of the people, he feels very fortunate to have daily access to both cultures.

"I can have an American life while carrying with me my European experiences and being able to renew these experiences every day," he said. "And especially in a very cosmopolitan environment like Ann Arbor, you can really combine the best of say, in my case, Greece, and the U.S. in the most fertile ways."

His specialty is modern Greek literature and culture of the last three centuries. His audience is anyone on campus with historical, geographical or cultural interest in Greek life, including those suddenly fascinated with the Olympics.

"What is very special about modern Greece is that it focuses on the present manifestations on a culture that is 3,000 years old," he said. "Therefore, it gives people a chance to see how tradition works, how a culture can go through turmoil, through success, through crisis, and survive in the modern world."

"And therefore, whenever we ask ourselves, 'What does the future hold for our community? For our nation? For our faith?' The example of modern Greece gives a wonderful case study for how traditions and cultures operate and what it takes for them to survive."

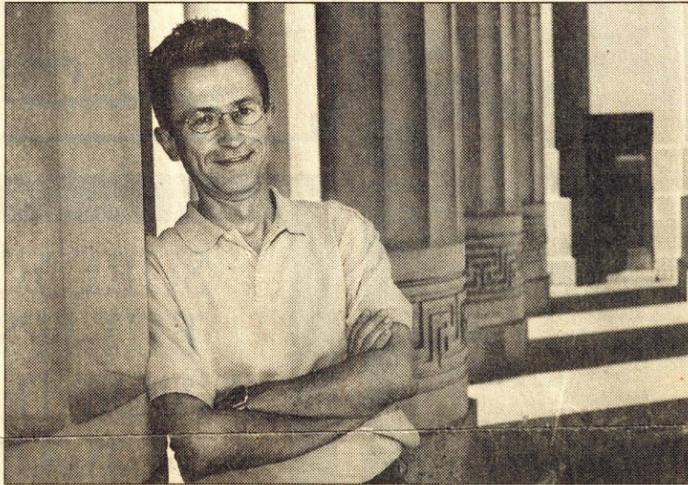
Sean Norton, program assistant for the Modern Greek program, says Lambropoulos is an incredibly generous employer and a "ready-witted force" guiding this program.

"He is superb at setting the agenda of the program by combining his deep intellect and his inventiveness when it comes to courses, symposia, talks, guests, gatherings of students and faculty. ..." Norton said.

"I've been told by his students - in that rapt way a student manages when they feel their university experience was truly and verifiably unique - how much Vassilis made it exciting to go to class, how inspired they were by his lectures and his obvious love for the material."

Born and raised in Athens, Lambropoulos came to the United States in 1981, and taught at Ohio State for 18 years before moving up to Michigan.

"Of course, people from Michigan love to hear that because



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The classic Greek architecture at the entrance of Angell Hall provides a backdrop for Vassilis Lambropoulos, a professor of Classical Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. His office is in Angell.

### Vassilis Lambropoulos

**Age:** 51.

**Native of:** Greece.

**Title:** Professor of Modern Greek, Classical Studies & Comparative Literature.

**Years on U-M faculty:** 6.

**Also taught at:** Ohio State University.

**Degrees:** Ph.D.

**Expertise:** Modern Greek Literature & Culture; Classical Tradition.

**Top academic awards:** C.P. Cavafy Professorship endowed by Foundation for Modern Greek Studies.

**Classes taught this fall:** Third-year Modern Greek 301; Comparative Literature 240: Greek Myth in Cinema.

**Most recent book written:** "The Tragic Idea" (just completed).

**Family:** Wife and colleague Artemis Leontis, daughter Daphne, 16, a junior at Huron High School.

**Outside interests:** "There is no outside or inside; it all connects."

**Best thing about being on U-M faculty:** "Creative synergy among students, faculty and community."

they say I saw the light," he said. "I moved in the right direction."

Although he travels across the country, he loves the pace of life in the Midwest and thinks it's underrated.

He calls working at U-M "an absolutely stellar experience."

"It's a unique campus in the country in that it combines a civic mission with a scholarly mission; a sense of public responsibility with a sense of research responsibility," he said. "All of us - faculty, teachers, staff - feel we are contributing to education, contributing to public culture, and at the same time learning new things about life, about humanity, about human creativity. And we also have unique respect for each other. It doesn't happen on every campus, but it happens every day everywhere on this one."

He came to the United States to be part of an academic community which is the most advanced and innovative in the world, he said.

He met his wife, Artemis Leontis, in Columbus. She is an adjunct professor of Greek who teaches one course every term and is a third-generation Greek-American. They speak Greek at home, and their daughter, Daphne, is bilingual. Their Ann Arbor house looks, smells and sounds Greek because of the Greek decor, food and music they enjoy there.

Partly because he wants to and partly because he should, Lambropoulos stays in constant touch with what's going on in Greece by looking up the Greek press on the Internet, e-mailing colleagues in Greece, and buying

Greek CDs and books.

"If the provost of the university calls me and asks, 'How about this?' I need to be Mr. Greek," he said.

Lambropoulos came to U-M six years ago after U-M created an endowed chair position and appointed him to it. This position was created with the cooperation and the active fund-raising of the local Greek community across Michigan. The Detroit-based Foundation for Modern Greek Studies, a group of many Greek Americans who are professionals, was the largest fund-raiser.

About 300 students every year take a Greek class at U-M. Prior to that, the Department of Classical Studies offered modern Greek off and on since the 1940s.

"We have here a nice synergy between campus and community," he said. "The university is able to reach out to a particular community group, which happens to be an ethnic group, but could be anything else. And the Greek Americans of the region also have enough trust in and admiration of the university to raise the money and endow this position. It's a good example of the good standing the university has with the public."

Every summer, Lambropoulos and his family go to Greece for a month, sometimes mixing it with business.

"We love our month there, but we also love when we return," he said. "This is home."

Jo Collins Mathis can be reached at [jmathis@annarbornews.com](mailto:jmathis@annarbornews.com) or (734) 994-6849.