
Development of Albanian visual art during XVI – XVIII centuries

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Abstract:

In the second part of the 16th century, Albanian urban society reached a high point of development. Foreign trade flourished to the extent that major Albanian merchants had their agencies in Ragusa, Venice and other medieval urban centers. This prosperity encouraged the development of education and art. Therefore, this paper elaborates some significant features for the Albanian cultural history of the XVI-XVIII centuries. The works of painters and art masters were observed to give a more complete mirror of culture as an integral component of spiritual life, as well as of Albanian history of the XVI-XVIII centuries in general. This paper uses a comprehensive and chronological perspective. This approach with contemporary literature offers us a literal interpretation of cultural or artistic developments from the field of visual art.

Keywords: Onufri, Albania, Konstandin Shpataraku, David Selenicasi, Joan Kukuzeli, etc.

Introduction

We must acknowledge that the Albanian culture developed in the 15th century was in same path with the European Renaissance in regards to literary and historical publications. When Albanians under Skanderbeg's leadership made sacrifices for their country and the defence of European civilization against Ottoman invaders, before choosing to flee rather than going into captivity, there was a period of growth and development in Western Europe, particularly in the Apennines Peninsula and Dalmatia, where humanist schools proliferated. This period signifies a turning point because the Ottoman occupation had burned and ruined Albania (Nadin, 2008). Even under these conditions, during the age of progressive developments, Albanians found

the fortitude to give their contributions in the field of arts and culture, bearing in mind their own country. In the exile, the Albanian humanists, scholars, and artists of the Renaissance are a testament to the resurgence of our people and the strength of our cultural traditions. They are also a shining example of patriotism for social progress because of their multifaceted and forward-thinking lives and work in a variety of field of science, literature, and the arts. Albanian humanists abroad had the chance to advance their skills in the most prestigious human institutions of the day, including those in Italy and Dalmatia, while always retaining love for their native country and its people. These humanists were renowned for their honorable contributions to literature, oratory, mathematics, astronomy, the fine arts,

philosophy, pedagogy, history, etc (Imami, 2017). From the early centuries, Albania was as a shelter for masters in construction of houses, bridges, castles, shrines, using a high construction technique and a perfect architecture. Albania was the place of masters and artisans who processed gold, silver, coral, ivory, mother-of-pearl, who worked and carved stone, marble, wood, etc. With these beautiful and durable objects, Albanian artisans, builders and artists decorated the cities as well as the houses and the premises. These Albanian artisans, being skilled workers, with talent and creative fantasy, with self-initiative, were in great demand in other parts of the Balkans and in the Mediterranean Basin (Prenushi, 1980). On the other hand, a part of painters and other artists who belonged to the orthodox confession remained in the Albanian area. In the new conditions of the Ottoman occupation, these artists focused their work mainly on various churches in Albania. The following should be mentioned among them: Onufri, Onufër Cyprioti, David Selenicasi, Joan Kukuzeli and some others.

The work of Albanian painters of the XVI-XVIII centuries

In XVI century, in the field of figurative arts, iconography continued to dominate in Albania, which then marked its peak. In this period, many church paintings and icons were created, which today are among the masterpieces of this field. XVI century is the century of *Onufri in figurative arts* (Onufër Neokastriti), the greatest master of Albanian iconography, who created his own style and was the first to make the turn in post-Byzantine painting in Albania. Historians attribute his birth year as 1500 and his death as 1578. Onufri carried out his activity mainly in the Berat castle, where he painted the frescoes of Saint Todri's church, a total of 13 frescoes. According to the inscription dated 23 July 1547, he made 31 frescoes in the church of the Apostles in Kostur (today Greece). In 1554, he made the frescoes in the church of Saint Mary, in the area of Shpati (Elbasan), of Saint Premte in Valsh (Elbasan), in the church of Saint Kolli (Saint Nicholas) in Shelcan, as well as in the church of the transfiguration in Zrze of Prilep (today Macedonia) in 1535. In Berat, he created the famous icons of the iconostasis of the Church of the Evangelist (in the castle), which are the masterpieces of this master. These works are

perfected by the high craftsmanship in the creation of figures, by the richness of colors, the painting of clothes and buildings with many shades of colors and psychological portraits. His figures stand out for their originality (Nimani, 1987). Onufri's iconography appears harmonious in terms of colors, it is distinguished by a perfect form of image creation. He creates a color ratio in icons with a predominance of red, which he uses in a very masterful and attractive way, organizing it in the presence of emerald green, towards a technical-artistic unity unattainable by other iconographers. The iconography created by Onufri remains one of the most accomplished works of Byzantine iconographic painting created in the Albanian territory. In these icons, you can see the reliance on the old Byzantine tradition, but also the influence of Venetian art, as well as the rich tradition of the local painters of XII-XIV centuries. A special role in the formation of Onufri was played by the city of Berat with its centuries-old culture, with the well-known centers of antiquity near Apollonia and Ballsh, as well as with the art of mural painting of XII-XIV centuries. XVI century also belongs to the other iconographer artist Nikola (son of Onufri). He continued the iconography of Onufri in his creativity, leaving many frescoes and icons that testify to a high professional quality. He painted in the church of Vllaherna, in the castle of Berat, in Kurjan of Fier and in Dhërmi. Nikola's works are also located in Arbanas, Bulgaria. The typological continuity of Onufri's iconography can be felt in the iconographic creativity of Nikola. The frescoes of the church of St. Mary in Vllaherne in Berat, created in 1578, and in the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) in Kurjan in Fier, together with the painter Joan and the icons inherited from him, represent outstanding artistic values in our national iconographic wealth. Onufri, together with his students, Nikola (the son) and Onufer the Cypriot, constituted the elite of the most prominent iconographic artists of that time. Together they converged in a common artistic space. They established a clear tradition for their descendants. In addition to the features that furthered and enriched the ornamentation, they simultaneously created new variants and subjects, compositional choices of the Byzantine tradition, giving the local iconography a new feature and above all deepening the school of Berat (painting) or Onufri, which was reflected in the artistic iconography of the iconographers until XIX century (Anamali 2002).



Figure 1. Saint Mary with Christ – Onufri

Another iconographic painter, who worked near the studio of Onuf the Great, is Onufri Cyprioti. In 1571, when Cyprus was conquered by the Turks, many iconographic painters left their country, emigrating to several countries in the Balkans as well as to Venice. One of them is Joan of Cyprus or Onufri Cyprioti, who in 1591 made the frescoes in the church of Shën Kolli in the Berat castle. The year 1591 is the year where we get the first signals of this author's artistic activity. Referring to the year 1571, the year of the invasion of Cyprus, we think that Onufri Cyprioti may have emigrated to Albania at the age of 20, bringing with him the influences of the school of Venice, Cyprus and Crete. His stay in Berat next to the old Onufri, made him fully considered as an iconographer. Located later in the surroundings of Gjirokastra, he made the frescoes of the church of Vrahogoranxi in Gjirokastra in 1622. From the dates it appears that this

iconographer carried out his creativity over a period of 31 years. The Cypriot received much from Onufri. He further enriched the miniature he obtained from him. The element that he borrowed more from him is the calligraphy of the writing, which is indistinguishable from Onufri. He remains the first painter until the XVI century that writes the name on the icon. He gave great help in the establishment of the school of Berat as well as in the spread of this school model in the south of Albania. Many works bearing his signature are ranked among the best creations of Albanian iconographers and formed a valuable tradition, on which other painters relied in the XVIII century, like Konstandin Shpataraku, which was supported by other painters of the XVIII century, such as Konstandin Shpataraku, Konstandin and Athanas Zografi, Çetirs, Joan Athanasi and Konstandin Jeremonaku. The portraits made by the Cypriot in frescoes and icons, unlike others, are painted in warm colors with light and transparency. And with their plastic, he created individual types. In the middle of XVII century, starting from 1643, the iconographer Konstandin Jeremonaku exercised his creativity, which appears with a miniature and special style, in the presentation of figures. His works were influenced by Onufri's school. He has exercised his activity in the area of Korça. This is testified by the icons found in churches, such as those of the church of Saint John Vladimir - Elbasan. Around these years, he is thought to have made some icons which date back to 1711 in the church of the monastery of Saint Naum (Ohrid). In XVIII century, a revival in the economic and cultural life of Albania is noticeable, which was accompanied by the formation of a rich social stratum, which promoted artistic creativity. This economic rise gave way to the development of culture and education and the penetration of the Enlightenment ideas of the Western world of that time. A significant number of large basilicas began to be built in Voskopoja, Korçë, Fier, Gjirokastër. The rise in the level of cultural development in Korça, which was also related to the old traditions, created premises for the birth of the school of Korça by local artists (Anamali, 2002).



Figure 2. Painting from Onufri Cyprioti

The founder of this school is considered to be David Selenica, who was followed by Konstandin and Athanas Zograf and all the later painters who emerged from this area. David is recognized as a great artist in Eastern ecclesiastical art in general during the XVIII century. When church art in the Balkans was almost in complete decline, Voskopoja and Vithkuqi already had some economic and cultural development. He breaks away from the creativity of the painters of this period by reawakening the art of the most brilliant period of the Palaeologian reign. It was during David's time that Konstandin Shpataraku started his activity as a painter. David Selenica made his iconography in the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) in Voskopoja. He is thought to have trained as an iconographer on Mount Athos, and painted the narthex of the Cape of the Virgin in the Laura the Great monastery, as well as the frescoes of the Church of Saint Mary the Great in Thessaloniki. Only in the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas), there are about two thousand figures painted by him. In the period 1722 - 1726, David Selenica

worked on the frescoes of the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) in Voskopoje with the help of Konstandin. The scenes presented on the walls of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) have a freedom of figures. In it we find apocalyptic themes from history and the lives of the saints. David Selenica is very different from the creativity of the painters of this period. He was the first who dared to violate the centuries-old tradition that was in force until that time, and he did not hesitate at all to introduce new elements that were contrary to this centuries-old and rigid tradition, which had already done its job. Preserving the monumental solution as in the iconography of Cyprioti and Jeremonachus, David seeks in his art to exclude the visible border that we encounter in earlier iconography between divine and earthly character. The Christian typology of the Byzantine image appears through the iconography of David, the most comprehensible and understandable thanks to a performance, which was not noticed before in the post-Byzantine iconography in Albania. The scenes painted by him acquire a secular meaning, in the reunification and identification of the man and the saint presented. Despite the fact that the themes preserve the Christian liturgical version, this has not prevented David Selenica, with his professional skill, to naturally insert details from real life, laying the beginnings of the humanism of Byzantine iconographic art in our country. Departing from the rules of Byzantine art, but not from the most inherent elements that make up the liturgical themes, he establishes an iconographic creativity that frees itself from dogma, bringing about a visible renaissance in Albanian iconography. Apparently, the connections of Voskopoja (in the churches of which David Selenica painted), with large, highly developed and enlightened centers, such as Vienna, Budapest, Leipzig, Venice, expanded the possibilities for iconographic art to change even under the influence of the great renewal that European art was going through. At the time of David, Konstandin Shpataraku, originally from Shpati of Elbasan, the birthplace of Onufri, began his activity, who in 1744 created the icons of the iconostasis of the church of the monastery of Ardenica. His icons bring new artistic elements inspired by the reality of this era. One of his works is that of Saint John Vladimir in the iconostasis of the Ardenica monastery church, where he painted the Albanian prince Karl Topia (1359-1388). His creations are considered continuations of Onufri's school, especially in

the creation of miniatures and types of portraits, without excluding the influences of the school of Mount Athos. XVIII century represents the period when many frescoes and icons were made. In Vithkuq, the walls of the church of St. Peter, the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) and St. Mary are painted, where the scenes take a wider space in the compositional choices and in the freedom of painting. This is also helped by the large spaces created by the construction of basilicas. The painters of this century follow the tradition of the school of Korça, namely that of David Selenica. The creativity of Konstandin and Athanas Zografi brothers takes place in the middle of the XVIII century (1720 - 1764), when they created their icons and frescoes.

Their creativity, as well as that of their grandsons Terpo and Eftimiu, extends to the area of the district of Korça up to the churches of Myzeqe. It relies on the tradition of the Mali school under the influence of David's painting. In 1720, they made the frescoes of the church of the Metropolis of Ardenica, the vestibule of the church of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) where David Selenica also painted in 1750, as well as many frescoes in Hungary and Mount Athos. Their creativity is also rich in icons. Characteristic of these iconographers is the tendency to dress the saints in national clothes. They created rare scenes, from their themes, related to the Apocalypse, where allegorical animals and a large number of figures are presented (Popa, 1961).



Figure 3. Fresco from David Selenicasi in the church of Shen Nikolla (Saint Nicholas)



Figure 4. Painting from Konstandin Shpataraku

In the frescoes of the monastery of Ardenica, they also reflected the well-known composer of the Byzantine world of the XII century, originating from Durrës, Joan Kukuzeli. In the beginning of XIX century, the creativity of Konstantin's son continued, who worked in the church of Vodica near Berat (in 1805), in the church of St. Premte in Përmet (in 1808), in the church of St. Konstantin in Drenova near Korça, in 1810. And the son of Athanas (Zografi), in this period made only icons, which testify to the decline of this ecclesiastical art in this period (Sokoli, 1995).

In the second half of the XVIII century and in the first half of XIX century painters of the Çetiri family from Grabova developed their activity. Their creativity is mainly in the province of Myzeqe, in Vlora, Berat, Fier and Lushnjë where many frescoes and icons bear their signature, such as in the church of Saint Vlashi (Vlora) in 1792, of Shën Kolli (Saint Nicholas) (Vanaj - Myzeqe) in 1795, in the church of Saint Thanas in Karavasta (in 1797) etc. They left a very rich creativity and created hundreds of scenes on walls and icons. The theme and style of these iconographers are the same as those of the Korça brothers Konstandin and Athanas Zografi, as well as Konstandin Shpataraku (Anamali, 2002).

Conclusions

As provided and discussed above, we see that the art created from the 16th to the 18th century was mainly oriented towards the east and influenced by orthodoxy. The paintings, and the painters of this period were gifted, and were oriented different from the works of their predecessors, and their creations stand out for a style that was different from that of the Byzantine tradition, coming closer to those of the Italian Renaissance. However, their portraits look more like oriental portraits. Their works were mainly part of churches. Iconographic art is a great asset in Albanian culture. Its works present the creative spirit of the painters, and the spirit and reality of the Albanian people appear at the same time. Unlike the painters of the coast who lived and worked in the Dalmatian and Italian areas, these painters were the opposite of them, thus giving a different contribution, but enriching the richness of Albanian painting and affirming it in the period of the XVI-XVIII centuries.

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