

ARTISTIC IMMERSION OF ALBANIAN PAINTERS IN THE 20th CENTURY

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Abstract

The past is simply a time dimension that enables us to understand things that have left their mark in history in which art is also included. Tradition appears as a direct consequence of the spiritual experiences of a nation in which art does not give up reality because it would disappear on its own. Undoubtedly, art attracts the extraordinary possibilities of life by providing vivid depictions of reality with a deep insight into its formal structure.

The 20th century visual art refuses to introduce the world as we see it, and at the end of the 20th century it is manifested through the eclecticism of styles and the pluralism of artistic expressions that will be present in contemporary Albanian art as well.

Considering the fact that art is a category subjected to changes, motivated by the historical circumstances and cultural traditions of different environments, it certainly had an impact on the Albanian painters that live in the Balkans. The integrated connection of the past and the present takes on new meanings, new experiences and labeling according to new needs while being conceived with modernity that essentially does not know the strict limits to space and time.

Contemporary Albanian art has its origins in the struggles of each artist and their artistic content and doubts. The most serious explorations of contemporary Albanian painting began in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Talking about a national art, we often have to talk about the impact of general and special foreign schools and phenomena that have influenced the Albanian reality. The culture of a moment is not only the culture that is born in it, but also the culture that lasts and operates in it by acquiring new values and meanings through various artistic presentations.

This paper aims to present the position of the Albanian artists in the colorful and highly divergent space of contemporary art, focusing on the presentation of some concrete examples of the 20th century.

Keywords: art, Albanians, contemporaneity, tradition, divergence

Introduction

In order to reflect and define the trajectory of the development of painting in the last two or even three decades among Albanian artists/painters, first it is necessary to reflect on developments of world paintings over the last century. In this context, we will interpret and compare them. Certainly, this explanation will be preceded by a description of the historical and socio-cultural circumstances in which the painting took place in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, as well as its relation to events on the international stage. In this particular case, it would be more than necessary to interpret some general, chronological, and aesthetic notions that made the appearance and disappearance of many processes, stylistic formations, currents and artistic trends more than a century old.

Albanian Art in the context of World Art

The definition of contemporary Albanian painting must be put in the context of modern and post-modern art, as well as avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. In addition, it should be noted that Albanian art during its history had dualistic developments. While in Albania the visual arts had a two-way flow, between free and ideological art, nationwide we have the development of engulfed art within the Albanian state and modern art that developed after the 50s of the last century in Kosovo. But to draw the proper comparative parallels between contemporary Albanian painting and European one, and why not of the world painting, one would certainly have to highlight some historical moments that stimulated these processes. To clarify the aesthetic and stylistic aspects, it is necessary to stop on art and its theory, viewed from the perspective of the most decisive events during the twentieth century, approaching painting once as art, then as theory, and then both are found within culture. Viewed from this perspective, it seems that the creation of painting is very much conditioned by the trio: art- culture-theory.

Therefore, in theory, when talking about 20th-century painting, we are talking about a megaculture, known as modern culture or modernism. Thus, the beginning of the last century is based on two poles. One pole is the modernity that turns into the culture of everyday life, the culture of the middle class at the time in France. The other pole, however, is the avant-garde, namely, the artist's behavior, which provokes, challenges, changes, and in a way transforms the everyday life of the bourgeois middle class. Within it, all oppositions, contradictions, conflicts and tensions will be involved in the establishment of the modern and until its power and domination is attained (Argan, 2001)

The contradictions and tensions between the modern as a daily routine and the avant-garde which rebels, seeks and explores every new social moment and every new artistic situation were the moments that defined the course of the painting of the first decade of the last century. In this context, even avant-garde experiments will rapidly transform into popular mass culture, that is, everyday culture. A major phenomenon related to the history of modernity occurs in the 1930s in one of the areas of the European bourgeoisie, also known as the great turning point in art, particularly in painting. Once the ideals and discoveries of the modern and the avant-garde are established and the connection with the traditional restored, it seems clear that modernity is in deep crisis in this period of time. But the question remains whether the paintings are in crisis or not? It is exactly during the 1930s of the XX century that we have an open struggle between traditional, abstract and inter-art. In totalitarian societies (fascism in Italy, national-socialism in Germany, and social-communism in the former Soviet Union) there was a drastic refinement of accounts with modern and avant-garde art, leading to the method of ideological art.

So, what about the artistic painting in Albania during the last century? This is an issue that has not received the right answer yet, and it may take some time to do so. Although a more serious study of the criteria and standards of modern historiography of fine art on the history of the development of cultivated painting in Albania is lacking, the answer to the question of where to place it in this historical, cultural, aesthetic and stylistic context cannot be avoided. As the world fine art painting went through one of the phases of modernity and avant-garde, Albanian artistic painting either delayed or was overcoming them. So it was with the end of the 19th century that just emerged from the cliché of medieval ecclesiastical painting and laid its secular civic foundations.

Even the constellation of first-generation fine art painters, educated during the first half of the twentieth century, has left modest traces of traditional realist painting, where it dominated by figuration. Although the flow of social realism of the generation of Vangjush Mio, Zef Kolombi, Odise Paskali, in relation to the revolution of modernism and world avant-garde were in a time discontinuity and stylistic disproportion, however, the Albanian artists at least oriented the academic province of Albanian art to modernism, a path which was interrupted from the beginning.

It is obvious what happened to Albanian culture, art in general, and fine art painting after communism laid the foundations and was politically consolidated in Albania. Albania is perhaps the most unique country among all the former communist countries, since the philosopher Gjergj Lukaç's finding that the art of socialist realism belongs to the future that was most fanatically implemented. Like art in general, artistic painting was completely ideologized under the dictates of socialist realism, a method that was systematically imposed, even violently when the "need" was demanded, using all ways and means of its application. The journey of the aforementioned Albanian fine art painters will be interrupted by Nexhmedin Zajmi, Sadik Kaceli and to some extent Abdurrahim Buza, who became the first apologists of the method of socialist zhdanovian realism (Drishti, Varvarica, 2001)

The high modernism of the 60s of the 20th century seems to become the dominant culture of international modernism, fine art painting, returning to a flat surface, shows the painters' behavior and intervention on its surface. Now it became clear that Paris is not the only and central center of world art, because this city now gained its "pandan," and it was New York. From the US capital, now were spreading new doctrines, currents, and arts that were admired all over the world. The American fine art painter, Jackson Pollock, is the most typical example of this artistic process. With the emergence of the third face of modernism during the 1950s and 60s of the last century, known as neo-avant-garde, fine art painters once again wanted to paint in the name of avant-garde, but now criticizing the dominance of modernism, elitism and totalitarian views as single aesthetic views.

Bearing in mind that the isolation produced by the country's communist ideology, which lasted for nearly five decades in Albanian visual art, there were few of those creators who in one way or another managed to avoid falling prey to it. Although Albanian art was unable to be adapted to the trend of world neo-avant-garde, yet Albanian artists tried to break free from the doctrines of social realism. Even that little liberalism displayed in the second half of the 1960s within the art of socialist realism in Albania, welcomed by a whole generation of mainly educated domestic painters, was extinguished by the savage Enverist ideology. It may probably not be an organized resistance, but a concentration of greater artistic freedom, with which firstly they were tested, such as Guri Madhi and some artists of his generation. But the price of that "missing freedom" was high, because the early 70s were followed by the exclusionary mindset, persecution, imprisonment, and even the physical execution of artists was not missing. Fine art painters who felt it on their skin were: Edison Gjergo, Edi Hila, Max Vello, Ali Oseku, etc. Thus, it was with all those who expressed dissatisfaction or opposition to the system and the compelling way of the artistic creativity (Hoxha, 2019). But the paintings of these painters undoubtedly constituted a window from which a more liberating spirit within the hermetic walls of the communist "wilderness" of that period could be opposed.

However, there were few who displayed different tendencies than what the doctrine of socialist realism dictated. There were also of those (among them Guri Madhi) who made some compromise between that creativity and what they suffered as constant pressure from the so-called method of socialist realism.

And as Albanian artists in the 1970s and 80s tried to save art and especially their heads, the Western world was largely revising its further visual arts. During the 1970's, modernity appears aesthetically, poetically and theoretically barren, which is in fact the late modern period. Artists abandon artistic creativity to the benefit of revising the creative process. I now come to terms of the intelligent findings of Marcel Duchamp, who, with his rejuvenation since the second decade of the 20th century, rose the conceptualism. Some call this the period of dematerialization of the artwork, while others call it the art of the age of theory. This is the time of "language art," the era of structuralisms, or the time of analytically oriented artists who themselves value modern culture and their artwork (Arnason, 1989). Although at that time prevailed the thought that art, and then painting, had come to an end, but time showed that it was at that time that painting turned into eclectic pluralism taking the dimensions of an even more massive culture. The painting emerged from the reserve of elite high culture and embedded in post-modern interculturalism.

The Local and Universal of Albanian Art

While the Western world was debating about the developments of the (post)modernist era, Albanian artists, after the fall of communist ideology, were hesitating to try anything out of the (un)consumed artistic plurality of the world. In other words, in order to explain contemporary Albanian artistic paintings, first it is sufficiently to break down the art under the period of totalitarianism, that is, under the dictatorship of the "party-state", and then treat the art after the 90s and beyond. Starting from 1944 until 1990, the contemporary technical "education" of Albanian painters and sculptors was not only deficient because it operated mainly on techniques of the realistic method, which for "ideological-political" purposes was called the method of socialist realism (Mema, 1996)

With the collapse of the communist system and the restoration of the pluralistic political system in Albania after 1991, visual art, and especially Albanian fine art painting, began its way to a wider and diverse space, and artists had more personal exhibition featuring works that belong to different contemporary streams of visual art.

Although at this stage, in Albania, there are also authors who still paint as in the years of realism, but the tone of today's Albanian painting is given by painters who attempt for a particular artistic language as well as young authors with artistic views who attempt towards a style as contemporary as possible. Albanian artists, isolated within their own country, are now facing the world in order to get the most accurate appreciation of the artwork.

Yet, the irrational outburst, stimulated by the opening of borders and reconnecting with the outside world, the thirst to join the trends of art and world painting, led even to the denial of all that was called the art of the past. Albanian artists, from the extreme of isolated art, fled to the other extreme of contemporary art, coming from developed countries. Therefore, in the contemporary Albanian painting, two main trends can be noticed on which its cultivation is based. One is the tendency that tends more towards the local, or towards elements of the Albanian tradition of art, but on which not enough light has been shed yet.

And the other is the tendency that almost unconditionally imitates Western Art. Extremely opened to the influences of world art, this tendency, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously ignores the specificity, the thematic, but also the tradition in many aspects of it that the local component carries. It must be said that the pro-Western tendency is gaining significantly greater ground than the first one, which has been narrowing, especially over the last ten years. Albanian painters undoubtedly embraced the postmodern spirit that was dominating world art.

There is a long list of Albanian painters who contribute to the enrichment of contemporary creativity in painting. It can be said that the carriers of the painting of the post-communist decades in Albania are three groups of creators who belong to different artistic generations and provinces. The first group consists of creators belonging to the constellation of painters educated in the academies of the Communist countries and the newly opened Albanian Academy of artistically proven during the communist period, who even in older age continued to be active even during the period of political pluralism. In this group it is worth mentioning the painters: Vilson Kilica, Max Vello, Pandi Mele, Hasan Nallbani, etc. The second group includes painters who were educated during communism, but with their creativity came to the fore in a very significant way both during the communist period and in democracy. Among the creators of this group the painters that should be mentioned are: Edi Hila, Ali Oseku, Alush Shima, Lambi Blido, Ibrahim Kodra, Gazmend Leka, Bashkim Ahmeti, Artan Shabani, etc. And in the third group are the creators that live and create in the diaspora, such as: Anri Sala, Ardian Paci, Edi Muka, Ilir Kaso and others.

Kosovar avant-garde creators of Albanian art

The flow of visual arts among the Albanians living within the former Yugoslav federation went in a different way, since the Yugoslav communist ideology was very early detached from the method of socialist realism and opened up and strongly associated with the (post) modern developments of world art. Therefore, when we talk about the modernization of Albanian art, then, obviously this epithet belongs to Albanian artists from Kosovo and later to those from North Macedonia. This can be proved by the creativity of Albanian painters in Kosovo and North Macedonia, which is the result of their artistic mastery. Within it we find abundant information about its poetics and aesthetics, but also about similarities and differences, dialogue and mutual influence, as well as their relationships with other artists of the former Yugoslav space.

Elements that potentially create the essence of the Albanian art from Kosovo are: national history, cultural tradition and ethno-cultural education but treated with a contemporary Western sense. The road started by Abdurahim Buza, Ibrahim Kodra, who are from Albania will be followed by Muslim Mulliqi, Tahir Emra, Engjell Berisha, Xhevdet Xhafa, Rexhep Ferri, Sislej Xhafa, Zake Prelvukaj etc.

The history of the development of visual art in Kosovo has developed in various political and social circumstances. The individualism and the creativity out of institutions of Albanian painters in Kosovo became even more evident due to the non-participation of Albanians in cultural and artistic institutions in Kosovo, between the years 1981-1999.

After the normalization of the political situation, contemporary art of Kosovo was again activated on institutional basis establishing art galleries in many cities of Kosovo. So today it breathes freely in its state and is always coherent with time (Mulliqi, 2005)

Kosovar artists will be presented with several styles compared to the general world artistic developments. In the composition of Muslim Mulliqi, we see expressionistic expression which is achieved by the value of color and the deep rhythm of contrast. He studies the dramatic psychology of portrait and figure through constructive drawing, revealing the humble man's drama, historical moments, struggle and moments of existence (Muharremi, 2008). Meanwhile, Xhevdet Xhafa in collage technique awakens associations of the darkness of the past period, the poor life that correlates with the past. They are fond of the spirit of fantasy, with a view towards symbolism and a view of the world (Čelebonović, 1965)

“Enformel-ism,” expressionism and surrealism are present in the work of Angel Berisha, who establishes an iconographic intimacy with the beauty of relics, inspired by authentic folklore. Rexhep Ferri is recognized as one of the most persistent creators in the field of figuration, the heavy quietness of space and the exclusion of any non-artistic detailing are central to Ferri's paintings. In the paintings of Tahir Emra, it can be noticed the sensation of seeking colors, which has to do with the national climate and tradition of Kosovo, with an expressionist worldview and interpretation of the atmosphere that surrounds the artist (Asani, 2013)

In addition to modernism, the visual art scene also features postmodernism, which has begun to be cultivated by conceptualists, such as: Sislej Xhafa, Albert Heta, Erzen Shkololi, Zake Prelvukaj, Jakup Ferri, Rudina Xhaferi, Alban Muja, Petrit Halilaj, etc.

The creativity of Albanian painters from North Macedonia

The road started by Omer Kaleshi will be followed by Adem Kastrati, Reshat Ameti, Miftar Memeti, Bashkim Mexhiti, Nevzat Bejtuli, Nehat Beqiri, Lulzime Leka, Safet Spahiu, Melik Arslani, Agron Abdul, Zenun Sherifi, etc, which physically belong to the sub-skies of North Macedonia.

The conditions and circumstances for the artistic activity of Albanian artists in Northern Macedonia in recent decades have not been identical to those of Kosovo. They were educated in several art centers of the former Yugoslavia, and largely incorporated the characteristics of their schools into their works. Until 1994, no major activity of Macedonian Albanian artists could be distinguished, except for some presentations in the context of collective exhibitions or low-intensity personal exhibitions. But since the establishment of the most important educational institution, the University of Tetova in 1994, they have been very active in developing the visual arts, cultivating and advancing their particular style from standard to conceptual trends.

For the painter Omer Kaleshi, the expression of the face and the human figure, has always been of interest, because there is sadness, sorrow, pain. His paintings are dominated by the red color of fire and light, black and later the white color. Adem Kastrati paints his paintings with naive figurative expressions, with deep spiritual depiction of figures with some depictions of daily life that contain elements of Albanian folklore tradition.

His feature is also the use of “earthy” color technique that distinguishes him from his contemporaries. In Miftar Memeti’s paintings, it is seen the freshness of Impressionism through easy coloristic movements, as well as the relation of the tones to the nature and space to which they belong. Miftar Memeti also performed very significant works on the history of postmodern Albanian art by interweaving more artistic movements that bear the stamp of conceptual art. With active participation, the public not only becomes part of its realization, but it creates an action, a form of action art, in the way conceived by the author himself (Pollozhani, 2012). In Nehat Beqiri's creativity, we have a spectrum of eclecticism of styles and in the 90's he started with expressive expressions with layered colors and articulated lines. After the 1990s, abstract expression dominates where certain associative signs are repeated. In recent works, he tests himself on conceptual art with installations and performances which summarize him as a personality in essence.

Nevzat Bejtuli composes expressively, where the expression is based on the values of color and the expressiveness of loose and wide brushstroke. The figure of the horse and the man has a reciprocal relationship in his painting. In the art of the fine art painter Bashkim Mexhiti motifs from mythology dominate but resized in form and content intertwined between layers

of color. The sensational coloring of Albanian folklore and the symmetry of the figures are artistic reflections of the painter Reshat Ameti's aesthetic ideas. In a perfect form, Lulzime Leka expresses the deficiency of the realistic view of existential aesthetic values, such as the female, from the human side. Paintings explore with the element of color, light and drawing of objects that seem to be constantly moving toward the center of the fabric.

Therefore, the art of the 20th century is constantly looking for new values, and the constant experimentation with the use of new materials has also changed the working technique by creating a new sensitivity. The choice of material stimulates imaginative impulses. The artist is inclined to particular shapes, colors and lines, determined by their rhythm and harmony, which elements have undoubtedly been and are present also in Albanian artists.

Therefore "The integration of the past into the present - Arnold Hauser will mark - is the most essential sign of historical development." Each present has its own past, its own tradition that is constantly reevaluated and thus assimilates new values and meanings.

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Artist in Albania



Edison Gergo, *The Epic of the Morning Stars*, 1971



Edi Hila, *Planting trees*, 1971



Hasan Nalbani, *Together*, 2007



Ali Oseku, *Landscape*, 2005



Ibrahim Kodra, *The date*, 1987



Gazmend Leka, *Room of lost steps*

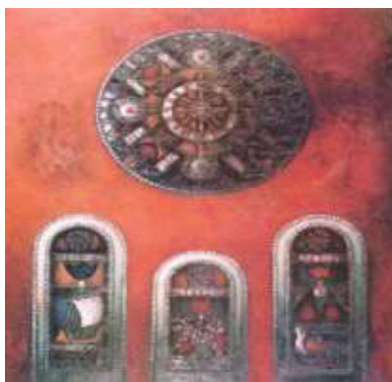
Artists in Kosovo



Muslim Muliqi, *Portrait*, 1994



Xhevdet Xhafa, *Autobiography*



Engjel Berisha, *Prizren medals*, 1981



Rexhep Ferri, *Accident meeting*, 2000



Sislej Xhafa, *Lost and found*, Biennale in Venice, 2017



Petrit Halilaj, *"RU"* installation, 2017

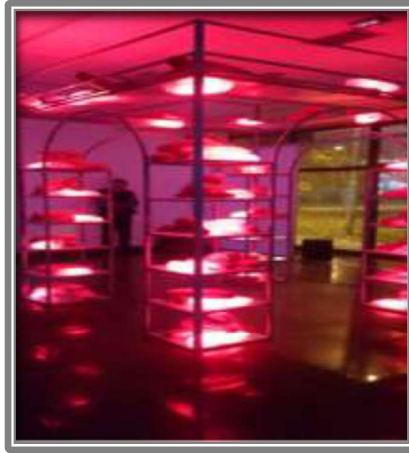
Albanian artists in North Macedonia



Adem Kastrati, *Dancers*, 1990



Miftar Memeti, *Lost paradise XI*, 2005



Nehat Beqiri, *Instalacion*, 2019



Nevzat Bejtuli- Kica, *Dervish and the horse*, 2012



Reshat Ameti, *Folklore*, 2019



Lulzime Leka Mulaku, *Who brought Doruntina*, 2018