

## THE BEGINNINGS OF ALBANIAN FINE ART IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

Albanian fine art in North Macedonia, which begins at the end of the 50s of the twentieth century, undoubtedly depended on the position of Albanians in the country, and not only appears with a great delay, initially it was also manifested with a limited quantitative and stylistic opus compared to the national artistic scene.

It should be noted that currently there are used two versions of labeling related to the fine art work of Albanian artists. One version is formulated as "Albanian fine art in North Macedonia" which is mainly used by Albanian researchers, whereas the other as "The art of Albanian creators in North Macedonia" which is imposed by Macedonian researchers. This entire issue is related to the question whether we can talk about Albanian national art in the Republic of North Macedonia. At first glance, it seems that there is no difference between these two formulations, yet essentially, they differ from each other. However, it is clear that this dilemma is unnecessary since now all the conditions and criteria for implementing the label "Albanian fine art in North Macedonia" are fulfilled.

*Keywords:* Albanian fine art, North Macedonia, founders

### Political, social and cultural circumstances in the country

It should be reminded that the Albanian people during their history have experienced (a)symmetrical fate, be it within their own being or opposite other peoples. The appearance and development of fine art in the Republic of North Macedonia should also be viewed in the context of these circumstances. But Albanian art should not be viewed separately from the general social, political and cultural national developments. Every so often, the Albanians have lived similar fates even with other nations of the Balkan, particularly with the neighboring Slavic nations with whom co (habited) (and a part of Albanians continue to live together even today) for more than a century within the frames of the same Yugoslav state communities, by experiencing and surviving different regimes and political systems. It should be highlighted that half of the Albanian population, for a long period was part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (also known as Communist Yugoslavia or Tito's Yugoslavia) and currently within the Republic of North Macedonia.

With the breakup of Yugoslavia, same as the former republics established their own independent states, the Republic of North Macedonia and Kosovo as autonomous provinces of the former federation, became independent states as well.

The repercussions against the Albanians had diverse backgrounds, but, above all, they were politically motivated, initially by the ideology of "yugoslavism" of the royal regime and later by the "communist" ideology. Behind these ideologies were hidden the panslavic intentions, where in extreme measure acted the "Greater Serbian expansion" from which suffered not only Albanians but also other nations. Even though in certain periods it appeared softer, the former Yugoslav communist regime acted almost similarly towards Albanians- a regime that

under the motto of unity- fraternity for many decades discriminated Albanians in all spheres of life. The situation changed positively after 1974, when Albanians in the former Federal Yugoslavia, especially with the Constitution of 1974 gained greater political and cultural rights, which after the events of 1981 began to be taken away again by the Yugoslav communist regime. But, during the last decades, after the fall of communism and the establishment of the pluralist democracy in the Republic of North Macedonia, where 25% of the population is Albanian, there is a tendency of “macedonianism” of the past and the present of this milieu. Precisely, in the name of this tendency, not infrequently Albanians and their culture are anathematized.

Nevertheless, despite those assimilation projects, the Albanian people, thanks to the relentless efforts in the cultural aspect and by intertwining the traditional with the contemporary, preserved the characteristics of their national identity. The appearance and the development of fine art in the Republic of North Macedonia should also be viewed in the context of these political, social and cultural circumstances. During the last hundred years, Albanians experienced a rather complicated social situation, extremely ideologically politicized and utterly culturally unfavorable. Their conditions, as much as was complicated by the imposition of the indifferent feudal royal Yugoslav regime, to the same extent was aggravated by the inherited orientalist- balkanic mentality, which had become an obstacle for the development of Albanians.

### **The tradition of Albanian art in North Macedonia**

Even though Albanian fine art tradition, outside the administrative borders of Albania, more intensively results to appear in the second half of the twentieth century, however, its roots should be searched even earlier, particularly in the ornaments of archeological findings and in motives of traditional art in different regions of Albanians in Macedonia.

During centuries rule of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires in their lands, even Albanians, have mainly expressed their artistic sense through mural paintings, whether it is the fresco painting or through icons, as well as by painting arabesques in mosques.

Since there is a lack of necessary research in the field of art history and with the absence of names of other Albanian artists throughout such a long history in these territories, we would emphasize the name of the well known Albanian painter of the sixteenth century, Onufri Neokastriti, which is known for his works on fresco-paintings in many churches and other Christian objects in Albania, Greece and other parts of the Balkans. He even reached to Italy. But, what should be noted is connected to the fact that this painter has left behind a series of works of mural paintings even in some churches in the territory of North Macedonia. Based on previous researches and publications, it is known that Onufri, has developed a rather successful activity in two famous monasteries: The Zrze Monastery in Prilep as well as in the Slepce Monastery in the region of Demir Hisar (Расколска Николовска, 2003, 135 – 136). Since this corresponds to the Ottoman rule, numerous mosques should be taken into account, which were built during this period, and today represent rare works of monumental architecture of genuine artistic values both on the architectonic aspect and the mural paintings aspect, which constitute a significant part of Islamic art. Decoding the names of the authors of these artistic works, which often were part of the imperial schools, remains a task for researchers.

Albania, despite becoming an independent state in the beginning of the twentieth century, half of its population remained outside its political borders, being forced to live within the frame of the different Yugoslav state formations. During the last 30 years of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, not only Albanian fine art but even their education in their mother tongue could not be discussed. Education in Albanian language began when Albanian lands were under

Italian occupation, where within the “liberated lands” (*tokave të lirume*), which among the population here is known as “The period of Albania” (*Koha e Shqipnisë*), were Struga, Kicevo, Debar, Gostivar, Tetovo, a period when the first schools in Albanian language were opened. (Dervishi: 2012: 171-188). It is not widely known that the works of the great Albanian sculptor, Odise Paskali, for a certain period were present also in some Albanian cities in the Republic of North Macedonia. A replica of Skanderbeg’s bust of 1941 is placed in the fortress of the city of Kicevo and in 1942 another one is placed in Debar (Pollozhani, 2017: Koha). In 1941, a monument- 88are88sk with the double-headed eagle is raised in the square in the city of Struga. Also, another similar monument is initiated (still pending) to be placed in the city of Gostivar.

### **The development of Albanian fine art in North Macedonia**

Fine art among Albanians of Macedonia has followed a binary development; one was connected with the national fate and the other with the standards of state administration. As such, without doubt, it has experienced the national historical fate, accompanied by a cultural and artistic disparity, a low level of education, a lack of fine art tradition, a difficult economic condition, etc. What worsened the difficult situation of the Albanian pioneer creators in Macedonia, is related to the fact of experiencing the communist regime, which led to a total isolation of Albania, thus disabling the contact with Albanian art (even with the art of socialist realism) that was created there during the communist period. Most certainly, the above-mentioned circumstances visibly delayed but did not prevent forever the appearance of the work of Albanian fine art creators in the artistic scene in Macedonia.

Despite delayed appearance, that small amount of works left traces and paved the difficult way for the development of fine art of Albanians in Macedonia, which according to a general mapping can be followed in two phases:

***The first phase-*** which includes the late period after World War II (NLW), respectively after 1958 and continues until the fall of the Yugoslav communist system, i.e. in 1990, when there is a greater rise of Albanian fine art. Adem Kastrati, Sulejman Lokaj, Rexhai Hiseni, Mexhit Bajrami, Omer Kaleshi, Qenan Shej, Kamil Vajner, Meli Zenku, Faik Kryeziu, Sabit Bocku, Fatmir Stavileci, Bedri Saracini, Vashington Doko, etc.

***The second phase-*** coincides with the beginning of pluralism after 1990 (which is followed by the opening of the Academy of Arts at the University of Tetova) and other artistic institutions and continues even today. Reshat Ameti, Miftar Memeti, Nehat Beqiri, Nevzat Kica, Xhelil Rufati, Nafi Jashari, Bashkim Mexhiti, Melik Asllani, Lulzime Leka, Ilirjan Beqiri, Safet Spahiu, Muamer Sadiku, Zenun Sherifi, Agron Abduli, Hajrush Iseni, Nora Halimi, Burim Ukici, Edip Lloga etc.

### **The founders of Albanian art in North Macedonia carriers of the first phase (1958 – 1990)**

Even though this artistic work cannot be considered very rich in quantity, it certainly deserves the dedication of researchers to search the roots but also to mirror the continuity which brought Albanian art to this level. In order for Albanian art to be mirrored as objectively as possible, above all, we have to take into account the fact that it comes as a manifestation of specific circumstances and the national position of Albanians in North Macedonia. Therefore, the focus of this paper (which is the first research project on the origins of Albanian art in North Macedonia) is the work of Albanian artists of the first phase which begins at the end of the 50s and continues to the 60s, 70s and the 80s of the twentieth century.

Truth be said, during these decades, the first artistic works which marked a more aesthetically advanced stage of the work of Albanian artists in the Republic of North Macedonia, were created. This more emphasized aesthetic level came as a result of the fact that during this period, the first academic staff of fine art arrived, mainly educated in Macedonian language, at the High school of applied arts and at the Higher Pedagogical School, which later became Faculty of Fine Arts at the “SS Cyril and Methodius” University in Skopje. However, after 1974, the Albanian teaching staff of fine art began to attend education also at the Academy of Arts in Prishtina.

It should be noted that the artistic achievements of the 60s of the twentieth century (Asani, 2013: 24 – 25) occupy a significant place in the history of modern world art. During these years, even Albanian fine art in former Yugoslavia experienced revival. During the sixth decade (1960-1970), were registered the first activities of several young Albanians creators who participated in collective exhibitions and organized some individual exhibitions, mainly with drawings and paintings, and rarely with sculpture or graphics.

Indeed, their appearance on the artistic scene of that time was not a result of the educational and cultural level of Albanians, but it was more a reflection of the social and cultural climate in North Macedonia. While Albanian creators were attempting to catch up the traditional artistic stream, while their Macedonian colleagues had already challenged themselves through the experiences of Informel, the expressive abstraction (Величковски, 1996/7, ДЛУМ 50 години), and then join the world art trends of acts (actions) of the 60s of the last century.

The work of Albanian painters in North Macedonia despite many difficulties, which was more a result of individual determination, than a result of institutional support, enabled some names to be distinguished and to reach the artistic scene of the country. It should be emphasized the fact that Albanian art in North Macedonia, during the first phase went through three sub-phases in which, from time to time appeared new talents that had completed the Academy of Arts. The three sub-phases are the following: *The origin of earlier works (1958-1962)*; *Intensified artistic appearance (1963-1967)* and *Works with stylistic heterogeneity (1968-1990)*.

**The origin of earlier works (1958-1962):** Based on the preserved fine art works, but also on the publications at the time, it can be said that in the first phase, where fine art itself originates, we deal with a rather poor artistic work of Albanian artists in North Macedonia. The entire story will revolve around one artist, the famous Albanian painter Adem Kastrati, who promoted Albanian art in North Macedonia with his first individual exhibition opened in 1961 at the Cultural Informative Center in Skopje (Pollozhani, 2018: 49).

**Intensified artistic appearance (1963-1967):** If the years from 1958-1962 represent the creating origin, the following phase highlights the more intensified efforts towards the ideational-aesthetic and stylistic aspect in the field of fine arts of Albanians in North Macedonia. During the second half of the 60s of the twentieth century, a rise of the artistic works of some Albanian artists begins. This is the phase when Adem Kastrati attracted attention by discovering and implementing a technique unknown until then, which later became the most authentic and most attractive technique seen in fine arts. This way of painting involves the use of clean soil (Pollozhani, 2018: 64) in order to gain different painting pigments. From that moment on, Adem Kastrati would not be alone in his artistic journey, because other painters such as Rexhai Hiseni, Mexhit Bajrami, Sulejman Lokaj, Bedri Saracini, Sabit Bocku and some other names entered the artistic scene.



Adem Kastrati, "Untitled" (1961) (This is the painter's earliest painting which is preserved in a private collection)

At the beginning of the 60s of the last century, more precisely, in 1963, in front of the country's public, appeared the young talented painters from Kumanovo: Mexhit Bajrami and Rexhai Hyseni, which had recently graduated in painting at the Higher Pedagogical School in Skopje. With this appearance they warned about their artistic orientation towards the new geometric tradition. Certainly, these two painters were connected because of three common characteristic elements: they both cultivated the (neo)cubist stream accompanied by elements of surrealism, both worked with the technique oil on canvas and both used the folkloric theme. While Rexhai Hyseni ended up in his own variant of cubo-surrealism (Pollozhani, 2019: 60–61), Mexhit Bajrami apart from neocubism followed surrealism and expressionism as well (Pollozhani, 2019: 18). In this phase, we should also discuss the artistic work of the painter Sulejman Lokaj, who was active with realism expressed through his aquarelles.



Rexhai Hyseni, "Portrait" (1964/65)

**Works with stylistic heterogeneity (1968-1990):** With the political advancement of Albanians (the Brioni Plenum of 1967 and the Constitution in 1974) a period marked by greater perspective of cultural and educational emancipation of Albanians in former federal Yugoslavia began. The University of Prishtina was also established in this political environment, which greatly influenced the education of the next generation in the field of art. Particularly, since the department of fine arts that was within the Higher Pedagogical School of Prishtina became the Academy of Art, this gave a new impulse not only to the artistic work of artists in Kosovo but to those in North Macedonia as well.

During this period, which includes a time interval from 1968 to 1991, surfaces a richer and more diverse fine art work among Albanian artists in North Macedonia. Their artistic opus is characterized also by a more emphasized stylistic heterogeneity, with content mainly inspired by the social, political and moral situation of the time. During this period, the main carriers of the fine art work of Albanian artists in North Macedonia continue to remain the same artists, which now appear more mature and more artistically consolidated. But, the group of the above-mentioned painters such as Adem Kastrati, Rexhai Hiseni, Mexhit Bajrami, Sulejman Lokaj, during the 70s and the 80s of the twentieth century was joined by Meli Zenku, Kamil Veiner, Bedri Saracini, Fatmir Stavileci, Sabit Bocku, etc.



Mexhit Bajrami, *"Portrait"* (1966)

### **Adem Kastrati- the founder of the Albanian art in North Macedonia**

A special place among the abovementioned painters, without doubt belongs to **Adem Kastrati (1933-2000)** who not only laid the foundations, but at the same time became one of the most deserving people in promoting Albanian art in North Macedonia. Based on some data taken from certain records, we learned that Adem Kastrati's work, a painter that came from Kosovo to attend education in Skopje and remained there all his life, is a reflection of the national provenience of the painter itself.





Adem Kastrati, *"Mother with the child"* (1967)

Thus, it is impossible to completely understand Adem Kastrati's poetics without separately dealing with the thematic, motive and the stylistic language of his work. There is almost no motive from the traditional fine art iconography that is not encountered in the painter's work. He used a diverse range of themes, by materializing them through different motives, which are present in most of his works. The motives represent visual forms of thematic contents. Most of the motives, starting from the landscape, interior, portrait, self-portrait, the act, still life, animalism, architecture, caricature, etc., (Pollozhani, 2018: 120), he has painted them according to the model of traditional figurative iconography, in this way leaving behind an opus rich with aesthetic values, but also with visual documentary meaning.

Mirroring Adem Kastrati's work through phases does not represent an easy task. As a consequence of the occasional repetitiveness of the themes, motives and the figurative expression during the creating process, there is a possibility of a potential trap. In order to avoid this permanent risk, as a criterion of separating it into groups, we've taken as basis the dominant thematic element, as well as the appearance of any aesthetic-stylistic novelty, in a specific period of time. Therefore, the phases are not strictly separated; instead, at times priority is given to the theme and other times to the stylistic expression.



Adem Kastrati, "Drug addicts", (1997)

Even though we do not claim that through this separation in phases the intended selection is achieved completely, still, in this manner arises the opportunity of mirroring to a certain extent

the closer and more systemized developmental dynamics and the content of Kastrati's forty years work. His artistic work (Pollozhani, 2018: 73) has experienced the following four phases: *The phase of earlier work* (1958-1962); *The phase of consolidating the painting method with soil colors* (1962-1968); *The phase of artistically proving himself on the (inter)national level* (1968-1988); *The phase of composition of national drama* (1988-2000)

### **Neo-cubist novelties of the two Kumanovo painters**

The two Kumanovo painters, Mexhit Bajrami and Rexhai Hyseni, not only were proving their talent, but also as members of the artistic association in the country were very active in other presentational activities. The painters in question organized individual exhibitions but participated also in collective ones which were organized in Macedonia, but also in other regions of former federal Yugoslavia and outside of the region.

Rexhai Hyseni's first appearances on the country's artistic scene began since his school years (1963-1965), but he presented himself with even more serious work after graduating at the Higher Pedagogical School, the department of fine arts- painting, as student of Professor Vangel Koxhoman class. He presented himself with works of different motives which warned about his stylistic path of cubism and surrealism. Rexhai Hyseni has left behind a wide opus of his work with a rich thematic and with diverse motives and tones. The events in the dynamics and the direction of modern art that was developing in North Macedonia during that period, were clearly also reflected in Hyseni's work, in which are equally embodied the three powerful dominant stylistic paradigms.



While the trajectory of one paradigm intended the realist discourse, and particularly the expressionist discourse, the second trajectory kept a surrealist line, whereas the third trajectory researched the experience of cubist aesthetics. All three paradigms also took distinctive stylistic shapes over time, which became specifics of this painter's artistic work. Rightly it can be concluded that his work is a synthesis of stylistic interlaces which resulted in a personal aesthetic language.

Since for Rexhai Hyseni's opus as well was impossible to draw strict separating lines in terms of temporal, thematic and stylistic aspect, we implemented a combined chronological and stylistic model of his work. As a result, his work has been grouped in three carrying stylistic variants, such as: *The variant of expressive and realist figuration (1963-1980)*; *The variant of the cubist-surrealist poetics (1968-1995)*; *The variant of the neo-cubist synthesis (1969-2003)*. These variants appear in specific time periods, while they incorporate some other sub-variants which enrich and express the heterogeneous character of his poetics.



Rexha Hyseni, "Woodcutters..." (1969)

Simultaneously, on the scene appears another young and talented painter from Kumanovo, Mexhit Bajrami (1942) who had also graduated in 1964 at the Higher Pedagogical School in Skopje, with the professor Vanco Georgievski. However, his artistic life does not last very long, since he abandoned his hometown and was employed at the magazine Shkendija in Pristina, and from that moment on he was completely disconnected from the Albanian artistic life in North Macedonia. In the thematic aspect, Bajrami's artistic preoccupations are related to the national historical past, folklore as a cultural value (Bajrami – Breznica, 2018: 57 – 69), as well as with the man of the everyday life (Ndoci, 1969: 17. VII). Despite being a young painter, who had just recently started searching for his stylistic creative path, he imparts some of the most important moments of the national history them with the language of cubism and surrealism.



Mexhit Bajrami, "*Combat between there people*" (1969)

This group should be joined also by the name of the painter Sulejman Lokaj (1934-2018), who despite completing his studies at the Higher Pedagogical School- the department of Fine arts in Prishtina, he worked as a professional actor in movies and theater. Even though he was dedicated to the scenic art, he did not neglect painting and sculpture, by filling is work with his aquarelles and his busts of different personalities mainly with a realist and expressive language (Ndoci, 1969:17. IV). It should be mentioned his joint exhibition with three other painters: Adem Kastrati, Rexhai Hiseni and Mexhit Bajrami in 1969 in Ulcinj of Montenegro (Katalog, 1969: Ulcinj).

### **The contribution of other painters to Albanian art in North Macedonia**

A special contribution to the development and consolidation of Albanian art in the Republic of North Macedonia was made also by some other artists that appear during the 80s and 90s of the last century. Bedri Saracini (1943-2016) from Skopje, despite not being a member of AVAM, during his entire career of more than forty years, he managed to bring a very rich artistic work. Saracini, for the first time was presented before the public with two exhibitions in 1969, one in the Cultural Informative Center and the Theater of Nationalities in Skopje. Initially, he began with traditional realism, by softly dealing with beautiful landscapes and rural idyll. But, over time, this painter will focus even more on his artistic search, wandering from expressionism to finally end up at contemporary expressionism.

The artist from Gostivar, Meli Zenku, born in 1944 in Gostivar is one of the first Albanian painters to become a member of the Association of Visual Artists of Macedonia in 1980(Величковски, 1996/7, ДЛУМ 50 години),and during his career has organized several individual exhibitions and has participated in a considerable number of collective exhibitions. As a painter, he is distinguished for his aquarelles but also for the oil technique, by engaging in creating the illusion of the material and the realist appearance, which he achieved with his characteristic patience and great zeal.

Also, it should be emphasized the cultivation of the graphic techniques with which he presented himself in some exhibitions in the country, in this way also becoming the founder (Katalog, 1980: DLUM) of graphics in Albanian fine art in North Macedonia.

Simultaneously, in the fine art scene entered another painter named Kamil Vajner (Kamil Weiner) (Qamil Dauti) born in Trencin of Czechoslovakia but originating from Forina in Gostivar, who at the beginning of the 80s of the last century (Величковски, 1996/7, ДЛУМ 50 години), had some individual exhibitions and participated in some collective exhibitions in the country and out of Macedonia. Kamil Weiner studied dramatic art and fine art at the University of Prishtina, and, apart from acting, he dealt with painting, graphics, caricature and scenography. He was also known as a very dedicated cultivator of drawing done mainly with ink. A characteristic of this painter was building a drawing with the help of the uninterrupted line, an intention of the author himself of expressing in this way the continuity of life. Alongside some other motives, through drawings, with greater dedication he treated figures of horses, accompanied by improvisation and arabesques compositions, as well as the figure of the man, proving himself as a good connoisseur of his anatomy. (Gilevski, 1981:14). At the beginning of the 80s of the last century, Veiner moved to Czechoslovakia, therefore we do not have information regarding his later work.

This group should include also painters such as Fatmir Stavileci, as well as the Albanian painters of the Macedonian diaspora: Omer Kaleshi (Turkey-France), Qenan Shej (Netherlands), Washington Doko (Belgium) etc.

As a conclusion we should add that since this article represents the first research attempt dedicated to the origin of Albanian fine arts in the Republic of North Macedonia, for objective but also for subjective reasons, it is impossible to include the works of all the above mentioned artists, but also of other artists, therefore these efforts remain an objective for further research.

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