

2.10. FINE /VISUAL ARTS

By Ferid Hudhri

Note: This chapter covers the early and historical development of visual arts (sculpture, painting, mosaics, etc). There are special chapters on Photography, Heraldry, Numismatics, etc, based on their historical development.

1. Antiquity

Figurative arts in the Albanian land date back to antiquity. The first findings are from the Neolithic Period. Through numerous archaeological discoveries in various areas of the country hundreds and thousands of items of ceramics, terra cotta, metallic ornaments, etc., belonging to Illyrian tribes, Albanians' ancestors, have been found. The earliest artifacts are simple; intended for practical application, and they also contain artistic values embodied in their zoomorphic styles of vessels and their ornaments, carvings and other elements. From the 6th century to the 4th century B.C. lines and geometric figures were drawn in ceramics; the form is constructed with silhouettes of a more elegant shape that comes to be enriched with plastic elements. Many vessels of this period, that are preserved to this day in museums of Albania have genuine distinguishable autochthonous artistic values not encountered in the art of the ancient neighboring countries, such as Hellenes, Macedonians or Romans. It's with these ancient vessels, ornamented with maleable decorations and fractures, that the developments of sculpture in Albania begins (see chapter 2.2. Archaeology). More clear-cut features appeared particularly with the formation of Illyrian cities, such as Bylis, Amantia, Phoinike and Buthrot, and also those of Hellenic settlements, Durrhachium, Apollonia and Orichum.



"Dea of Butrint"
marble sculpture

2. Illyrian and Byzantine period

A greater development in Illyrian cities was reached during the accomplishment of monuments with round sculptures and relief. At first, sculpture evolved by appropriating elements of Hellenic art, especially from Corinthian and Cyprian traditions.

Later, beginning in the 6th century B.C. along contacts with the Hellenic tradition, Illyrian art assumes new, distinguishable features. Apollonia and Durrachium became the most important centers in those times; they had their own notable autochthonous masters who carved and chiselled in a style marked by special features vis-à-vis the works of Hellenes. At the museum of Durrës, important unfinished sculptures found in that area,



Artemis
sculpture,
marble, Apollonia

have been exhibited. They attest to the fact that these sculptures were made in Illyrian territory. In Apollonia and Durrhachium, relics of early ceramics workshops have also been found. Many of the beautiful, antique-style vessels and vases that are preserved in Albanian museums were produced in these cities. The painted figures represent various scenes: mythological, athletic contests, fighting, etc. They generally contain black figures on a red background (in 6th and 5th century B.C.) and red figures on a black background (4th century until Hellenistic period). The painted figures seem to be in motion and the painting is full of harmony and flexibility. During this period many bronze statuettes and terra cotta pieces were created, which represent secular motifs and figures of children, shepherds, etc. Figures of artistic value can also be found in numerous coins of this period, issued in Apollonia, Durrhachium and Orichum.

The flourishing of several Illyrian and Hellenic colonial cities brought a great development of arts, accompanied by a diversity of forms and techniques; from frescoes to beautiful monochrome and polychrome mosaics. In the 1st century B.C., Roman occupation caused, for a period of time, the economic decline of Illyrian cities but however the main centers (Apollonia, Durrhachium, Buthrot, etc) were subjected to boom of development to face Roman empire demands followed by significant development of all kinds of visual arts.

Mosaics

The earliest mosaic is found in Durrës. It dates from the 4th century B.C. and is wrought of multicoloured pebbles. It has unique artistic values that make it distinct in this genre. It's called "The Beauty of Durrës" and can be described as the most beautiful of all mosaics

discovered so far in Albania. It has a marvelous grace of its figure and great excellence of artistic creativity. As noted above, in the 1st century B.C. this genre of art reached its peak, and later instead of pebbles, small cubes of stone, glass, marble or terra cotta were used. Mosaics of such materials have been discovered in Apollonia, Durrës and Butrint.



The mosaic of Butrint's Baptistry

The later development of mosaics is generally related to the early Christian monuments. After the 5th century A.D., mosaic motifs differ from the models of early paintings, such as Amazonomania in Apollonia, which was replaced by symmetric figures that stand

loose in the surface and represent animal figures, fruit-trees, flowers and other symbols of early Byzantine art. These works, such as the Baptistry in Butrint and mosaics in Lin and Antigona, are well pre-

served to the present. The excavations carried out so far have discovered only one mural mosaic in Durrës dating from the 6th or 7th century A.D, within the city's amphitheatre that was built in 2nd century B.C.

Mural Paintings- Frescoes

During the transition period from late antiquity to early Middle Ages, the art of sculpture declined until it suffered a total abolishment by the Byzantine aesthetics, while, in contrast, the art of painting found its highest artistic expression. The most developed art form was mural painting, particularly in Christian temples. Churches became full of frescoes and icons that would totally follow the rigid canons of metropolis. In those times authors did not put their names on their works, so all of that creation remains still anonymous. Only a few traces of the earliest creations, certain fragments of them, are now preserved in Albania. Unfortunately, some of them were damaged during the anti-religious policy carried out by the Communist regime (1967), which resulted in the disappearance of works of rare values. In those few fragments still preserved, there appear to be influences from the Western styles (the Church of Rubik - 1272), and Eastern Byzantine art (Vau i Dejës - 14th century). Numerous icons and miniatures in the codices of Berat and Vlorë (11th to 14th century) constitute works of artistic values that date from the development of Byzantine art in Albania.



Saint Michael icon at Saint Mary church, Mborje region of Korca

3. Post –Byzantine period

Though the country fell under the Ottoman occupation, new artistic paintings were created during the 16th century in the post-Byzantine style. The most celebrated artist from this period is Onufri.

Onufri is the most distinguished Albanian painter of the 16th century. He created works of Byzantine art style and became one of the most eminent representatives of this art. One of the most striking features in his works is the realistic elements that goes beyond the rigid Byzantine canons and provides space to the Albanian everyday life and its characteristic environments.

He depicted frescos in a number of churches in Albania, as well as in Macedonia and Greece. Many of his frescos in Albanian churches have been restored, and his icons are displayed in the principal museums of the country. In 1986, the Onufri Museum was inaugurated in the castle of Berat where some of his best icons were displayed. Another collection is exhibited at the Medieval Arts Museum in Korça and the National History Museum in Tirana.

Onufri's icons have also been exhibited abroad and have attracted attention with their scarlet red color, which was characterized as "original and unrivalled". Onufri's work has played an important role in Albanian painting not only during his lifetime, but also in the later centuries. His direct followers were his son Nikolla, Onufër Qiprioti and some other anonymous painters. His paintings are



"Nativity of Christ" by Onufri, 16th century, tempera on wood, Church of Annunciation in Berat

distinguished for their rich colours and decorative shades and introduction of certain ethnographic national elements that would be more visible with his successors: his son Nikolla (16th century), and other distinguished painters, such as David Selenicasi (18th century), Kostandin Shpataraku (18th century), Kostandin and Athanas Zografi (18th century), Katro family (18th century) etc., who decorated a number of churches in Albania and the neighbouring countries.

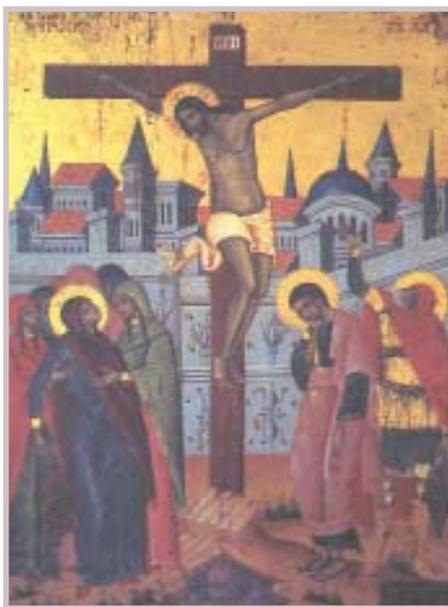


"The last supper" by Onufri

K o s t a n d i n S H P A T A R A K U a painter of 18th century was born and worked in Shpati, a region of Elbasan district. Along with Onufri and Selenica, he was one of the three eminent painters of the medieval period of Albanian painting. Shpataraku was distinguished by his miniatures by introducing elements from everyday life in painting.

His characteristic features include a more adroit style as well, which finds expression in his vivid compositions. A part of his artistic work is represented by frescoes in a church near Pogradec and in a number of icons in Ardenica Monastery of Fieri region, in Cikallesh near Kavaja, in Verdova of Pogradec, etc. The best icons of Shpataraku have been collected and restored, and now are on display at the Medieval Arts Museum in Korça, the Museum of National History in Tirana and other national museums.

David SELENICA painted the interiors of some well-known churches in Albania and Greece. Among his works, the most important are the frescoes in Athos Mountain (Greece) from 1715 and the frescoes at Church of Saint Nichola in Voskopoja, painted in 1726 with the help of Kostandin and Kristo Shpataraku. Other paintings are to be found near Kosturi in Greece.



"Crucifixion" by Kostandin Shpataraku, tempera on wood, 18th century

Selenica represents the last splendour of post-Byzantine painting in Albania, and the Balkans generally. He distinguished himself by introducing elements from life and the national ethnography and by intensifying the realistic trend of his works under the influence of the Western European painting. Frescoes at Voskopoja Church stand out for their monumental character in painting. They include more than 1000 figures. The Athos Mountain fresco painted by Selenica, represents a group of girls in realistic garments of the time and the whole composition gives the impression of a secular painting, far from post-Byzantine canons. Some of Selenica icons are exhibited at the Museum of National History in Tirana, the Medieval Art Museum in Korça and the museums in Berat.

A careful work has been carried out in Albania concerning the post-Byzantine art works, for they are appraised as of important value for the national legacy. Explorations for discovering other authors, and the restoring damaged artworks over the centuries, are still going on. Several temporary art exhibitions of these works are opened in important art cities like Paris (1975), Rome (1985), Nice (1993) etc., which aroused great interest of the international art specialists. Illustrated publications and abundant commentaries have accompanied exhibitions by foreign press.

4. Renaissance & Independence period

In the latter half of the 19th century a new and important stage for Albanian art begins. The great liberation acts starting with League of Prizren of 1878 that led to the Independence of the country on 1912 established the climate for a new artistic movement, which would reflect life and history more realistically. The secular painting with patriotic and ethnographic motifs emerged. In Albanian art history, the year 1883 is celebrated for the creation of the two most crucial and finest paintings, "The Portrait of Skanderbeg" by Jorgji Panariti and "Sister Tone" by Kolë Idromeno. With these works, the painting Albanian Visual Art entered into Renaissance age. The motifs of these two first works would dominate the range of themes of Albanian Renaissance art and the Independence period; i.e., by evoking the historical past by portraying the National Hero, Skanderbeg, and depicting scenes from everyday life, where values of national culture have also been summoned.

Renaissance painters convey a romantic theme and spirit. In many paintings, however, features of the classical realism and sometimes of a more contemporary realism are also noticeable. Several works represent the real situation of the country, sometimes even with a critical attitude. The most distinguished Renaissance painter is Kolë Idromeno (1860-1939), the artist of many paintings, portraits and landscapes. His art set the foundations for many future artists to come. Idromeno was also been a renowned architect and photographer.

Kolë IDROMENO (1860 – 1939) is the most distinguished painter of the Albanian National Renaissance. He was born in Shkodra, where he learned the first elements of photography from Pjetër Marubi. In 1876 he stayed for a few months at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, and then worked in the studio of an Italian painter. When back in Albania (1878), he engaged himself in a number of different activities, working as an architect, sculptor, photographer, painter and engineer. He can be easily named "Da Vinci" of Albania. He was the initiator of the first art exhibition in Shkodra (1923) and was represented in the first national art exhibition at Tirana (1931).

Kole Idromeno established a very active photo studio and was the first to show moving pictures in Albania (1912) due to his correspondence with the Lumiere brothers in Paris. His paintings are very rich in details and of a highly artistic value. He created a number of ethnographic compositions. The portrait "Sister Tone" is not only his masterpiece, but also one of the best artworks in Albania, which after being restored in Paris in 2005, is currently on display at the National Art Gallery in Tirana. Many refer to it as the Albanian "Mona Lisa". Idromeno also stands out as the first landscape painter in the modern Albanian painting school ("Courtyard of a House in Shkodra"). He became well known abroad as well, by participating in international exhibitions, e.g. in Budapest (1900), New York, (1939) etc. His paintings are now exhibited at the National Art Gallery in Tirana, Shkodra and other cities.



Self-portrait
by Kole
Idromeno

Other renowned painters emerged during this period such as Ndoc Martini (1880-1916), Simon Rrota (1887-1961), Andrea Kushi



"Our Sister" by Kole Idromeno, Oil on canvas, 1883



Spiro Xega
Portrait

(1884-1959), Zef Kolombi (1907-1949), **Spiro XEGA** (1863 – 1953); **Vangjush MIO** (1891 – 1957) and others. After Shkodër, Korçë became the second cradle where the art of painting developed in Albania.

Andrea KUSHI (1884 – 1959) is one of the most eminent figures among the generation of Albanian painters. He was born in Shkodra and stayed there during his childhood. For some years he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade but thereafter, during the years of the World War I, he was obliged to interrupt his studies. Upon his return to Albania, he worked as an art teacher in Elbasan. In 1931 he opened the first drawing course in Tirana, which some months later became a vocational school, the first fine arts school in Albania. Kushi, like Idromeno, was one of the organizers of the first national art exhibition in Albania (Tirana, 1931). He was active in participating in several national exhibitions. His works include portraits and landscapes.

Spiro XEGA (1863 – 1953) is a well-known painter during the National Renaissance and Independence periods. Xega produced the highest number of paintings dedicated to the National Hero, Skanderbeg. His work "Shahin Matraku and his Band" is one of the most beautiful and original paintings of Albanian Renaissance. He accomplished many portraits and landscapes as well.

In general, they are very romantic. His works could be a result of the particular circumstances in which he lived and was inspired by the events of that time. Xega's painting played an important role in strengthening the patriotic feeling and the national pride.

Vangjush MIO (1891 – 1957) was born in 1891, Korça. He received his first drawing lessons in Bucharest, and later graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, in Rome. Upon his return in Korça, Albania, he worked as an art teacher and a landscape-painter. Mio is the most distinguished landscape painter of the modern Albanian painting school. In 1920, he opened a personal exhibition, the first one in Albania. Thereafter, he participated in the first national exhibition (1931) and in all other art activities. Mio's landscapes are internationally well-known as well, as they were exhibited in several countries well before the Liberation (1944). Mio painted portraits, *natura morta* and made a great number of drawings, notable for their artistic refinement and craftsmanship. His works have beautiful scenes of Albanian landscapes and there is human presence everywhere, which gives vividness to landscapes and creates a joyful and optimistic atmosphere. Most of his landscapes and drawings are preserved at his home-museum in Korçë, while the rest of the works at the National Arts Gallery in Tirana, in Korçë and Durrës.

Sculpture, after a long discontinuity for several centuries, began to develop during the Renaissance period in a new fashion. Murad Toptani (1866-1917) is known as the first author. He has created some patriotic works, among which two busts of Skanderbeg are most distinguished (1899 and 1917). But it's Odhise Paskali (1903-1989) who would set the higher standards in sculpture. With his monumental statues, the first works of this kind in Albania ("National Warrior" - Korçë, 1932, "The Standard-bearer" - Vlorë, 1932, "Skanderbeg" - Kukës, 1939), the monumental art started its life in Albania.

Odhise PASKALI (1903 – 1985). He was born in Përmet and in 1914 he went to Italy. After 1920, he was a at the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature in the

University of Turin. At the same time he was attending a studio of an Italian sculptor, where he learned the first skills of sculpting. In 1927, he wrote his thesis about fine arts history. Upon his return to Albania, Paskali developed an intensive creative and organizational activity for the promotion of fine arts in Albania. Since 1932, Paskali produced the first monuments in the country, which remain to this day among the most eminent works of monumental sculpture. His works are dominated by a patriotic spirit and have a unique and expressive elasticity. He was the first teacher of the most notable contemporary painters and sculptors in Albania. Many young artists were trained in sculpture at Paskali's studio.



S.Xega "Shahin Matraku and his Band"

Besides the monuments upraising in some towns of Albania, Paskali created hundreds of other works, housed in the artist's studio-museum in Tirana, at the National Art Gallery, and in some other national museums and institutions. Other works of Paskali are part of international collections. He also, participated in many art exhibitions.

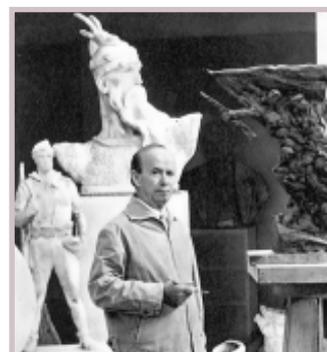
In the **post-Independence** period 1912-1939, and between World War I and II, arts in Albania developed in a more organized fashion. The first attempts took place to train the young artists, establish artistic societies and organizing exhibitions. The painter Vangjush Mio, opened the first personal exhibition in 1920 in Korçë. With the contribution of the renowned national poet Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), who took part himself with certain works in watercolours, the first local exhibition was opened in Shkodër in 1923 with the participation of 15 artists from Shkodër. The most important exhibition in this entire period is "The First Art Exhibition" organized in Tiranë in 1931 which is the first ever national exhibition. This exhibition was organized by the association "Friends of Art", which is also the first artistic society created in Tiranë in the same year. Two other important efforts were made in 1931 to create a public art gallery and arts school. The former failed, but the school was opened. On the initiative of the painter A. Kushi, a drawing course was opened in 1931, and one year later, **in 1932, the first Art School was opened in Tiranë.** This school recruited students from all over the country. The lecturers of this school were Odhise Paskali, A. Kushi, Abdurrahim Buza, the Italian Mario Ridola and the renowned poet Lasgush Poradeci (1896-1989).



Vangjush Mio

The most well-known generation of Albanian future artists of the period 1940-1970 such as B. Sejдини, K. Kodheli, N. Zaimi, Foto Stamo, Ibrahim Kodra, Qamil Grezda, Ll. Nikolla. F. Makoçi, H. Reçi, Z. Bumçi and many others received the first lessons at this Art School.

Abdurrahim BUZA (1905 – 1986) was born in Skopje. After finishing his secondary studies in Elbasan (1928), he pursued his



Odhise Paskali in his atelier

education in Italy, at the Albertina Academy of Fine Arts in Turin, and at the Arts Academy in Florence. Upon his return to Albania, he was given a post as a teacher in a vocational school at Tirana. Though he did not take part in the first national exhibition in 1931, he contributed to the foundation of the first drawing school in Tirana. After 1945, Buza was engaged in an intense creative activity, resulting in hundreds of paintings, portraits, landscapes, drawings, etc. His work has been very influential on the young generation of Albanian artists, representing to them a model and a true school. Based on folk traditions, he achieved works that were distinguished for the detailed refinement and the richness of nuances.



"The Starving old man" marble, from Odhise Paskali 1935

Buza opened a number of personal exhibitions and participated in all National Art exhibitions. His works were displayed in various exhibitions abroad, where they have been appreciated for their original style and national spirit. Most of them are now housed at the National Art Gallery in Tirana and in the painter's studio.



"Independence warrior" by Odhise Paskali

Zef KOLOMBI (1907 – 1949) is one of the most outstanding artists among Albanian painters. Born in Sarajevo, of a Shkodra family origin, he became an orphan in early childhood. With the help of his compatriots he was registered as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, wherefrom he graduated in 1933. Upon his return to Albania, he was given a post as a drawing teacher in Elbasan and later, in Shkodra. A part of the new generation of Albanian painters learned from him the first art skills.

His artworks include portraits, landscapes, natura mortum and a small number of compositions. His works are characterized by a transparency of colours, an artistic refinement and a beautiful materialization of objects. His works have been on display in exhibitions in various countries. They are to be found now at the National Art Gallery in Tirana and other museums and galleries in the country.

Between 1932-1935, several art exhibitions were organized at the Art School. The best artworks underlined a continuum from Renaissance painting tradition, but other realistic representations were present by involving a critical stand towards the difficulties of life and social injustices of the time. At the same period, the caricature based on social themes developed and was illustrated by A. Dino, M. Frashëri and Q. Mesarea, the latter being at the same time the most well-known Albanian watercolour artist during the Independence years.

The international competition for building the monument of the National Hero Skanderbeg, organized in Tiranë in 1937, was another important activity during the post Independence period. Aside Albanian sculptors, many renowned European artists participated. The first conceptualization Prize went to the well-known Croatian sculptor A. Agustinic (1900-1979), and production right was given to the Italian sculptor R. Romaneli. The monument of Skanderbeg realized by Romaneli was placed in 1939 at the "Albania Square" in Rome.

During World War II (1939-1944) the situation was not favorable for artistic activities. Some exhibitions, however, were organized. The most important was one of 1943, in which the best artists of the country participated. Other activities were mainly personal exhibitions.

5. Social Realism period (1944-1990)

The first fine arts activity after the Liberation of the country was the National Exhibition that opened in April, 1945 in Tirana. This exhibition, and particularly other ones that followed it, defined the new trend in Albanian art, known as *Social Realism* originated mainly from Russian art of the time .

After 1945, much work was carried out to **establish art institutions** as well. In 1946, the art high school opened for the education of painters, sculptors and textile designers. In 1954, the National Art Gallery was built, achieving an old dream for the artists and audiences. The best works of traditional and contemporary artists were collected there. 20 years later, the National Art Gallery moved to a new building, which is its current location, and now houses a rich collection of artworks. Part of the collection at the gallery are also works by Rembrandt, Titian and other European artists.

Students graduating from the Art High School in Tirana would continue their studies at art academies in the Soviet Union and other Eastern countries. In 1960, when Albania broke its relations with the socialist countries, students returned back and in the same year, the High Institute of Arts was established (today the Arts Academy, Tirana). Some years later, other art schools opened. Art galleries were established also in the main cities. Several national museums were constituted, such as the Museum of Medieval Art in Korçë, Archaeological Museum in Tiranë and several history museums, like the Museum of Skanderbeg in Krujë, and the National History Museum in Tirana, where many original artworks of great values of all time are preserved and displayed. In 1986, the Art Study Center was founded, at the Academy of Sciences, focusing on research in arts.

Since 1945, **national arts exhibitions and competitions** were organized almost every year. The most important exhibitions at the time, were considered those involving anniversaries of Liberation and other national events. Likewise, many national competitions have been organized. The first competition was announced in 1948 for sculptor of Skanderbeg's Monument . The sculptor, Janaq Paço (1914-1989) won the contest with his scale model, which after 10 years was cast in bronze and placed in the town of Krujë (November 28, 1959).



"Gjakova (Kosovo) Wedding Party" by Abdurrahim Buza, Oil on canvas, 1979

Monumental sculpture developed largely after the Liberation of the country. In a few years, several works were created. The most important productions include the equestrian statue of Skanderbeg in Tiranë (1968) by Odhise Paskali, A. Mano, Janaq Paço; "The Independence Monument" in Vlorë (1972) by Kristaq Rama, M. Dhrami, Sh. Hadëri; also, statues and monuments by Thoma Thomai, Perikli Çuli, H. Dule, F. Dushku, A. Mano, etc.

A larger number of paintings were created. For the first time, almost all the art genres developed, from easel painting and sculpture to graphics, scenography, textile, ceramics, glass and, further, mosaics and frescoes applied to some social/ cultural buildings.

Although there was a rigid censorship, works of particular artistic values were also created, many talented painters created beautiful paintings that were not fully in the lines of the so-called social realism.

Following the 1960s, arts in Albania developed in isolation not only from Western countries, but also from the countries of the Eastern Communist block itself.

During such isolation, the artists were more and more restricted within the **schematization of creativity to social realism**. Individual artists preferred to portray more historic themes; a large part committed themselves to landscape; i.e. themes that would allow enough space for creative freedom. The artworks of the painter Abdurrahim Buza (1905-1987) and a large part of paintings by K. Kodheli (1920-), S. Kaceli (1913-) etc., remained least affected by the schematism imposed by official directives.



"Story from the National Liberation war" by Nexhmendin Zajmi, oil on canvas, 1954

After 1970, three generations of art teachers, educating young artists, were active. The first group was educated in the Western academies; the second from Eastern countries' schools, and the third group included those trained at the Arts Academy in Tirana. The controversies that started to emerge among them in recent years, would re-create new groups that were defined neither by the countries wherein they were educated, nor their ages, but by their skills, talents and culture. Each generation has its representatives who tried to break from schematism. Innovative artists of the time managed to survive by creating two kinds of works: paintings for exhibitions that would meet the requirements of art officials, and works of art intended for the studio, where they could make artistic experiments for the future days to come. On occasion, such works were submitted for exhibition. Even though they had artistic values, not only weren't they exhibited, but also were made objects of criticism.

Among the distinguished artists of this period, who could resist pressures by following the requirements of the time, and also created works of artistic values, was the painter Sali Shijaku (born on 1933). His works were of various genres such as paintings, landscapes, portraits, frescoes, ceramics and sculptures from recent times.

The struggle for creative freedom of most talented artists has always been antagonistic to the imposed schematism by communist system and leaders of the time. Though isolated from the contemporary creativity in the rest of the world, time and again, Albanian artists have made efforts toward innovation in visual art. The most obvious example of such efforts was the exhibition of the year 1971 in Tiranë which was harshly censured by the officials' critique. Those years also labeled the **first dissidents** in Albanian painting, such as E. Gjergo, Edi Hila, Ali Oseku, Maks Velo, etc.



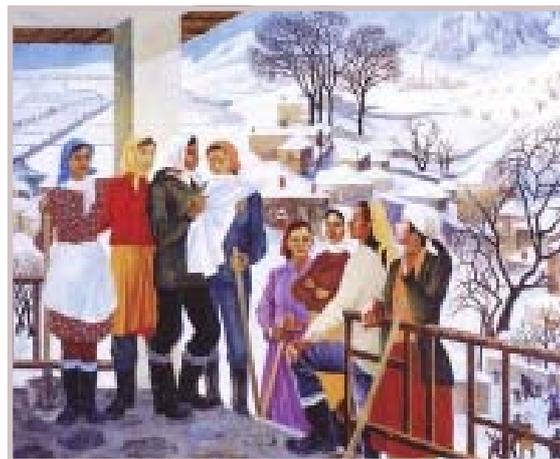
"Kids" by Spiro Kristo, oil on canvas, 1966

6. New tendencies after the 90s

After 1991, for the first time, after more than 45 years of censorship, the community of artists of visual arts found themselves free to produce their works. This freedom led to the boom of many new visual art forms as well as the opening of private art galleries. In a few years time, almost all the contemporary trends and tendencies of the 20th century were also experimented with in Albania.

The opening of Albania with the rest of the world updated Albanian artists on the contemporary arts. Although Albanian artists were soon integrated in international visual art they still preserve the originality conveyed by cultural, political, economical, social and other themes related to Albania's events.

The establishment of democracy in Albania permitted the private artistic institutions. In recent years, alongside numerous activities organized by the National Gallery of Arts, there were organized several exhibitions of various private artistic groups like Te&Ge Gallery, the Gallery XXI, Galeria e Vogel, Zeta Gallery, BoArt, Raum,



"Morning news" by Niko Progri, oil on canvas, 1936



"The painter's atelier" by Sali Shijaku, oil on canvas, 1974

Kledio and Lindart Association, November Association, etc, contributing to further development of contemporary visual art in all its kinds. Mezuraj Museum, the first private art museum, was inaugurated in January, 2007 in Tirana, with a considerable number of works from antiquity and a selected collection from the Albanian contemporary art. In Korçë, the Bratko Museum of Oriental Art, the first in the Balkans, opened in 2003.

Some Albanian **institutions** have updated their curricula and new ones have been established. *The Albanian Arts Academy* has introduced new ways of teaching and practicing, a new Graphic Department, and has organized several exhibitions at the Arts Academy Gallery (FAP) which opened in 2008. *Tirana Institute of Contemporary Art* (TICA) in partnership with the Institute of Tirana Biennale

and 1.60 Insurgents Space have organized international events. Various artistic projects are sometimes specific on their medium of expression, but the *International Centre of Culture* in Tirana, under reconstruction in 2008-9, delivers events like theater, art exhibitions, book discussions, conferences, etc.

The largest activity organized by an independent international organization is the *Tirana Biennale*, a huge art event with many international participants. Its curators have been Zdenka Badovinac, Roberto Pinto, Joa Ljungberg, Hou Hanru, Edi Muka and Gezim Qendro.

The National Arts Gallery of Albania organizes annually the *International Competition in Visual Arts "Onufri"* in which have participated Koen Wastijn, Nicolas Kozakis, Herbert Christian Stoger and many other internationals. The French Embassy has organized exhibitions of Albanian and French artists at the International Center of Culture with participation of Vladimir Stamo, Besson, Leloup and Godard.



"Transportation of a dream" by Maks Velo, 1995

ArtKontakt Festival organized by the EDS Foundation, has already invited national and international artist performers to participate in cultural heritage sites, promoting at the same time the castle of Ali Pasha Tepelena in *Porto-Palermo* and the *Lekurs Castle* in Saranda. There are also many local contests for photography, paintings, and other visual art mediums, in Shkodra, Korca and other cities. The Albanian Arts Academy organized the *AMC*

Company prize 2007, curated by Najada Hamza and Ardian Isufi, considering surrounding public areas as exhibition space.



Mezuraj Museum

"The artist/ Self-
portrait" by Heldi
Pema

Albanian artists have participated abroad at the *International Venice Biennale*, and also at *Mini-Tirana Biennale* in cooperation with ApexArt in New York, and other international events organized by individuals and art organizations.

Some internationally recognized Albanian artists are also supported by European and international contemporary galleries and are very much involved in artistic events in Albania. They have received international prizes and they have their own specific theories, approach and presentation. *Suela Qoshja* (b.1981 Tirana) graduated from the Arts Academy in 2004, has participated in various group exhibitions in Albania, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, France, Austria, USA and Germany. The artworks include photography, installation, cartoon series, videos and other mediums, to convey the artists reality on the Albanian society, symbols, myth, history through a critical and documenting point of view. The Albanian artist, *Eltjon Valle* (b. 1984 Kucova) who graduated in arts in Milan, Italy, emphasizes the role of petrol (engine oil) in our society, economy and environment. His artworks consist of paintings, petrol on canvas, videos and photography, such as in his project *Petrol Pax*. The artists *Alban Hajdinaj*, *Armando Lulaj* and *Heldi Pema* curated by Bonnie Clearwater, executive director of MOCA, U.S.A, have represented Albania at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and they work in various mediums like installations, video projections, live performances, photography, etc.

Bratko Museum of
Oriental Art, Korca,
2003

Of particular interest is artist *Samir Strati* who received 3 Guinness World Records for his works of mosaics out of eggshells, nails, glass, corks, toothpicks, etc.. His first work of this kind "Leonardo Da Vinci Self- Portrait" of 450,000 nails, 4x2m, weighting around 1 ton. In 2007, *Agim Sulaj* received the award for the "Best Illustration" in China, at the "Master Cup International Cartoon and Illustration" the Albanian artist

Tirana Biennale, 2005
(Artwork by Olafur Eliasson)



National Art Gallery,
Tirana, 2008

The *Copyright Office*, sub-ordinate organization of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, has ratified international and national agreements for author's rights and has a wide cooperation with artists and art organizations, yet there are some difficulties encountered in the market and society for the implementation of the law and case appeals.

As of 2009, a few noteworthy living contemporary Albanian artists are: Ali Oseku, Lumturie Blloshmi, Gazmend Leka, Shpend Begu, Genc Mulliqi, Genti Korini, Leonard Qylafi, Alban Canga, Agim Zajmi, Leonardo Voci, Artan Shabani, Edmond Gjokopulli, Adrian Paci, Elsa Martini and many others working in visual arts and new potential artists of the Albanian Arts Academy.

7. Albanian Artists abroad (diaspora)



"Sweet Taboos",
New York, 2006

After the Ottoman occupation, during the 15th century onwards, many Albanians immigrated abroad. Among them, talented artists also immigrated and developed their skills in the countries in which they were settled. Two Italian-Albanians from Vicenza in Italy, Gjon and Jeronim, have their epitaphs inscribed, "Ille alter Phidias, his Poliklet erat", which compares them with two of the greatest masters of Hellenic sculpture. Also, the

sculptor of Albanian origin Aleks Tarketa has worked on the altar of the Duomo Cathedral in Milan. Many Albanian artists distinguished themselves in Venice, too. They set up there their own school, which they called "**Scuola degli Albanesi**" (School of the Albanians).



"Avenue of Stars" by Suela
Qoshja, 2005

Their textbooks were the works of the Albanian Humanists: Marin Beçikemi (1468-1528) and Marin Barleti (1460-1512). The most renowned painters were Mark Basaiti (1496-1530) and Viktor Karpaci (1465-1525). Some international academics have referred to them and their Albanian descent.

One of most notable figures of this period is Aleksandër Albani (1692-1779). He is considered one of the first art collectors. His villa in Rome, which to this date is still called "Vila Albani", is one of the first art museums in Europe. The celebrated archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) received his education there too.

Some well-known architects of Albanian origin, such as S. Mehmeti, K. Dulla, S. Atiku, etc., were decorated in

Istanbul and other centres of Ottoman Empire, as well as A. Aleksi, M. Tivarasi, Gj. Durrësaku, etc., who have worked in other regions of Europe.

The art of the Renaissance and Independence period includes works of artists living in settlements away from the country and those from the “Arbëresh” in Italy as well. Like literature of this period, the art works among both Arbëresh and Diaspora had the same motifs and styles as the art cultivated in Albania like painter Theohar Gjini who created in Paris and Bucharest and Mikel Trota who worked in Italy, whom critics of the time called the “New Canova” (as per famous Italian painter Antonio Canova 1757-1822).

The number of artists in late (XX and XXI century) Albanian Diaspora is now greater than ever. They belong to various visual art groups. To list some of them who are well-known in the world art as well: photographer Gjon Mili (1902-1980), who lived and worked in the U.S.A.; the painter Abedin Dilo (1913-1993), a friend of Picasso and other celebrated personalities in Paris; Çatin Saraçi (1902-1974), a friend and close collaborator of expressionist Oskar Kokoshka during the years he was staying in London; Ibrahim Kodra (1916-2006), friend of Picasso and distinguished painter (cubism) in Italy, etc..

The paintings of “Arvanitas” artists who live in Greece could be added to these creations. An album containing the best creations of the most renowned “Arvanitas” artists was published in Athens in 1985, but their work, just as the whole creation of the “new Albanian Diaspora”, is much richer, and it’s increasing with new artists who left the country after the 1990s.

8. International Artists for Albania

Through out different times, various visual art works of foreign artists, such as paintings, portraits, landscapes, etchings, sculptures, reliefs and works of other genres of art has been dedicated to Albania and Albanians.

In the 18th century, when the realist painting has just started, at Paris salons and in some exhibition in England, Germany, Austria, etc., paintings of Albanian themes were also exhibited. Individual works were created even earlier by distinguished authors such as Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) “The Siege of Shkodër”, Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) “Skandërbeg”, Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) created some paintings, etudes, watercolours and drawings; Camille Corot (1796-1875) created “The



Artist Saimir Strati, 3 Guinness World Records for Arts & Sculpture, 2006-2008



“Man and Nature” by Agim Sulaj, 2008



“The Albanian School in Venice “ Relief on the Albanian Resistance



Fresco at Mount Athos church by David Selenica

Albanian Woman"; Ary Scheffer (1799-1858) the famous composition "The Suliote Women", and Richard P. Bonington (1802-1828) V. Vereshagin (1843-1904), G. Sargent (1856-1925), Ç. Conder (1868-1909) and other created some paintings, portraits and landscapes.

The well-known French artist Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904) created over 20 paintings with Albanian themes; the Croatian Paja Jovanović (1859-1931) did over 10 compositions

with various scenes from Albanian life, and the famous Edward Lear (1812-1888) created over 100 watercolours, lithographies, drawings and oil paintings dedicated to Albania. In addition to artists mentioned above, there are many other ones who though less known, have created works of value for the Albanian history and culture. Most creations mentioned here have been collected in the illustrated book, "Albania and Albanian World in Art" published in Albanian (1990) and English (1991).



"The child with a bird" by Ibrahim Kodra, 1976, Italy

Albania today is a destiny of foreign artists as participants in exhibitions and competitions, and also through residency programs such as from Tirana Institute for Contemporary Arts. To mention as a distinguished example of international cooperation is the work "Nativité" of Greek painter Kozakis presented in the International Competition in Visual Arts "Onufri" held in Tirana in 2006. The work consists on shapes and symbols referring to

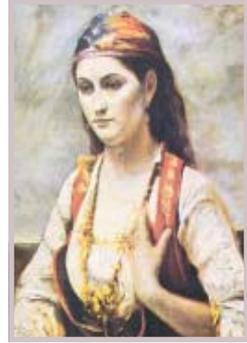
Onufri's work "Birth of Christ".



Queen Teuta at King Gent's tomb by Nua Gjelaj, 2000, Michigan, U.S.A.

Author: *Dr. Ferid Hudhri*

Updated in 2010 by & *Blerina Berberi and Genc Myftiu*



"The Albanian Woman" by Camille Corot (1796-1875)



"The Cockfight" by Pavle (Paja) Jovanovic, oil on canvas, 1926



"Rozafa legend" Ivan Mestrovic (Croatia 1883- USA 1962)



"Albanian Dancers"
by Alexandre Gabriel
Decamps (1803-1860)



"Nativité" (Onufri) by
Nicolas Kozakis, 2007