

## Early Photography in Albania The Photographic Legacy of Kol Idromeno



### Visual Art

**Keywords:** Visual art, art history, photography, ethnography, Albanology.

**Rubin Mandija**

Lecturer in the Department of Arts. University of Shkodra, Albania.

### Abstract

Kol Idromeno, (1860-1939) was one of the foremost artists of Albanian Renaissance art. Idromeno was a distinguished painter, architect, photographer, scenographer, sculptor, artisan etc. He is mostly known as a painter and architect. His achievements in these two fields have overshadowed somehow his also remarkable efforts in other arts. Especially his photographic heritage is of particular interest. He began his photographic activity in 1886 after he attended at the Marubbi studio, which was the first photographic studio in Albania. Idromeno started his career as a photographer, working with the wet collodion process. By 1899 Idromeno had switched to the dry gelatin plates. The main body of his photographic work is preserved in the archives of QSA (Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike – Center for Albanological Studies) in Tirana. There are 1285 glass negatives in this archive. There are about 150 more negatives in the Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkodra. Portraits and group portraits are the most numerous among all other genres. These portraits represent an important exposé of Albanian society between the 19th and 20th centuries. Men, women, children, officials, aristocrats, highlanders, soldiers, merchants, priests, lay people, they all go through the photographer's lens. The photography of architecture, streets and urban ensembles is especially dear to Idromeno. Being also an architect, architecture would be one of favorite subjects. In the historic photography context, there are dozens of photographs representing many sorts of soldiers, officers and armies. Idromeno lived in a very turbulent period of Albanian history. The Albanian struggle for independence, the Balkan Wars and the First World War. Artistic effort can be observed in all genres of his photography. Being also a painter he used the correlation painting-photography primarily to the advantage of the first. However some of the photographs used as a preparatory material for painting, reveal today genuine examples of fine art photography.

### Introduction

Kol Idromeno, (full name Nikolla Arsen Idromeno, 1860-1939)<sup>18</sup> was one of the foremost artists of Albanian Renaissance art.<sup>19</sup> Idromeno was a distinguished painter, architect, photographer, scenographer, sculptor, artisan etc. He is mostly known as a painter and architect. His achievements in these two fields have overshadowed somehow his also remarkable efforts in other arts. His photographic heritage is especially of particular interest. As a child he begins to take painting lessons from Pietro Marubbi. Marubbi, an Italian revolutionary from Piacenza, was a political emigrant in Albania (then part of the Ottoman Empire). He was the first to establish a photography studio in Albania. “Dritëshkronja<sup>20</sup> Marubbi” opened in Shkodër in 1856.<sup>21</sup> Marubbi, beside his exceptional legacy as a photographer, is credited also with the teaching of photography to some of the first Albanian photographers in the city of Shkodër. Idromeno was one of these lucky young men to take advantage of Marubbi generosity in terms of professional teachings.

<sup>18</sup> Prenushi, Mikel “Kolë Idromeno” Tiranë 1984 Note: all data relevant to the life of Idromeno are extracted from this monograph, except when otherwise stated.

<sup>19</sup> Hudhri, Ferid “Arti i Rilindjes Shqiptare” Tiranë 2000

<sup>20</sup> “Dritëshkronja” literally: light-writing

<sup>21</sup> Paci, Zef “Marubi, Photography as ritual” Princi, Tiranë 2012 p. 126-7

Marubi was also a gifted painter, and the young Idromeno, was originally to study painting with him. It is here, in the Marubi studio that Idromeno is introduced to the new exciting art of photography. Working day by day by the master, he apprentices the new art of photography. It is also Marubbi, that urges him to enroll in the Academy of Arts in Venice. However for unclear reasons, Idromeno quits the Academy. In 1886 Idromeno opens his own photographic studio, “Dritëshkronja e Kolës” (Light-writing of Kolë). It was the second photographic studio in Shkodër.<sup>22</sup> The main body of his photographic work is preserved in the archives of QSA (Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike – Center of Albanological Studies ) in Tirana. There are 1285 glass negatives in this archive. There are about 150 more negatives in the Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkodra. Almost all negatives in the Marubi Museum represent soldiers and officers.

### **Technique**

Idromeno started his career as a photographer, working with the wet collodion process. By 1899 Idromeno had switched to the dry gelatin plates.<sup>23</sup> No celluloid negatives have been attributed to him, and there are no data to suggest that he ever worked with them. Most of the early photographers did not keep an inventory of their work. The reason was simple in the early days, because the wet collodion process permitted the same plate to be used for different photographs. We need to keep in mind that the costs were high if compared to nowadays, so, to wipe out a negative and prepare it for another shot was a routine act of lowering costs. When the dry gelatin process was introduced the glass plates could not be used more than once, and subsequently photographers began to store and register them. Although most of Idromeno’s work is on dry gelatin plates, it is to be mentioned here that no original register of photographs has survived and we do not know if Idromeno kept one in the first place.

### **Commercial Photography**

Photography was recognized as a potential art since its very inception. But on the other hand we have to recognize that since its beginnings it was a business too. The main body of Idromeno’s photographs is no exception. Most of the work was ordered by clients. The spare time and “spare” financial means were then used for artistic shots. This was true for all photographers, beginning with the portraits of the very first of them all, Daguerre. This indeed is a fact that follows artistic endeavor long before the advent of photography. Was not “Mona Lisa”, the most famous painting in the world, but a commission? Was it not the Sistine Chapel a commission too? And we can go thus far as to the marvels of sculpture in classical Greece, of pharaonic Egypt. These remarkable examples of “perfect commissions” help us reshape that somewhat contemporary cliché of incompatibility between commissions and artistic achievement.

<sup>22</sup> Paci, Zef “Marubi, Photography as ritual” Princi, Tiranë 2012 p. 125

<sup>23</sup> Denelli, Gjergj “Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos” Third International Seminar “Shkodra në shekuj” volume III p.111.

Returning again to the Sistine Chapel as a paradigm, indeed the quarrels of Michelangelo with Julius II are among the most famous episodes of history of art. The fate of commissions as a living income was bound on photographers too. Especially portraiture was to be the backbone of financial incomes. The privilege of dealing with fine art photography would have to be postponed in spare time for most of photographers. Besides the time, cost was no less important issue. It is difficult for us now in the digital age, to imagine the costs of plates and relevant chemicals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On this sensitive topic the British art critic Charles Caffin, contemporary of Idromeno, writes in the very first issue of “Camera Work” in 1903. Referring with admiration to the artistic merit of the photographic work of Gertrude Käsebier, he states: “For this lady has won a most enviable reputation both for the quality of the work and for the tact with which she has united artistic endeavor to business considerations. The latter is no slight achievement, since Mrs. Käsebier is doing what the majority of professional photographers are only pretending to do. Every practitioner with the camera nowadays dubs himself an artist, just as we have tonsorial and sartorial artists, until the designation has become a by-word and a joke. The dear public also are practically unanimous in desiring artistic photographs and almost equally ignorant of what really makes a photograph artistic. So, to have emerged clear of the ordinary clap-trap of the profession and at the same time to have impressed upon clients her own estimate of artistic qualities in a photographic portrait, represent a very remarkable triumph. It has not been without some compromises, of which no one, I dare say, is more conscious than the artist herself; but the same only redound to her credit. They have been sacrifices which she was wise enough and big enough to make for the ultimate end of her endeavors, which is to establish photography, where many of us believe it belongs, as a distinct and valuable medium of artistic expression.”<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, the editor of “Camera work” himself, renowned photographer Alfred Stieglitz, would take a different stance in an earlier article. Arguing for this triangle of professional-amateur-customer mixed relation, he states: “Let me here call attention to one of the most universally popular mistakes that have to do with photography—that of classing supposedly excellent work as professional, and using the term amateur to convey the idea of immature productions and to excuse atrociously poor photographs. As a matter of fact nearly all the greatest work is being, and has always been done, by those who are following photography for the love of it, and not merely for financial reasons. As the name implies, an amateur is one who works for love; and viewed in this light the incorrectness of the popular classification is readily apparent.”<sup>25</sup> Also Barthes retains similar views on the amateur question: “Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot--or will not--achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the *noeme* of Photography”<sup>26</sup>. Pursuing the “golden ratio” between customer demands and self vocation has been a life long strive for almost any artist.

<sup>24</sup> Caffin, Charles H “Camera Work” no. 1, New York 1903, p. 17

<sup>25</sup> Stieglitz, Alfred “Pictorial photography” “Classic essays on photography” Leete's Island Books New Haven 1980 p. 117 First published in Scribner's Magazine, November 1899.

<sup>26</sup> Barthes, Roland “Camera lucida Reflections on photography” Hill and Wang, New York 1981 p. 88

This conflict might have obstructed artist in their way, but certainly did not stop them, or at least the best of them. Idromeno as a photographer is no exception. Customer's portraits are his most common commissions. And it is exactly this plentitude of commissions that permits him to attain a special experience in portraiture, returning many plates in exquisite examples of fine art photography. Except portraiture, the ceremonial photography is another commercial genre. There are civil, religious, political ceremonies captured in different circumstances. From the religious photographs, of particular artistic interest are those of children confirmations. The white robes used in custom provide an opportune light that enables the photographer to capture almost radiant images. An interesting clue to be mentioned in the ceremonial photography is the absence of wedding photography. There are photographs of couples in their wedding day, but just inside the studio. Such absence is evident also into the much larger archive of the Marubi Museum in Shkodra.<sup>27</sup> Searching such archives, it is surprising to find that wedding photography was not yet a popular custom before WW II, compared to the status of the wedding album as a "protocol" in nowadays weddings.

Backgrounds play an important role in the commercial photography. Idromeno was a painter, and he painted them himself. As it happens with every artist, failures have got their rate of occurrence. In certain shoots, misappropriate placing of camera and subject in relation to the background, has produced quite wired images (e.g. photograph no. 174)<sup>28</sup>

### Portraits

Portraits and group portraits are the most numerous among all other genres. We see in them a full spectrum of society. The desire to have one's image for eternity was so thrilling. The desire to be photographed is irresistible to any class of society. The instantaneity and impartial accuracy of representation are too much to resist. Also the costs, which were very high compared to those of nowadays photography, were nevertheless much lower than painting. Men, women, children, officials, aristocrats, highlanders, soldiers, merchants, priests, lay people, they all go through the Idromeno's lens. Single people, couples, whole families, groups of associates they all approach the studio in search for their share of glory. The group portrait in the wider sense of the word, is by now a social event. Idromeno's portraits reveal that immediate contact that photography provides between photographer and the photographed. Many portraits claim the merits of fine art photography. Soft lighting provides in many examples for overall soft subtle tones. Simple and clear compositions provide the personages with dignity in their poses. Many photographs of the portraiture represent children in their religious confirmation day. As abovementioned, the white robes represent for the photographer a most preferred opportunity to exploit the light contrast. Such photographs are among his best examples in children portraiture.

<sup>27</sup> Paci, Zef "Fotografia si ritual Marubi" Princi, Tirana p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Numbers of photographs are the same as in the inventory of the QSA archive.

## Fine Art Photography

Artistic effort can be observed in all genres of his photography. Being also a painter he used the correlation painting-photography primarily to the advantage of the first. However some of the photographs used as a preparatory material for painting, reveal today genuine examples of fine art photography

### Pictorialism

One important feature to be mentioned in Idromeno's artistic photography is a pictorial attitude in some of the photographs. Albeit a few, they constitute an important part of his artistic effort. Pictorialism was a trend, since the early days of photography. One of the earliest and most important proponents of pictorialism was british photographer Henry Peach Robinson. In his book "The pictorial effect in photography"<sup>29</sup> he coined the term pictorialism itself and established an enduring "manifesto" of this artistic stand of photographers. Pictorialism included elaborate manipulations such as use of multiple negatives to achieve artistic effects. On the contrary, Idromeno however interested in attaining pictorial effects, is not interested in creating over-manipulated images to such an end. He restrains himself in the borders of the untouched negative. As Stieglitz, one of the most important pictorial photographers in America, remarks while prescribing the pictorial efforts: "With the skilled photographer, on the contrary, a variety of interpretations may be given of a plate or negative without any alterations whatever in the negative, which may at any time be used for striking off a quantity of purely mechanical prints."<sup>30</sup> The light is the main ally of Idromeno's pictorial photography. By simple overexposure he attains over illuminated scenes which seem to be day dreaming.

### Ethnographic and Anthropological Photography

Albania has been a land between east and west. The intertwined influences can be seen throughout its history. Catholic, orthodox and muslim traditions have each enriched its turbulent history. The camera of Idromeno has captured all these traits of Albanian society. Many of his subjects are seen dressed in traditional costumes. Many others in contemporary western clothing. The western and traditional costumes that his subjects bear reflect this state of in between that characterized Albania at the time. These photographs give us today anthropological data of the Albanian urban and rural life in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to WW II.

Idromeno started his photographic career when Albania was still an ottoman province. For orientalist<sup>31</sup> scholars and collectors alike, Albania represented a case *par excellence*. A country inside Europe, that was part of an orientalist empire. By the end of the 19 century orientalism in the arts was a high trend in mainland Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Robinson, H. P. "Pictorial effect in photography" Edward L. Wilson, Philadelphia 1881

<sup>30</sup> Stieglitz, Alfred "Pictorial photography" "Classic essays on photography" Leete's Island Books New Haven 1980 p. 120

<sup>31</sup> Said, Edward W. "Orientalism" Vintage Books New York 1979.

His photography shows orientalist biases on certain examples. The richness of folkloric costumes are one of western fascinations with Orient, and these costumes are abundant in Idromeno's photography. Especially photography shot for postcard production bears clear orientalist biases. This fascination influences such photographs. Besides the standard shoots of traditional costumes in the studio, the street photography is another orientalist genre. The streets and bazaars provide Idromeno with a wide spectrum of personages in orientalist frames.

Albania and Shkodra in particular, had always kept mercantile activities with the western world. Italy was just few miles across the Adriatic, so except the trade, cultural contacts were eminent as well. Idromeno himself had studied in Venice, and many rich families send their children to study in the west.<sup>32</sup> In this context, also "Occidentalism" manners can be observed through the Idromeno's photographs. Western clothing can be seen on wealthy man and women primarily from the bourgeoisie of the city, but also from common lay people.

### **Architecture Photography**

The photography of architecture, streets and urban ensembles is especially dear to Idromeno. Being also a distinguished architect, architecture would be one of favourite subjects. Many of the buildings are photographed with no attention to composition or other artistic concern. It is obvious that these shots were made simply to document a building. He did not receive a formal training regarding architecture or engineering, but was rather self-taught. So besides reading relevant texts on the building matters, he relied on practical experience, and the photographing of technical structures was one of the means that helped. Bridges are particularly thus photographed. Idromeno must have been concerned with the particular structural challenges represented by bridge construction, in his numerous architectural and engineering enterprises. Besides this documenting photography, in some other plates one can observe great care in composition, exposure and fine detail render. These latter examples remind me the photographs of architecture, which rendered famous the Alinari brothers.<sup>33</sup>

### **Historical Photography**

There are dozens of photographs representing many sorts of soldiers, officers and armies. Idromeno lived in a very turbulent period of Albanian history. The Albanian struggle for independence, the Balkan Wars and the First World War. He was a witness of the transition of his city Shkodra from the hands of one power to the other for many times. Yet his photography is not one of war in action. There are no scenes of violence. Soldiers are depicted more in processions rather than proper action. Of the "military photographs", the only scene representing some evidence of action is no. 2851. It seems a battlefield after the battle. Ruins are evident. Still from a historic point of view there are to be mentioned some photographs of what seem to be various documents. Some of them are ottoman scripts. There are also few examples of papers in Greek. These documents are still to be translated.

<sup>32</sup> Onuzi, Aferdita "Kultura Popullore" No. 1-2 2010 Tirana pp. 53, 56

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.alinariarchives.it/>

## A Late Discovery

There has been a late discovery of twelve very special photographs of Idromeno in the huge archive of Marubi Museum of about 500 000 negatives. They were discovered by Zef Paci, an art historian and curator of numerous Marubi albums and exhibitions. The photographs represent staged scenes of torture and delirium, and are supposed to have been shot between 1892-4.<sup>34</sup> The exhibition “The two roads of Idromeno” opened in the Marubi Museum on January 26, 2017. This exhibition celebrated this discovery of such special photographs, which till lately were labeled as “anonymous”. It was curated by renowned artist Adrian Paci. One of the most important paintings of Idromeno is “The two roads”. It is a religious large painting. It depicts the ascendance to Heaven of the pious and the fall in Hell of the vile. It is a moralist composition, painted with the utmost commitment of a religious painter. There are dozens of figures arranged in an elaborate, yet clear composition. In many of quasi-independent scenes, the virtues and vices of mankind are displayed in a scenic way. Three other paintings, never exhibited before, were part of this exhibition too: “Saint Peter”, “Saint Paul”, “The Perjury”. Now let us return to the discovery or better say the attribution of the anonymous photographs to Idromeno. The sheer similitude of one the photographs with the personages of the painting “The Perjury” leave little to no doubt about their authorship. We see here once again a clear example of using photography as a preparatory stage for a painting. But we dare say at the same time, that the author would have never dreamed that these preparatory photographs would be celebrated about a century latter as a great discovery. The importance of this discovery is enormous. Such pathetic gestures are rare if not completely absent in early Albanian photography. Different man engaged in heat action are “stoned” to eternity by the photographer. Moments of staged seem-to-be tortures are permanently fixed in what becomes a pure artistic photography other than just a preparatory work for a painting. Distorted faces and bodies that we are used to see in a contemporary art show, come from Idromeno’s lens rather a century ago. They show once again that ceaseless relationship between painting and photography, between painter and photographer, which in the personality of Idromeno blend to create an amalgam of an overlapping artist.

## Conclusions

Kol Idromeno is one of the earliest and most important Albanian photographers. His heritage of about 1500 glass negatives constitutes an important part of early Albanian photographic heritage. His photographic activity captured almost all imaginable genres: fine art photography, portraiture, historic, ethnography, events, landscape, architecture and urban photography, documentary etc. etc.

Portraiture represent the bulk of his work. These portraits represent an important expose of Albanian society between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His excellence in capturing psychology of his subjects, was no less admirable than his painting works. Composition, costumes, light and shadows and many others, are all relevant elements in his studio portraits.

---

<sup>34</sup> From the leaflet of the exhibition.

Being a painter, Idromeno was concerned in artistic and formal values. His fine art photographs are to be found among all the genres that he treated. Especially his Pictorialist tendencies are noteworthy. Although to be found in a few negatives they represent that insolvable relationship between painter and photographer.

Idromeno's photography is a primary source to any anthropological and ethnographic study. His numerous photographs shot in the bazaars, streets, villages, christenings, mournings etc. represent an invaluable visual evidence of the Albanian life in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. An orientalist stance can be observed in some of the photographs. Especially his postcards carry on this European trend. Many portraits in national costumes and scenes from the bazaars, are to be noted as akin to such trend.

Historic photography is represented by a considerable number of negatives. These plates show different armies that campaigned in Albania during the Balkan wars and First World War. A few photographs of documents are also of interest as primary sources.

## References

1. Barthes, Roland "Camera lucida Reflections on photography" Hill and Wang, New York 1981
2. Caffin, Charles H. "Camera Work" no. 1, New York 1903
3. Denelli, Gjergj "Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos" Third International Seminar "Shkodra në shekuj" volume III
4. Hudhri, Ferid "Arti i Rilindjes Shqiptare" Tiranë 2000
5. Onuzi, Aferdita "Kultura Popullore" No. 1-2 2010 Tirana
6. Prenushi, Mikel "Kolë Idromeno" Tiranë 1984
7. Paci, Zef "Marubi, Photography as ritual" Princi, Tiranë 2012
8. Robinson, H. P. "Pictorial effect in photography" Edward L. Wilson, Philadelphia 1881
9. Said, Edward W. "Orientalism" Vintage Books New York 1979
10. Stieglitz, Alfred "Pictorial photography" "Classic essays on photography" Leete's Island Books New Haven 1980
11. <http://www.alinariarchives.it/it/>

## Archival data

QSA archives

Marubi Museum archives

**Please NOTE:** Copyright of photographs belongs exclusively to the "Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike" QSA (Center for Albanological Studies) in Tirana. EXCEPT for publishing in this article, any other use or reproduction by any means of these photographs is illegal. Reproduction of these photographs can be obtained only with the written permission of QSA.

The poster copyright belongs to Marubi National Museum of Photography in Shkodra.









2397

5/163







