

ALBANIAN ICONS, A CULTURAL HERITAGE ALWAYS IN THE “TARGET”



Art History

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Abstract

The oldest artistic heritage works of the medieval period, inherited up to nowadays, though in a very small number, consist mainly of miniatures of early manuscripts. Not only the content, but also their intentions and impacts, were religious. The oldest that arrived and is preserved to this day, staying on the top of the Albanian culture heritage is a truly rare object, belonging to the 6th century; i.e. nearly 1,500 years old. In the language of professionals, it is known as “Codex Purpureus Beratinus.” It is written in parchment and has a religious content. The parchment replaced the papyrus at this time and was prepared with animal skin. “The Purple Codex of Berat” is handwritten in Greek, and contains parts from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Because of the color in which it is written, the codex is named; “Purple”.

Introduction

Its existence, as well as of the other Codices in Albania, became world-renowned in 1868, following a Greek-language publication by the bishop of Berat A. Aleksudes. After 18 years, the French scholar P. Battifol (1886) complained that the Berat monks didn’t allow him to go through the archives of the Orthodox Church library more than 16 of them. It was this scholar who also named the Codices, names by which they are still called by scholars of that field today: “The Purple Codex of Berat” (Beratinus 1); “The Golden Codex of Anthimus” (Beratinus 2) as well as “John’s Liturgical Code.” The first two survived and today are part of the most important Cultural Heritage Register, in that of “Memoire du Monde” as the unique values of humanity, protected by UNESCO. While the third, no longer exists, occupying the list of major and important losses not only of the Albanian, but also of the world heritage.

Albania owns a collection of over 100 volumes (complete works and 17 fragments) stored in the Central State Archive, in what is known as “The 888 Fund”. It is one of the most important assets of the history of Albanian heritage and an important contribution to the treasury of the world culture. We have a unique witness to the development history of the old biblical and liturgical literature. The Albanian Codices Collection that begins with the Purple Codex in the 6th century follows chronologically one after the other with all the Codices “created” throughout the following 13 centuries, up to the 18th century. However, the collection is very reduced, in relation to the creativity of those 1300 years. In addition to historical and documentary values, manuscripts are treasures in terms of artistic values. They are written with a rare calligraphy and their decoration is made with figurines and initials painted with much taste and art, which makes them separate objects of studies on.

During the Middle Age, due to the proliferation of Byzantine churches and cultures, the art of miniatures and icons flourished. The miniatures originally started to develop in the 9th and 10th centuries, presented in a decorative style, but realized with subtlety and style. According to the

best experts of the field, the greatest miniature development of medieval manuscripts came from somewhere between the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 12th century. For this reason they offer the example of Vlora's "too luxurious" codes in which the old antique tradition with the "new" Byzantine art style are perfectly harmonized. In January 2017, the General Directorate of State Archives announced the discovery of a manuscript, known as the Dossier 14 of the Codices Fund. It was a "Palimpsest", a recycled parchment of 8 sheets. We have another parchment, written firstly in the 10th century and latter, through prior purification, was reused for writing something new on it, in the 13th century. A manuscript believed to have been written in the Otranto area of Italy, but part of the library fund of Berat Metropolis, on which are written speeches from the church leaders and histories from the saints' lives.

Along with the development, enrichment and refinement of miniature art, in the Albanian life and the art of icons was being perfected. An icon of the 10th century was found in Berat's Fund until 1990, which shows that our heritage has been rich in this period, from which sadly no more evidence has arrived today, as was the case also of the Codices collection. However, along with the icon and the miniature that was reaching the highest levels, in the 12th century we have the development of another genre of figurative arts: the monumental painting.

The evidence and facts provided are Rubik's monumental and St. Mary's monumental in Leskovik. Interesting is also a fresco discovered on the cave of Sinj between Berat and Ballsh, the second layer of the painting of which, according to specialists, determines that it belongs to the year 1292.¹⁶

Along with Berat, icons of this period, preserved to this day are also found in Korça's fund. The icons were originally worked on different materials, while in this period we have the consolidation of the spread art of icons painted on wood. In the three centuries before the invasion of the Ottoman Empire, the art of the icons was extensively developed. From this period, until the 1980s, in the 20th century, Albania kept in its national fund 30 icons, of which, most belonged to the 14th century. It should be remembered that at this time, every form of cultivated art was reflected only through the figurative themes, and transmitting religious message. The artistic level had the freedom of expression, through perfection of the form of this message, but not perfecting its content.

There is a very harmonious relationship between the dynamics of the whole socio-economic development, of the population in the Albanian lands, with the ups and downs of enrichment or impoverishment, of the treasury of the cultural heritage. The higher the financial level and the political power of the Albanian feudal and the local population, the more the quality and the artistic level of the heritage objects of their culture increased. Based on this report, the decades of the 12th century show they were prosperous years for the Albanian lands. The icons of this period, for example, had a high artistic level, on the compositional side and the entirety of the materials and forms of their realization. In the 13th century there was a decline in artistic level,

¹⁶ Popa, Th., "The Medieval icons and miniatures in Albania." Sh. B. "November 8," pg. 4-6.

finesse and variety of miniatures, icons and manuscripts. Indicator of the decline of economic growth rates in the country. A similar situation, according to scholars, was presented in this period also in other neighboring areas in the Balkans.

The situation begins and changes positively again, in the second half of the 13th century and especially throughout the 14th century, thanks to a boom in the development of the two most important urban and economic centers of this basin: Thessaloniki and Constantinople. This fact, according to Th. Popa (1974) also had a profound influence on the Albanian cultural monuments of the time, on monumental painting, on the hagiographic icon literature but not on miniature. In this period, the level of economic development increased again, which is also reflected in the fact that the Albanian feudal gave increasing importance to the new constructions, decorated with elements of works of art. It is logical but also interesting how the economic recovery brought ever more pompous constructions of the churches, which were not only larger and higher by the magnificent structure and architecture, but also filled and adorned with all kinds of paintings.

In the 12th century we have a new stage, an important development in the form of social organization created in Albania and Epirus during Middle Age. Albanian nobility created what is known in history as the Principality of Arbanon (1190-1255), which strengthened and assumed full form in the 14th and 15th centuries, which coincides with the weakening and then the fall of the Serbian Empire (1371 - 1402). It was the time when the Balkans was facing an evil part of history. The development that started in all economic and social areas, as well as in the art of culture because of the “lasting” periods in recent centuries would be violently interrupted. After a millennium, the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the rise of a new empire would bring, quite another era in the Albanian life. The consequences of which were so great that its effects are still felt in some respects even today, and apparently will continue in the future as well.

The Balkan Peninsula suffered more during the Ottoman invasion and it is no coincidence that today, it is the least developed part of the entire European continent. Prior to Ottoman invasion in these territories, the Balkans competed with dignity and almost was in sync with the main developments in the rest of Europe. It is enough to recall that the Balkan of the 12th century strongly competed with the other countries in the continent. What happened then? Only in the period between 1350 and 1450, i.e. within 100 years, in our peninsula, from Adrianople to Istanbul, many cultural heritage sites and architectural monuments have been destroyed, over a thousand years in across the continent. It can be said that the whole Balkan Peninsula was completely plucked. To prove this, it's enough to look at the famous Athens today. There is nothing left. To this day it has almost no heritage. There is nothing but the part that Greeks are able to value and re-evaluate indefinitely, which is the Acropolis. Even what remained after this, was reduced during the centuries of Ottoman conquest and following. This is also the reason why thousands of years-old-towns were reduced to the size of villages.¹⁷

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¹⁷ From conversations with Artan Shkreli, June 2018, manuscript, personal archive AP, Tirana.

Despite this permanent invasion strategy, the Ottoman Empire made an effort to show its another side. Being one of the military and economic powers of the time, on one hand persuaded local nobility and the population through increasing trade and new opportunities for military, local and central administration career. While it continued with the construction of mosques, castles, madrasas, hammams, roads, bridges and other investments in the public infrastructure, which slowly led to the revival of the market. In parallel with this, the process of Islamization had begun through the religious conversion of the population. For Albanians was a double knife: On one hand, it encouraged the detachment of many influences from Greek and Slavic languages that were the languages of the liturgy in Byzantine churches. Its succession for centuries has slowly led to the Slavization and the Hellenization of a part of the population. While the conversion and Islamization were driven mostly by forced and restrictive measures, it was embraced by the pragmatism, to survive under the new conditions.

The rise and revival of the country's socio-economic life influenced the development of cultural and artistic traditions. In this period we have the stage appearance of a group of painters who brought a new standard in Albanian art, especially in wall paintings and iconography. This art had been forcibly interrupted for almost a century, sometime in the middle of the 15th century. While in the 16th century there is a qualitatively different revival of this tradition, with a large number of quality works. Unlike the Byzantine period, the manuscript miniature art was interrupted due to the spread of publications through printing. Gutenberg, from the initial idea of the 1440s to melt the letters one by one, forming words, then rows and pages with them; in 1455 he managed to publish the full Bible. This revolution led to the replacement of manuscripts, with printed books. The effects of this revolutionary development in this area would be noticed in the 16th- 17th century even in Albania, until a little later, Voskopoja would become one of the most important centers of the Ottoman Empire in this area.

In the Albania of the 16th century, Onufri by Neokastra (Elbasan), was the first to be distinguished in the mural painting and the art of the icons, He is considered to be the most important painter of the history of Albanian iconography. About his life, work and activity, unfortunately, there is not much data. It was Viktori Puzanova (1893-1967), a Belarusian scholar who “discovered” the great Albanian iconographer. In her unfortunate circumstances, but fortunate for us, she would remain in Albania, after the Russian communist revolutions, October 1917, and would, among other things, examine the Onufri study. Author of the book “On Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Albanian Art,” Puzanova sheds light on the subject, in one of the most fascinating periods of Albanian painting history. In a statement about Onufri, she values the Portrait of King David in the fresco of the Valësh church and compares it with “Father Eterno” by the great Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564).

It appears that in 1527, Onufri may have painted a church in Macedonia. There is a gap of two decades in the evidence of his creative activity, and it turns out that in 1547 he painted in Berat and that year in Kostur. In 1554 he left excellent works in the churches of Valësh and in 1555 in Shelcan, an area in Elbasan. In the Eve of 2012-2013, one of the most serious crimes

towards Onufri's unrepeatable inheritance was recorded: the destruction of the fresco in the St. Premte's Church in Valësh with an adze, which is considered a cultural, conscious crime, with the purpose to undo this work of our heritage, in the wake of a series of such destructions not committed for financial benefits. Elbasan's Slope residents had an interesting approach to the phenomenon of Islamization. To save the conversion, they were converted into crypto-Christians. Keeping two names and practicing simultaneously, both religions. There were also cases in the same family, where half were Muslims and Christians. In Onufri's paintings in the churches of this area are these two inscriptions: "When you will raise your hand towards God, o pastor of God, mention me as well; the sinner and the ignorant painter -Onufr". While in the other painting, these words are added: "... mention me, the sinner Onufr, a priest, painter and potopap of Neokastra."

In addition to Onufri, the group of painters who made their name in the art of wall painting and overseas art of the 16th century, were Nikolla, Onufri's son, and Joan- his associate. Another group of artists of this field remained anonymous, but with their work they have "beautified" many churches and cult buildings throughout the Albanian territories in the Balkans. In Onufri and his son Nikolla, it is noted the creation of "bouquets" or "clusters" of small icons, moved within an iconostasis, which began to multiply progressively and spread in churches by other painters. From Onufri, were inherited the iconostasis of Vangjelistrè and Shën Mitri churches, and from Nikola were the small icons of the iconostasis of the Vlahern church, all within Berat's Castle. In addition to the elements of the tradition and the best of Byzantine art, he brought a new post-Byzantine spirit, creating the profile of an original artist, based on his creative individuality and the influences of the European Renaissance art. Onufri's influence due to his talent was so great, that his work "influenced" the art of iconography, creating the "new school" of Albanian painting.

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When the strategy of the destruction of religious institutions was implemented during the communist regime, besides the negative side it evidenced two positive elements: First, the state itself generally preserved the movable assets and those most important of the real estate assets, and secondly, religious people risking punishment, hid and preserved crosses, religious books, icons, and other valuable items. This terrible experience raised the hope that while in freedom, such scenes would not be repeated again. Time proved that after 1990 these assets threatened by the atheist state before were now at risk and in some cases perhaps more, by citizens in complete freedom of belief. Iconostasis, crosses, epitaphs, old religious books, and nearly every other artifact that can be sold and bought on the black market or searched by art-cultural traffickers are targeted by them. According to Gj. Frasherri before the communist system collapsed, there were over 12,000 icons inventoried by the Institute of Cultural Monuments in Albania. By 1989 there were 55 iconostases officially stored, of which, 40 went missing. This phenomenon began with the robbery of St. Peter and Paul's Church iconostasis in Vithkuq, Korça, in 1991 and 1992 and now, according to him, turned into "the symptom of an anti-national activity." In the Missing Objects Catalog 1990-2016, Heritage Institutions declared as stolen: 79 icons, 1 epitaph, 1 iconostasis and 5 crosses. Of which: 17 icons are stolen from the Iconostasis of St. Thanas Church; 19 icons from

the Labova Cross Church authored by Johan Athanas; 11 icons from the Regional Directorate of National Culture in Berat; 25 icons stolen from the Ethnographic Museum of Elbasan; an iconostasis piece in Pogradec; Three icons and one epitaph stolen at the Museum of Peshkopia; 5 silver crosses stolen at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology in Tirana and 4 icons missing from the inventory of the Historic Museum of Lushnja.

On February 3, 1994, at the National Historical Museum in Tirana, it was found that one of the most important objects of our cultural history, Gllavenica's Epitaf, was no longer in the place of exhibition. Prior to this, few people recall that along with it, four icons of Onufri of Selenica, Enver Hoxha's revolver and Andon Zako Cajupi's quill pen and ink were stolen. Gllavenica's epitaph worked on a hemp fabric has the dead Christ's figure surrounded by angel figures. Embroidered with silk, gold and silver, it has been preserved for 650 years. With a size of 250cmX117cm, it is written: "This divine and all-honored aeras (epitaph) of the saintly divinity was made possible through the expenses and efforts of the Merciful Bishop, the Calist of Gllavenica and Berat, in March 22, year 6881 (i.e. in 1373). You, who own the life, how can you win dead and breathless. During the reign of Gjergj and Balsha brothers in Serbia, Romania and Albania (Albans). Gjergj Araniti and the gold worker's hand". The inscription is embroidered with gold and silver, in two parallel columns near the head and legs of the image of Jesus Christ.

"Gllavenica's Epitaph" robbery has been described as the theft of the century in Albania. Initially, the director of the National History Museum at that time, M. Islami, was arrested, along with two employees, an electrician, a private guard and the head guard. After two years, when the hopes of finding it were faded, the miracle happens. A girl, newly separated from her lover, decides to revenge. She confessed to the police an incredible story: On February 2, 1994, the person who robbed the museum was introduced as a visitor and was locked in the bathroom until the official visits were over and the employees left. During the night he went to the iconography pavilion and took the 4 most prominent icons, and put in his pocket quill pen and ink. He looked for something to wrap up the icons, and he saw the Epitaph, who seemed fit for that job. The cops rushed to Alexander Sota's apartment. He said to have bought the icons from a stranger, but had nothing to do with the epitaph. He returned after two days and on October 7, 1996, and Gllavenica's Epitaph was found inside his grandmother's bag. On October 16, the Epitaph returns undamaged to the empty closet the National History Museum.

Fortunately, despite the systematic losses, thefts, robberies, destructions, damages and the trafficking, the national collection is rich. It consists of 3 funds: The largest is that of Korca with about 7000 stone, wood, metal and textile works created from the Early Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century, all parts of the National Museum of the Medieval Art, inaugurated on April 24, 1980. After a reconstruction, the Museum reopened in 2017 where 400 icons were exhibited, of which 250 were released for the first time. Tirana's Fund has in its total a number of 778 icons, of which 65 from the 14th century, exhibited at the National History Museum's Iconography Pavilion. Berat's Fund has a number of 350 icons in its composition. In addition to these three funds, totaling in 8,128 icons, part of this treasure are also the two Codices of Berat,

which are part of “World Memory,” from March 2016, as the unique values of humanity, protected by UNESCO.

As quoted by St. Vasil, “what the word transmits through speech, the picture transmits through the image.” This valuable national heritage has great value, which seems to be highly appreciated and demanded in the black market and the art works mafia. Relatively small dimensions of icons and other valuable religious objects make them easily maneuverable targets for being stolen, hidden, camouflaged, transported, and trafficked. This accompanied by the high price that the buyer must pay for the originals, it is better understood why the icons were set, after 1990, at the target of cultural heritage robbers. Media headlines from time to time have been full of news about church robberies and thefts of their valuable objects. But the news of October 9, 2013 initially notified by the State Police and then by all the Albanian and world media, was different from the previous ones. The operation codenamed “The Icon” had just been finalized. BBC and the Associates Press (AP) cited Prime Minister’s, Edi Rama, statement calling it “one of the largest art anti-trafficking operations. We must preserve even the few that we have. If we lose this heritage, then the history will eradicate it.”

Three years later, on September 29, 2016, on the National Cultural Heritage Day, the “Saved Treasures” exhibition was opened at the National History Museum, the expert committee that dealt with the final report, registration, cataloging and cartelization of 476 objects captured in total, selected 62 of them to be viewed by the visitors. Of which: 27 icons, 14 iconostasis pieces and 4 iconostasis crosses. For 47 items, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania demanded repatriation, as it was proven that they were stolen in various churches in the country. The National Inventory Center said that in this collection went missing 78 objects, previously equipped with a regular ID (object ID) but had been alienated or sold. Parallel Investigations were conducted in Macedonia, where some collection objects are believed to have arrived from. An Onufri icon of the 16th century was classified as “heritage of special values.” The court filed charges against Gjergj Thimio and Arben Spahiu and dismissed that of trafficking, for the stolen artifacts. The news impact at first was huge, but later it was discovered that Thimio was licensed by the Ministry of Culture. He was registered in the court and as a small business in the Municipality of Korça. The former minister of culture, former directors of this ministry and former directors of the National Center of Cultural Assets Inventory had given recommendations about his activity. For the works found in the apartment, Thimio said he rescued them from 1997 trafficking. Tirana’s Court sentenced M. R with 18 months on parole, an employee of the National Inventory Center, because she certified 3 icons, outside the legal procedure. The irony was that Thimio had opened with them some exhibitions in Korça, Tirana or elsewhere, with the participation of authorities as well. What shows how porous is the boundary between legitimacy and lawlessness in this area. This case is a cause for the heritage and law enforcement agencies to prevent abuses, violations and different forms of trafficking in the future.

The theft of 27 icons in Bularat’s church in Gjirokastra, the robbery of Labova Cross Church in Libohova, containing a sacred relic that was believed to be part of the real cross of

Christ and the violation of the Churches of Voskopja, Berat, Korça, Elbasan , Kavaja, Lushnja, Fier, etc are worrying. The peak reached with the flagrant violation of Onufri's wall paintings of 1554, in Valeshi's church in Elbasan's slope. People, still unknown to the justice, consciously destroyed with an adze the main part of a unique mural painting, which is defined as "the most significant for the 15th and 16th century Albanian art history." According to field experts, this act is not carried out to steal or rob and profit materially. According to Prof. K. Frasheri we have to do "with a political decadence, economic misery and blindness of civic education, which is an alarm for the disappearance of national identity."

References

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From conversations with Artan Shkreli, June 2018, manuscript, personal archive AP, Tirana.