

Some Beginnings of the Presence of the Nude (Artistic Nude) in Albanian Secular Art

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the earliest instances of the presence of the nude (artistic nude) in Albanian secular art. Initially partial and reserved, the representation of the nude becomes evident with the medium of photography at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Later, the nude appears as part of comprehensive and in-depth academic studies undertaken by the first Albanian students who attended European art academies during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Another important historical moment includes the treatment of the nude by Albanian painters in their post-academic free art creations, as well as the first Albanian model who posed nude for an artist. Furthermore, the paper aims to answer questions such as when the nude first appeared as part of public art exhibition in Albania and when works featuring the nude were first exhibited to a wider audience.

Given the purpose of this study (to present several beginnings), the research approach follows and elaborates on these early events and dimensions chronologically, bearing witness to the growing presence of Western cultural influence in Albanian urban society, from the late 19th century up to the mid-1940s.

Keywords: Medium of Photography, Academic Study, Free Art Creation, Public Exhibition.

Introduction

The history of the treatment of the nude in Albanian art can be said to begin with secular art of the late 19th century. This statement, however, should not contradict the well-known fact that depictions of the naked or partially covered human figures have been present in the art of ancient cultures produced in the territories of the Balkans inhabited by Illyrian populations.

In this ancient context, we know today of artifacts such as statuettes, figurines, vases, and statues representing the nude male or female body, dating back to:

- the late Neolithic period, copper age (4000–3000 BCE)
- the era of Hellenic colonies in southern Illyria (4th–2nd centuries BCE)
- the late Greek and subsequent Roman periods (1st–2nd centuries CE)

During the Byzantine period, artistic production was strictly canonized, dedicated entirely, both in iconography and iconology to Christian themes. This position rigorously prohibited rep-

resentations of the human body in its physical, sensual form. Only partially nude depictions of the male body were allowed, most commonly of Christ or certain saints. However, these representations were conceived as metaphysical symbols, depicting the body as a nominal bearer of the soul, rather than the phenomenal body, i.e., the physical, biological, sensual body.

In Albanian iconographic tradition, we encounter partial depictions of Christ's body, such as in the "Epitaph of Glavenica" (14th century), as well as in works by Onufri (16th century), David Selenica (17th century), and Kostandin Shpataj (18th century), etc.

Development

The First Partial Nudes

In the second half of the 19th century, Albania (still under the waning Ottoman administration) received a "gift" from Western Europe: the medium of photography. Introduced by Italian

photographer Pietro Marubbi and further developed by his successors Kel and Gegë Marubi, photography became an increasingly modernized technique and genre. It enabled the mimetic capture of multifaceted Albanian reality, starting with the first photographs dating to 1865.

Among the thousands of negatives produced by this century-long dynasty of photographers, a few rare examples depict partially exposed female figures. Two of these, created by Pjetër Marubi before 1900 (figs. 1, 2). Another later photograph by Kel Marubi at the beginning of the 20th century, is notable examples (fig. 3).

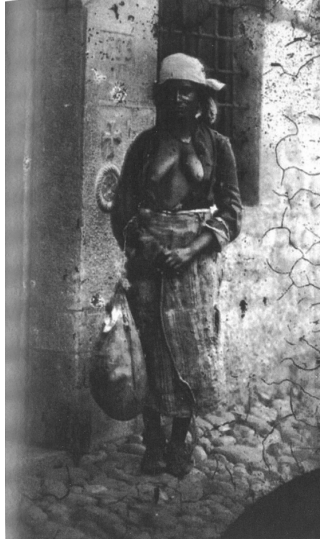


Fig. 1. Pietro Marubbi, Çingije, end of the century XIX.



Fig. 2. Pietro Marubbi, Beggar arriving in Shkodra, late 19th century.



Fig. 3. Kel Marubi, Woman with thick coat, early 20th century.

The presence of the partially nude body also appears in the works of Kolë Idromeno, a multifaceted figure in Albanian art at the turn of last century 19th and the beginning of the 20th. In his process as a painter, Idromeno often referred to photography. Several photographs staged in his studio, used as studies for his paintings, such as “The false testimony” and “Irregular Marriage” of years 1892–1894, or the large composition “The two

roads” of the 1896, Idromeno felt the need to make several trials for specific scenes of these compositions, by staging these situations in advance in his studio and photographing them. Among this typology of photographs are several examples depicting half-nude male figures, dramatically enacting the roles assigned by the artist (figs. 4, 5, 6).

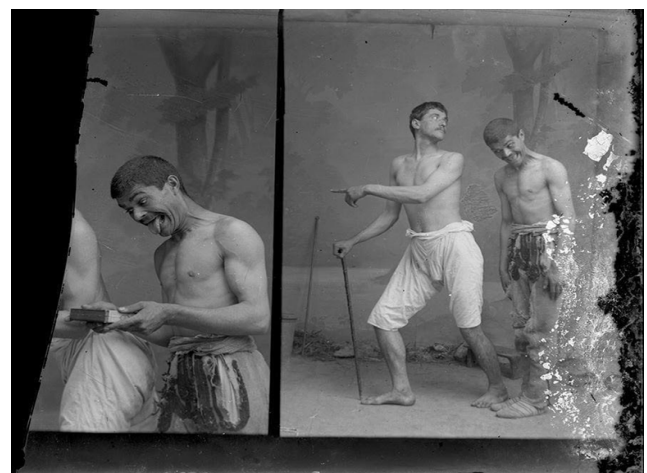


Fig. 4, 5. Kolë Idromeno, studio scenes, years 1892-1894, part of the work process for the compositional oil paintings *The false testimony* 1894 and *The two roads* 1896.



Fig. 6. Kolë Idromeno, *Swearing a lie*, oil color, year 1892-1894.

According to Eleni Laperi's study "Kolë Idromeno, Founder of Albanian Realist Art", concludes, among other points, that based on the preliminary drawing Idromeno created for the painting *The Inappropriate Agreement* (also known as "The Irregular

Marriage") (fig. 7), as well as the presence of numerous partially nude figures populating the composition of *The Two Roads*, it can be stated that he was the first Albanian realist painter to address the nude figure in his creative work [1].



Fig. 7. Kolë Idromeno, preliminary drawing for the painting *The Unsuitable Agreement* (or otherwise "The Irregular Marriage") 1892-1894.

Other scholars in the field suggest that other artists of this period, the late 19th and early 20th centuries, may also have drawn and painted nudes; however, it is conceivable that these works have not survived to the present day or remain undiscovered [2].

The First Complete Nudes – Academic Assignments in Western Art Academies Much later than its Balkan neighbors, Albania broke away from Ottoman Eastern administration and gained its independence in 1912. An event that marks the beginning of modern Albanian history.

During the years of Independence, an important turning point also occurred in Albanian culture. After centuries under eastern control and influence, painting in these years developed under

the impact of cultivated western art... The first realist paintings, those that form the foundation of Albania's visual arts tradition, were created precisely under the radiating influence of the progressive European culture of the time [3].

From the broader perspective of national civic, social, and cultural modernization, increasing importance was given during this period to the formation of a new Albanian intellectual elite educated in a Western European cultural milieu. Thus, from the 1910s through the early 1940s, a number of young Albanians, initially supported privately and later also with state assistance, had the good fortune to study in European, primarily Western, art academies. With their centuries-old academic traditions, these institutions offered well-structured programs of compre-

hensive artistic training. Among their core components was the study of the human figure in general and, in particular, the nude addressed through a wide range of classical and modern concepts and techniques. The school works of Albanian students who trained in these foreign academies clearly reflect these positions and distinctions, mainly formal and stylistic, in the artistic treatment of the human figure, clothed as well as nude.

One of the earliest Albanians to undertake formal art studies in Europe was Simon Rrota, who attended the Brera Art Lyceum in Milan from 1910 to 1914. From this secondary-level art school in Milan (which Rrota himself, in his diary, refers to as an Academy), there survive, among other works, three drawings (figs. 8, 9, 10) treating the male and female nude, now recognized as a fully legitimate artistic genre [4].

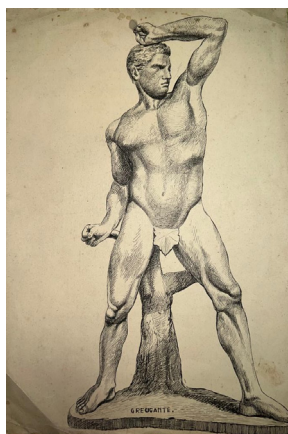


Fig. 8. Simon Rrota, study for a Classical sculpture, pen drawing, made during art studies in Milan, 1910-1914.



Fig. 9. Simon Rrota, sketch for a Female model, pencil drawing, made during art studies in Milan, 1910-1914.

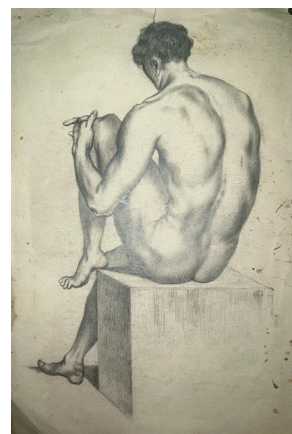


Fig. 10. Simon Rrota, study: Male Nude with Back Turned, pencil drawing, school assignment completed during art studies in Milan, 1910-1914.

In the same year that the young Rrota returned home after his studies, another young Albanian, Vangjush Mio, began his own formative artistic journey, this time at the academic level.

Mio enrolled in the National School of Fine Arts in Bucharest,

which he attended for five years, from 1914 to 1919. The Mio family archive preserves numerous student works from this Romanian academic period, including a drawing of a standing female nude seen from the back [5] (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Vangjush Mio, Female nude with back, sketch made at the Bucharest Academy during the years 1914-1919.

After his initial Romanian training, Mio continued his artistic formation in Italy. From 1920 to 1924 he attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and the Free School of the Nude. The School of the Nude functioned within the academy and existed specifically to train students in the study and refinement of the nude body.

Critics regard Vangjush Mio as the most important Albanian realist impressionist landscape painter of the first half of the 20th century; he is also recognized as one of the first Albanian artists to produce nude drawings and paintings from live (foreign) models as part of the academic process in the schools where he studied abroad (fig. 12).

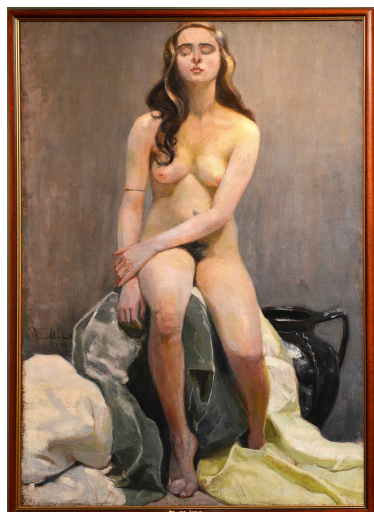


Fig. 12. Vangjush Mio, Female nude, oil painting, school assignment at the Academy of Rome, 1923.

All of Mio's nudes were produced during his student years, especially at the Roman academy, ...where the spirit of the time increasingly leaned toward expressive freedom.... and open inquiry; working from the live model in drawing and painting created a bridge between classical tradition and modern sensibility by placing direct observation and the study of reality at the foundation of art [6].

Mio's nude studies reflect precisely these programmatic and pedagogical approaches. As art historian Gëzim Qëndro ob-

serves ...they aimed to form future painters through well-established classical principles: realistic drawing, convincing rendering of three-dimensional form, volumetric modeling across the pictorial surface, fundamental elements of composition, and disciplined training in faithful reproduction of the model before the student, ect.

At the completion of his studies, Mio defended his diploma in 1924 with a painting whose subject is a female nude [7] (fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Vangjush Mio, Female nude, oil painting, Diploma work at the Academy of Rome, 1924.

The pictorial treatment of both figure and background is restrained in tonal range and coloration. In terms of figure-ground relationship, the artist adopts a traditional logic: the figure, bathed in a soft, warm light, stands out graphically against the dark background in which it is set.

Seventeen years later, in 1941, Kristina Koljaka, the first Albanian woman sculptor, who also studied at the Rome academy, defended her diploma with a female nude (fig. 14). By then, however, the atmosphere had shifted, the academy appears to

have absorbed the political-aesthetic influence of Fascist ideology regarding the representation of the "new man" in art. Emphasizing the importance accorded to nude studies there, she recalls: The nude was a major and essential assignment. ... The human body, when male, had to present a strong, proud, far seeing psycho physical presence, fully muscled and powerful; when female, it was expected to embody a romantic, lyrical, idealized femininity. To achieve this, students trained every day ... and any possibility of treating the figure under modernist interpretive tendencies was excluded.



Fig. 14. Kristina Koljaka, Female Nude, Diploma thesis at the Academy of Rome, 1941.

Although most of the student works created abroad by Albanian artists are removed from the more current aesthetic, philosophical, and moral concerns of European modernist practices of the time, they remain an important part of Albanian art history and constitute a valuable legacy. They mark the beginning of the cultivation of the realist nude genre by secular Albanian artists. They also stand as living testimony to their academic formation in Western countries, where they learned to live and create under the influence and intersection of diverse cultures.

The First Public Exhibition of Nude Works

Returning home after their studies confronted these young Albanian artists with stark contrasts. They came from Western Europe with cultural, artistic, and social experiences shaped at the heights of modernity. They returned full of dreams and passions, with a fresh and liberated outlook on the world, society, and morality, only to find their homeland a socially and culturally closed environment, still in its embryonic stages of emancipation. Upon their return, these newly graduated students brought with them some of their academic works. Among these collections were works featuring the nude, which they carefully hid and safeguarded in their homes. In some cases, however, such works, entrusted even to close acquaintances for safekeeping, were destroyed as a result of the prevailing backward mentality of the young man Abdurrahim, while returning to his homeland in the summer of 1933 after studying in Florence, he entrusted some school works, including several nudes, to the family of a friend in Gjakova for safekeeping for just a few days.

As his son recounts regarding this painful episode:

"My father could never have imagined that the nudes he had entrusted to his friend would be burned like garbage... set ablaze inside a home belonging to people who were warm and hospitable toward the artist himself, yet fearful and hostile toward his nude works. There was nothing personal in it, it was simply the mentality of the time [8]."

This unfortunate incident can be considered the first iconoclastic act against the artistic nude in Albania.

Despite their extensive knowledge and skills acquired in classical-realist academies, due to the mindset of the time, their creative experiences in Albania related to the representation of the nude body in art materialized only fragmentarily. As art historian Ermir Hoxha points out [9] ...the history of the Albanian nude enters the 20th century hesitantly, always as a result of inherited moral codes, minimal educational levels, limited contact with the Western world, and all those other elements of backwardness that Albanian society endured up to the threshold of this new century."

After their studies, these artists devoted themselves seriously to artistic activity, continuing to explore a variety of themes and exhibiting their works in solo and group shows, both local and national. However, they generally did not present works featuring the nude to the broader public. Albanian society of that era did not accept the representation of the naked body in art; such depictions were considered "shameful," even "immoral."

Interpreting this fact, art scholar Gëzim Qëndro raises a provocative question:

Is it a coincidence that in the Albanian language the words trup ('body') and turp ('shame') are so similar? Without venturing into linguistic speculation - he continues - and lacking the proper scientific preparation to answer this question definitively (if such an answer exists), I would suffice by just saying that it suits the relationship that the Albanian patriarchal society had defined to the naked body.

This helps explain why, as far as is currently known, among all the exhibitions organized in Albania up to 1944, the nude appears on display only once. This was the June 1942 Exhibition, known as the "First National Biennial Competition for Painting, Sculpture, and Drawing."

The event received extensive coverage in the press of the time, in Rivista d'Albania, Vatra Shqiptare, Shkëndija, Tempo-Koha, and especially in the newspaper Tomorri, which published several articles about it [10, 11].

The magazine Tempo/Koha featured the exhibition with photographs—two of great importance, as they are the only images

found that visually document the display of three nude works [12] (fig. 15).



Fig. 15. View from the exhibition hall of the Two-year national competition for painting, sculpture and drawing, opened in the halls of the Tirana Industrial Vocational School, 1942. Illustrative photo of the article Exhibition of Albanian artists in Tirana, TEMPO/KOHA magazine, no. 22, July 1942.

One was a painting by the Albanian artist from Ulcinj, Filip Vučković. The other two were sculptures. One of these sculptures was realized by Janaq Paço, depicting a standing female figure frontally posed, with one arm raised as if holding or grasp-

ing an apple (fig. 16). While the other sculpture work belongs to the artist from Kruja, Sabri Tuçi. It is a female torso by Sabri Tuçi, brought from Rome, where the sculptor was then a student (fig. 17).

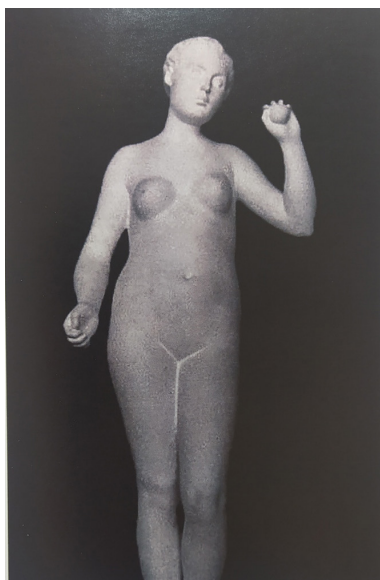


Fig. 16. Janaq Paço. Naked, work exhibited at the Two-year national competition for painting, sculpture and drawing, Tirana 1942.

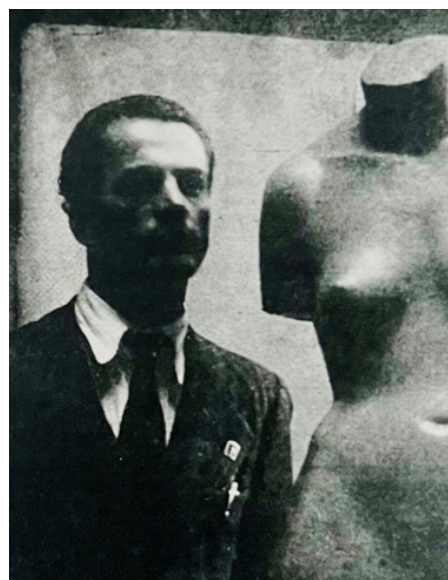


Fig. 17. Sabri Tuçi, Female torso, school assignment at the Academy of Rome, 1941. Work exhibited at the Two-year national competition for painting, sculpture and drawing, Tirana 1942.

This exhibition-competition, evidently of considerable importance, was accompanied by the publication of a catalog under the auspices of the Ministries of Education and Popular Culture. Noting this document, it makes us how they are titled works with a nude subject. The works by Vučković and Paço are titled *Lakuriq* ("Nude"), while Tuçi's piece is listed as *Studim torsoje* ("Torso Study") [13]. The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear, though it is interesting to note the attempt to translate the genre of the nude into Albanian as *lakuriq*.

Regarding the 1942 National Competition, the press coverage abounds with information, commentary, praise, suggestions, observations, and criticism. Yet the presence of works featuring the nude and the awarding of prizes to two of them, passed entirely without remark, as if perfectly ordinary. This leaves us in doubt

as to whether this was indeed the first (and perhaps the last) public presentation of works with nude subjects, or, conversely, whether such occurrences were relatively normal in exhibitions organized at that time?!

The First Nude Artwork Based on an Albanian Female Model
Leaving aside the debatable conclusion regarding the first public presentation of the nude in Albania in 1942, we now turn to another "first" concerning the Albanian nude. This time it relates to the first nude artwork created as part of an artist's post-academic free practice, using an Albanian woman as the model.

Based on facts revealed after the 1990s, the earliest known nude figure produced in Albania by an artist, with an Albanian female model, is considered to be *Meleke* by Abdurrahim Buza, created in 1935 (fig. 18).

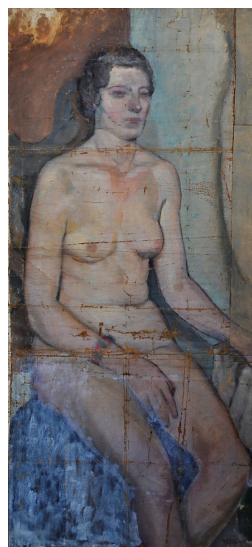


Fig. 18. Abdurrahim Buza, *Meleke*, the author's wife, oil paint, 1935.

Regarding this work and its history, Buza's son, Kujtim Buza, recounts (Buza, 2023):

At home, there was a nearly life-sized painting of a nude woman, which I later learned was the figure of my mother, Lekë (*Meleke*), painted by my father in 1935, only a short time after they were married... The painting had been carefully cut into four pieces that were stacked on top of each other...

In an intimate conversation, my father told me that the nude was the painter's wife (his wife), in other words, my mother... He was pleased when I told him that I would reassemble the four pieces and exhibit the nude painting in the studio.

Among the considerable number of Albanian artists who, after completing their studies, returned to Albania and developed their creative activity there during the period 1914–1944, this appears to be the only such case. This cannot be stated with absolute certainty, since even this work remained completely unknown for decades, hidden away in the family.

The Nude as a Work of Art in Public Space

The earliest documented introduction of an artwork of this ty-

pology featuring the nude within a public space in Albania can be traced to 1928. This instance refers to a monumental female figure carved in marble by the Italian sculptor Gianni Remuzzi, positioned, according to architect Vittorio Morpurgo's design, at the very apex of the frontal façade of the imposing National Commercial Bank building in Durrës [14].

Subsequent examples in which the nude figure appears in the realm of public art in Albania are likewise associated with the presence of Fascist Italy and were executed by Italian artists. Among these are:

- Several bas-reliefs created by the Roman sculptor Alfredo Biagini, integrated into the recessed façade of the Bank of Albania building in Tirana in 1938 (Giusti, 2006, p. 110).
 - A large-scale relief installed in 1940 on the main façade of the Maternity Hospital building in Tirana, authored by the renowned Italian sculptor Giuseppe Gronchi (Giusti, 2006).
- Similarly, the first publicly displayed nude created by an Albanian artist belongs to this same historical context of Italian influence in Albanian art and architecture. The work in question is a sculptural fountain situated in the gardens of the Royal Palace in Tirana. Its author, Odhise Paskali, conceived this complex com-

position with a dominant female nude figure, accompanied by two angels. The work, titled *Fertility*, was completed in 1940. The central figure demonstrates a high degree of technical mas-

tery, modeled in a stylistic synthesis characteristic of the period an italianate amalgam of realism, classicism, and deco [15- 19] (fig. 19).



Fig. 19. Odhise Paskali, *Fertility*, bronx, part of a water basin in the courtyard of the Tirana Royal Palace, 1940.

Conclusions

Although most of the works by Albanian artists who studied in Western art academies lack the aesthetic, philosophical, and moral imperatives characteristic of the latest European modernist approaches and practices of the time, they remain an important part of Albanian art history and represent a valuable legacy. They mark the beginning of the cultivation of the realist nude genre by secular Albanian authors. Furthermore, they constitute a reflection of their Western-oriented cultural emancipation, even though the academic experience in cultivating the artistic nude did not find suitable ground for further development upon their return to the homeland.

Other artists of the period under consideration (from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century) may also have addressed the subject of the nude; however, it is highly likely that such works have not survived to the present day or remain undiscovered. Consequently, the study of the nude in Albanian art remains an open and ongoing field of inquiry.

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