

SERBIAN MEDIEVAL ART IN KOSOVO AND METOHIJA

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THE LARGE province of Kosovo in the south of Serbia, rich in fertile plains and silver ore mingled with gold, is no less rich in cultural monuments, churches built in the Middle Ages by rulers and church dignitaries, noblemen, clergy and monks, and—as an old notice has it—by “the impoverished and the middling poor.”

Over time, Kosovo has encompassed several regions which were historically and geographically, though not administratively, distinct.¹ At the end of the war (1945), in a new subdivision of the country, an autonomous province within Serbia which covered the same surface area was given the official name *Kosovo and Metohija*,² which applied to two naturally distinct units, stretches of plains and the slopes of nearby mountains separated by low hills and saddles. A watershed divides the rivers which flow into the Black, Aegean and Adriatic seas. Its position has determined the significance of Kosovo in the center of the Balkan peninsula: at the intersection of major roads running from several directions, heading seaward. This was the “Zeta route”—the valley of the Drim River toward Scutari—the shortest connection, via Prizren, along which ran most of the traffic between the interior of the Balkans and the Adriatic Coast.

From a historical perspective, the heart of the Province’s territory is Kosovo Field. Because of the fateful events which occurred there this place became deeply embedded in the Serbian consciousness and was invested early with special significance. Notes taken by Bishop Martin Segonus in the second half of the 15th century have recently come to light. Travelling toward Skoplje, he wrote that the field was roughly 70 miles long and “renowned for battles between different nations.” He certainly must have had in mind the famous clash of the Serbian forces gathered around Prince Lazar and the Ottoman army under the command of Sultan Murad I himself—a battle in which both rulers lost their lives on 15 June 1389. The battle had far-reaching consequences for the future of the Balkan states, despite the fact that the first news to reach the West reported a great success for the Christian war-

riors. At a later date the field of Kosovo—as prelate Segonus coming from Novo Brdo knew only too well—was again a theatre of war. In the autumn of 1448, the Ottomans crushed Hungarian military leader John Hunyadi in command of an anti-Ottoman alliance, and several years later, in 1455, the Ottomans took possession of these lands for many years to come.

Kosovo had become integrated within the borders of the Serbian state as early as the end of the 12th century, during the reign of its founder Grand *župan* Stefan Nemanja. However, no monuments of art dating from the first decades of new rule have survived. Neither do remains of Byzantine structures reveal much about ecclesiastical centers from the previous age. A somewhat fuller picture is offered by archeological excavations of older fortresses that long defended these eastern frontiers of the Empire.

A considerable impetus to the spiritual and artistic life was provided by the foundation of the independent Serbian Archbishopric with its seat in the monastery of Žiča (1219). Its first head, St. Sava, Nemanja’s youngest son, established bishoprics whose network relied on the tradition of the Byzantine ecclesiastical administration with the centers in ancient Ulpiana and Prizren. In connection with this, artistic activity can be simultaneously followed from the twenties of the 13th century in the cathedrals which were built or restored, but also in the modest dwellings of monks.

In broad terms, the development of art in Kosovo depended on the position that this rich region held in the life of the country. It therefore saw its greatest rise in the period when rulers lived in its towns, and Serbian spiritual leaders held court in Peć, hitherto a remote estate of the Archbishopric. The very transfer of the spiritual throne from Žiča, after its demolition in an enemy attack, is with good reason brought into connection with the proximity of the king’s court, in which the head of the church was invested with a major role and duties.

In the entire art history of medieval Serbia, the sacred buildings of Kosovo, with their number and character represent the most significant part of the heritage from its age of prosperity in the second half of the 14th century. Broad prospects were opened to art at that time, with new ideas and styles arriving from Byzantium. They did not,

¹ “Not a single administrative district is known from the period of the medieval Serbian state and early Ottoman rule having ‘Kosovo’ in its name” (S. Ćirković, “Srednjovekovna prošlost današnjeg Kosova,” *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta* XV 1, Belgrade 1985, p. 152).

² Until the significant changes of the Constitution in 1968.

however, exclude the traditional presence of western artistic forms that reached the interior of the country from the other side of the coast via the towns on the Adriatic Coast.

Both the social position and financial resources of those who commissioned the building were directly manifested in its appearance. In size and ornamentation, opulence of material and aesthetic conceptions, rulers' endowments differed from the more modest churches built by archbishops using less opulent materials in their seat in Peć, the interior of which was adorned by frescos interpreting in a sublime manner the specific ideas and culture of monastic life. Even greater was the difference between edifices of the highest representatives of secular and spiritual authority and the endowments of lower feudal lords, in particular modest village churches or simple caves arranged for the prayers of anchorites.

Because the church held a special position within the Serbian state, the influences exerted by the cultures of the East and the West, with the Greek and the Latin and their respective religious and literary traditions, were felt more acutely in the life of the Kosovo region than they were elsewhere. Nevertheless, the spread of Byzantine literacy played a decisive role, and with it various genres of domestic theological literature, which evolved until the 10th century.

On the other hand, there were stylistically heterogeneous forms existing in parallel, intertwined in architecture and sculpture, occasionally producing startling symbioses. Coexisting for years in a mutual tolerance which might surprise the uninformed, artists, regardless of their own religious affiliation and artistic training, respected the character of the other existing denominations and fulfilled in a solicitous manner their cultural requirements to the last. A telling instance of religious breadth is the fact that King Stefan Dečanski (1322–1331), recollecting years spent in asylum in the monastery of Christ the Pantocrator in Constantinople, decided to devote a large mausoleum church in the monastery of Dečani to the same patron, but entrusted its construction to Franciscan Vito, a member of the Friars Minor of Cattaro.

These coordinates can be comprehended fully only with a broader insight into the economic and social life of medieval Serbia. Its economy was considerably boosted by the exploitation of mineral resources on the territory of Kopaonik and Novo Brdo in particular, dating to the early 14th century. Mining was introduced to Serbia by a group of Silesians who were assimilated over time, but retained technical terms for their work and kept the Catholic faith. This religion was also shared by numerous merchants and lessees from Dubrovnik, Cattaro and elsewhere, who had their colonies in mining settlements and marketplaces, and raised churches there. Rich coastal archives offer a wealth of data on the travels through Kosovo or permanent sojourns there by people from the coast-



al area, dubbed *Latins* by the people of Kosovo because of their religion. High office and assignments of significance at the Serbian royal court were entrusted to members of patrician families from the coastal region, primarily from Cattaro. Versed in all manner of jobs, these men were most frequently in charge of the royal purse. Their names are encountered in the West, whither, as they were acquainted with circumstances there, they travelled to



Ascension of Christ, Church of the Holy Apostles, dome, the Patriarchate of Peć, ca. 1260

conduct negotiations, often delicate and long, especially when the possibility of union was being discussed at the papal court.³ Initiatives of this kind came from both sides

³ The bond between the Serbian royal court and the people of Cattaro is perhaps best expressed by a famous episode from the time of King Uroš I, 1247, when a conflict broke out between the Archbishoprics of Bar and Dubrovnik. Refusing to recognize the jurisdiction of the Dubrovnik prelate over their territory, the citizens of Bar

and, most of them, interestingly, in the first half of the 14th century. The permanent association of the country with the tradition of Orthodoxy, however, at whose great

and their clergy drove away envoys from Dubrovnik (who, in their defense, had made mention of the Pope) with abuses and cries: "Quid est papa? Dominus rex Urosius est noster papa" (S. Stanojević, *Borba za samostalnost katoličke crkve u nemanjičkoj državi*, Belgrade 1912, 105–106; *Istorija Crne Gore*, II, 1, Titograd 1980, 22–23 (S. Ćirković).



Resurrectional Appearances of Christ,
altar vault, Dečani, ca. 1339

center, Mt. Athos, Stefan Nemanja built the monastery of Hilandar for the monks of his “blood,”⁴ was never seriously called into question by such ideas.

When Milutin conquered lands to the south and married Princess Simonis, daughter of Andronikos II in 1298, Serbia’s connections with the political and social life of Byzantium, its institutions and customs grew closer yet.

⁴ The monastery was founded eight centuries ago, in 1198, with the consent of the Emperor Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203), who, in connection with this, issued a chrysobul to St. Sava.

At the same time spiritual ties were strengthened, particularly with Mount Athos, where ideas and the monastic life provided a special school to eminent prelates, men of letters and translators. Artists, summoned to work for rulers and ecclesiastical dignitaries, came to Mt. Athos from conquered Byzantine provinces and the larger cities, primarily Thessalonica.

Although by the close of the 13th century the territories to the south of Skoplje were within the Serbian state, the courts of King Milutin were located in Kosovo, in a lowland region. These rather small towns whose names

were noted at the end of the ruler's charters, have disappeared nearly without a trace, while to the north of them remained Priština, an unfortified town in which Stefan Dušan (1331–1355) subsequently sojourned on several occasions. His successful military campaigns emboldened Dušan to proclaim himself Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks (1346). He expanded the state to the shores of the Aegean and İonean seas, so that by the middle of the century its borders encompassed, apart from Macedonia, all of Epirus, Thessaly and Albania (except for Dyrrachium).

Dušan stayed in Prizren quite often. Prizren was a town whose character revealed, more than others, the economic advantages of its position at the crossroads of important caravan routes. Fairs were held there four times a year; merchants from coastal towns, Cattaro and Dubrovnik in particular, but also Venice, Genoa, etc., arrived from various directions, some settling permanently. Crafts and trades, particularly the production of textiles, especially silk (the silkworm was cultivated locally), were organized into guilds headed by protomasters. King, and future Emperor, Dušan, also resided in this thriving town because he was having the monastery of the Holy Archangels raised in its vicinity, in the Bistrica Valley. Within the monastery confines was a large church in which he wished to be buried. This, however, was not the first edifice of its kind in Kosovo. Before it, kings Uroš II Milutin and Stefan Dečanski had built mausolea—the churches of St. Stephen in Banjska and Christ the Pantocrator in Dečani. These churches and the complex of the Patriarchate of Peć with the Holy Apostles in its core—the resting place of the highest church dignitaries as early as the second half of the 13th century—left a distinctive mark on the architecture of the region as a whole. It was as if the example set by heads of church had inspired the Serbian kings to build monumental buildings of outstanding character where they were to rest in peace, in their new administrative center. Dušan did the same. This region signified, in a special way, his parent country, though he pushed the borders far southward in the first years of his reign, thereby stripping the territory of present-day Kosovo of its key geographical position.

Kosovo was homeland to a number of distinguished feudal families (the Musić, the Branković, the Lazarević) who continued to hold their estates, as the legacy of their ancestors, for many years. Nevertheless, the fertile soil and the ore-rich lands were largely in the possession of the rulers themselves. The endowment charters of the monasteries of Banjska, Dečani, and the Holy Archangels that have survived, attest to the fact that the sovereigns granted them enormous estates in the plains surrounded by wooded mountains, along with villages and summer pastures, thus permanently providing for the subsistence of their monastic communities. The lands of other monasteries, especially those of the Patriarchate of Peć, being added to this, it can be claimed that most of the

territory of present-day Kosovo was taken by church estates. It is therefore not unusual that vast regions to the west were called Metohija, after a term of Greek origin used locally to denote monastery estates which were not immediately adjacent to the monastery (τὰ μετόχια).

On some of these *metochs*, as can be seen from the example of the estate of the Žiča—a monastery where the Patriarchate of Peć was to expand later on—the number of churches grew due to the monks' obligation to attend religious services. There are hundreds of village churches which are now in ruins, others the only remaining trace of which is in written sources or a surviving name—and these buildings, past and present, testify to the presence of a large population, its infrastructure and religious life for many centuries throughout Kosovo and Metohija. Along with the monasteries, town churches, and those of feudal lords, places of prayer in caves and graveyards, these places of worship comprise a dense network of shrines for which this region is often called the Holy Land. The survey of monuments at the end of the book, presented in a selective, well-documented account, sets forth only the most basic facts assembled in the field or taken from sources.

A survey of the architectural heritage including a broader overview of monuments would certainly offer a more complete picture of artistic activity, but would not provide a fuller understanding of its nature. The analysis has been therefore restricted only to the monuments which most thoroughly represent artistic ideas and realizations, starting from the simplest anachoritic cave-dwellings with places for worship, and going on to buildings raised by kings and archbishops.

Most of the survey is, nevertheless, dedicated to larger structures in which artists could express their ideas in monumental dimensions and in a most complex mode. A view, therefore, of artistic creativity within the boundaries of present-day Kosovo offers a profusion of ideas and forms. We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that early Serbian art, despite its strict compliance with the fundamental principles of the Eastern Christian church, did not adhere closely to a particular tradition or mimic established forms. Rather it was responsive to the vital styles it met with in the workshops of master craftsmen in Byzantine towns and the Adriatic coast, freely seeking for solutions suited to the views and needs of the Serbian environment.

The narrative sources which recount preparations a ruler made to endow a church for himself first draw attention to his consultations with immediate associates, frequently outlining the reasons influencing the selection of a certain patron-saint, and explaining the personal wishes of the founder as to the building's appearance. Especially interesting are the passages regarding the king's attachment to the Christian sacred buildings he wished to emulate. Writers of *Lives* were not always precise in

their descriptions, so sources of other kinds and analogies with sacred buildings in other places have enabled scholars to extrapolate the essential ideas motivating the person who commissioned the project, regarding the character of the building and its decoration. Descriptions confirm that on these issues the rulers relied on spiritual advisers, the most prominent of whom in the first half of the 14th century was Danilo II (1325–1337). The final appearance of each church was decided in consultation with artists who set out their proposals in accordance with their experience and the practice fostered in the region where they came from. These certainly gave each building a particular flavor, especially in the sculptural articulation of the whole and in façade ornamentation. In that sense, the rulers in Kosovo, as was the case earlier in Raška in the Ibar valley, gladly embraced western architectural patterns, adapting them—primarily in the design of the dome and the spatial components in which the services were carried out—to the Orthodox ritual.

The strict artistic concepts of the Serbian clergy found more consistent expression in wall and icon painting. Western artistic experience and iconography of the western world were far less likely to penetrate their closed system. The character of sacred paintings and their meaning in the tenor of the views of the Eastern Church is discernible in small shrines with abbreviated iconographic content, while in the spacious interiors of larger buildings, where surfaces serve an overlay of meanings and functions, one can find developed, thematically connected sequences of compositions with manifold messages, frequently comprehensible only to those versed in theology. Intricate concepts translated into visual language had a long tradition in the art of the Byzantine sphere, and in medieval Serbia, its significant segment, this was best evidenced in the Kosovo churches. The frescos were the work of both local and foreign masters, and their learned advisers. Their contribution is most tangible in the wealth of historical depiction and the individual portraits of Serbian rulers, noblemen, church dignitaries and monks. Special among them are portraits of the members of the house of Nemanjić in the form of a family tree—an exuberant vine with foliage interwoven with their images like the Tree of Jesse. These compositions appeared for the first time in Kosovo where three of four such representations have survived.

The fortunate circumstance that a number of large monastic buildings still stand well preserved, can be explained by the fact that advanced building techniques were employed to raise them. They were invariably sturdier structures than other buildings of the period. Furthermore, they were maintained and restored with greater care—the Patriarchate of Peć being a most telling instance—both in the decades when the spiritual life was



declining after the fall of Serbia (1459), and after the restoration of the Patriarchate of Peć (1557) which prolonged the existence of the Serbian church and creative activity in its fold until the time of the Great Migration of Christians into northern regions across the Sava and the Danube (1690).



The Incredulity of Thomas, Church of the Holy Apostles, south wall of the naos, the Patriarchate of Peć, ca. 1260

This tangible distinction between the well-preserved churches on the one hand, carefully built in stone, and the ruins of fortified towns on the other, once housing the royal court which were constructed using rather more modest materials, moved an anonymous poet to praise the devotion of rulers who spent their riches on endowed

churches⁵ rather than on palaces in the poem “Where did the treasure of King Nemanja vanish?” Milutin, as we have said, resided in smaller fortresses and adjacent towns; no

⁵ The specific term *zadužbina*, or endowed church, denotes in Serbian a building erected *za dušu* (for one’s soul).



Dečani, view of the narthex

The spacious interior of the Dečani narthex is separated by four slender columns into sections. The narthex is tripartite, somewhat lower and narrower than the nave. The church was built on marble slabs in three colors. Its sophisticated architecture harmoniously blends the western, Romanesque, and Gothic movements with the eastern, Byzantine style, keeping the tradition of the Serbian arts.

ruins have, to date, been discovered which would suggest that he led a lavish lifestyle.

The descriptions provided here are not consistent in proportion to each building's size and the opulence of its icons and frescos. Whole chapters could be devoted to single extensive cycles, as in the case of churches like Dečani, but such a focus would go beyond the scope of this volume. Here we intend to depict, by means of a specific selection, the nature of creative activity in Kosovo, primarily its monumental aspects—architecture, sculpture and fresco. In time, the appearance of church interiors altered: they were lavishly embellished with candelabra and choroses, icons on the altar screens and proskynetaria, gold and silver vessels, vestements of priests, curtains, epitaphioi and other fabrics, most frequently embroidered with gold and silver, and then analogia in wood-carving and intarsia, thrones and other church furnishings. A part of these objects is now held in collections whose existence is only noted here. Preservation of a building, in most cases its frescos, over centuries of Ottoman rule, is sketched in broad outline. An occasional illustration or incidental reference will nevertheless conjure for the reader the former opulence of the interior, best evoked in the ambience of the church of Christ the Pantocrator in Dečani.

Countless Kosovo shrines are in ruins or they have vanished serving as sacrificial offerings toward the preservation of the larger buildings which have survived all subsequent turmoils. These enduring monuments in the lands known as Serbia sacra are the result of the far-seeing need of the autonomous Christian state and church to master the transience of human destiny with a sense of permanence. Referring in specific to the artistic and spiritual heritage of Kosovo, Andre Malraux, author of *The Metamorphosis of Gods* said: "Culture, when it is the most precious possession, is never the past" (*Revue des études slaves* LVI [Paris 1984] 466).

The Sacred Land: Art of Kosovo,
The Monacelli Press 1997, pp. 7–14.

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THE GLORY OF BYZANTIUM AND THE GRANDEUR OF SERBIA

“Roman statecraft, Greek culture, and Christian belief are the three wellheads of Byzantine development. If any of these three had been missing, Byzantium as we know it could not have existed. It was only the synthesis of Hellenistic culture and the Christian religion with Roman governmental forms which could have caused that historical phenomenon, known as the Byzantine state, to arise” (G. Ostrogorsky).

It is said that Emperor Justinian (482–565) was born in present-day Kosovo in Ulpiana (today Lipljan, close to beautiful Gračanica). During his reign the Serbs had started moving down to Byzantium—certainly to be baptized, in God’s wise and saving providence. They then learned and acquired much of what Justinian bequeathed to them from the Illyricum, that is, today’s troubled region but still the cradle of Europe: the Balkans. During the Great Migration of Indo-European peoples, the Serbs finally settled in the area of present-day Kosovo and Metohija in the seventh century and soon thereafter became Christianized joining the Christian civilization of Orthodox Byzantium. Attesting to this is the existence of over 1,300 churches and monasteries, especially near Prizren, Peć, Istok, Klina, Mt. Čičavica, Novo Brdo, and the region of Pomoravlje. Among the pious endowments in Kosovo and Metohija are several important religious, cultural, and historical monuments,

such as the Patriarchate of Peć, Visoki Dečani, Gračanica, and Bogorodica Ljeviška, unique in the world’s spiritual and cultural heritage.

The best churches in Orthodox Serbia constitute a eulogy of Hagia Sophia, the Church of Churches—of the Holy Wisdom of God in Constantinople, which is beyond all philosophies and philosophers, all architectures and architects, as an image and type of the Church—Ship of Christ. Blessed are they who have selected this Church—Ship, “the boat of Christ which will never sink,” as St. John Chrysostom (4th century) would preach from the ambo which still stands in front of Hagia Sophia today. Beauty will be dead, untrue, if the mystery of the Body, the sacrifice of Christ, the House of Bread, Bethlehem, outside of which there is neither salvation nor eternal life, is not incarnated in it. And the Hagia Sophia has remained a model for all the churches of God, throughout the world and throughout the centuries.

In Byzantium, Sava Nemanjić managed to secure autocephaly for the Serbian Church and became the first Serbian archbishop in 1219. In the same year Sava published the first constitution in Serbia—St. Sava’s *Nomocanon*. This legal act was the compilation of Civil law, based on Roman Law, Canon law, and the Ecumenical Councils. Its basic purpose was to organize functioning of the young Serbian



Church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople (Istanbul)

kingdom and the Serbian church. The Medieval Serbian Empire rose from Byzantine patronage. There is a tendency which wishes to showcase the Serbian conceptual system as indigenous, even though it is not, for Serbs have been nurtured by the Iliad and the Odyssey and the classics—otherwise one cannot explain why Plato, Plutarch, the Ethiopian prophetess Sibylla and others, are portrayed on the northern arch of the Cathedral of Ljeviša—as well as Byzantine philosophers, the Fathers of the Church.

The Nemanjić dynasty left to Serbia masterpieces of religious art combining Byzantine, Western, and local styles. Serbia's sophisticated architecture harmoniously blends the eastern, Byzantine style, with the western, Romanesque and Gothic movements, keeping the tradition of the Serbian arts. Serbia dominated the Balkans under Stefan Dušan (1331–55). He proclaimed himself emperor, and wrote a new legal code combining Byzantine law with Serbian customs.

Remaining to testify about Kosovo and Metohija as the center of the ecclesial, governmental, and social authority

of “all Serbian countries” are not only the magnificent temples of monasteries Dečani, Gračanica, The Mother of God of Ljeviša, and of the Peć Patriarchate, preserved until our day, but also the imposing ruins of the churches such as Asceterion of Peter of Koriša, The Mother of God of Hvosno, the Holy Archangels, Banjska, Novo Brdo, Zvečan, Ubožac, Ajnovac, and tens of our other rulers' and feudal lords' pious endowments (foundations) from the 13th and 14th centuries. Some of these monuments rank among the highest artistic creations of the Christian civilization. Yet, these landmarks and historical sights were never the only ones; they were followed by hundreds of rural churches, monasteries and temples which represented (and partly some others as well) a firm foundation in the evolution of our culture and arts.

Even when Serbia had fallen under the Ottoman yoke, good artistic work was still produced, although it lacked the brilliance of that done before about 1320. It is the paintings of the earlier period that constitutes the true glory of the Serbian contribution to the story of art.



Constantinople—a composite view of the 6th to the 11th centuries, painting by Jean-Léon Huens (1921–1982), from *National Geographic*, December 1983