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Albanian **A**rt  
Institution **H**istories

1920 \* 1969

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## Editorial Note

Albanian Art Institution Histories is the first ‘note’ in the Albanian Handbook for Art Education, a bilingual and open-source publication exploring the theme of art and education in Albania, starting by tracing a narrative that is still only partially accessible and complex to untangle.

Developed with a research collective made up of professionals coming from different disciplines and working within or in relation to Albanian Art Institutions, the ‘histories’ presented here are envisioned as plural, in an effort to overcome the predominance of any single narrative or perspective, and to offer the ground from which a plethora of critical viewpoints can emerge.

The timeline showing the development of art institutions, including significant individuals and ateliers, is intertwined with historical information that further contextualizes the people, places and events that feature in these narratives. The broader geopolitical picture, and its significance for local and international actors, is crucial to understanding the development of art institutions: it helps clarify the trajectories of various political figures and the role art continually plays in shaping national, socioeconomic and individual identities. Taken together, these elements demonstrate the multiple transformative approaches that we--as artists, researchers and writers--can take towards understanding the shifting character of Albanian Art Institutions.

- Valentina Bonizzi

## Colors Legend

|        |                 |
|--------|-----------------|
| Blue   | Dr Ermir Hoxha  |
| Red    | Dr Jonida Gashi |
| Purple | Dr Ylber Marku  |

# 1920

In Albania, the post-World War I decade is generally characterized by political instability. Its commencement in 1920 is marked by the Vlora War, a popular armed uprising in the region of Vlora opposing its annexation by Italy, which had occupied the city and several villages around it. The uprising was also supported by the Albanian government at the time, and, in the end, Italy was forced to abandon the Albanian coastline. In these years, Ahmet Zogu emerges as the principal political figure. He was challenged by Fan Noli, the most prominent intellectual of the period, who led a progressive revolution that brought him to power for only six months in the middle of 1924. Following Noli's defeat, Zogu once again assumed leadership, transforming Albania into a monarchy in 1928. Under Zogu's monarchy, the economic conditions remained difficult, prompting many Albanians to emigrate. During those years there were no visa requirements for Albanians, allowing them to move with their passports to Western countries, including the United States, even though only a few could afford the travel costs.



Anonymous, Artist Mario Ridola, founding director of the Drawing School, 1930/1940

At this time, young artists in Albania were taught and trained by established artists in their studios; this was the prevailing educational model in the main cities of the country. Consequently, institutional initiatives focused on artistic education were limited and regional in nature. Notable among them were: “The Foreign School of Crafts and Arts”, founded by the Italian Saverio Polaroli in the city of Shkodra;<sup>1</sup> “The School of Fine Arts”, directed by the lawyer Duro Guri in the city of Gjirokastra;<sup>2</sup> as well as a course organized by the painter Spiro Xega in the city of Korça.

# 1930

The 1930s are generally marked by the influence of Italian art and culture in Albania, reflecting the increasingly close ties between Ahmet Zogu's monarchic government and the Italian fascist regime. A striking example of their cooperation is the relatively considerable number of Albanian students who were sent to study at Italian universities during the 1930s and the direct influence of the new fascist architectural style on the construction of state buildings and the public spaces surrounding them, best illustrated by the “Martyrs of the Nation” Boulevard in Tirana and the block of ministries, which were completed during Albania's occupation by fascist Italy.

On May 10, 1931, the “Friends of Art” society was established by Odhise Paskali and Qenan Meserea. With a proper statute and program, it was immediately supported by a group of young artists such as Vangjush Mio, Zef Kolombi, Abdurrahim Buza and Lasgush Poradeci, as well as several older artists such as Kolë Idromeno and Spiro Xega. The creation of this society marks the end of the regional character that had defined Albanian art until then.

1 Among his students, Simon Rrota is considered the most talented.

2 Duro Guri, a lawyer (and later chief judge of the court of Tirana), an amateur painter and embroiderer in Gjirokastra, is mentioned in the press of the time, in the years 1914-1920, in connection with the creation of some paintings and embroideries.

Two weeks after its establishment, the “Friends of Art” society also held its first exhibition at the “Kursal” café in Tirana.

Also in May 1931, a so-called Drawing Course was opened in Tirana, with funding from the National Entity and the Committee of Arts, overseen by painter Andrea Kushi. From the start, it attracted a lot of interest, with about 150 boys and girls enrolling in this course following the selection process. The rush to enroll clearly showed the compelling need to establish a larger institution.

In January 1932, the Drawing School was established, under the direction of the Italian Mario Ridola. The number of students and teachers at this school increased over time, until it consolidated its reputation as the best place to raise the finest cohort of emerging artists. The themes ranged from classic academic subjects—such as models, portraits and still lifes—to landscapes and scenes from urban life. The director of the Drawing School oriented its artistic direction towards academicism by bringing plaster models from classical antiquity to the school, while the models for the classes were mainly boys, girls and old people dressed in national costumes, an aspect of Albanian life that was disappearing before the eyes of artists, amidst the march of modernization in the society.<sup>3</sup>

In 1932-33 in Tirana, a decoration course or class was opened at the “Harry T. Fultz” Technical Institute, under the direction of Zef Dajçi.<sup>4</sup> This course was divided into two areas of study, the drawing class and the sculpture class, operating with both technically focused and artistic programs. In it, students initially learned how to draw using proportions, with light and shadow and with volume, as well as learning how to model three-dimensional sculptures and reliefs in clay. In a second phase,

students learned to produce artistic objects: capitals, plates with floral decorations, geometric forms, etc. Ultimately, students were trained as craftsmen or artisans, with all their artistic works cast in plaster. Some established artists, such as Ibrahim Kodra and Andrea Mano, received their first lessons in these courses, which lasted four to eight years.

On 7 April 1939, Albania is invaded by Mussolini’s fascist Italy. The occupation prompts the Albanian monarch, Ahmet Zogu, to effectively abandon the country, seeking asylum in unoccupied countries. During the Italian occupation, from 1939 to 1943, a series of public buildings were completed, some of which had already been started prior to this interval, while others were initiated during this interval. In the aftermath of the war, some of these buildings were converted into educational institutions, such as the Higher Institute of Arts (today the University of Arts), Polytechnic University and Rectorate in “Mother Teresa” Square.



Anonymous, Artworks of the School of Drawing, September, 1938

3 “Inauguration of the art exhibition”, *Gazeta e Korçës*, 8 June 1932, p. 4; N. V., “Our future Academy of Fine Arts”, *Minerva*, no. 12-13, July-August 1933, p. 18; Nebil Çika, “A cradle of artistic life in Albania”, *Minerva*, no. 10, 15 May 1933, pp. 12-14; “Preparatory school for fine arts”, *Besa*, 1 December 1932, p. 3.

4 Zef Simon Dajçi (1890-1963) was born in Shkodra, where he completed his initial studies at the school “Per Arti Mestieri”, and then completed a three-month specialization in Milan for the decorative arts. One of his best-known works is Saint Francis of Assisi, made in bronze and installed on the main facade of the Assembly of Stigmatine Sisters in Shkodra. The work survived until 1967. See: Lec Zadeja, “Zef Dajçi, a distinguished master of chisel and plaster”, *Shkodra over the centuries*, International Seminar, Volume II, 1999, p. 411.

# 1940

Albania's occupation by Mussolini's Italy was met by armed resistance, which was swiftly organized after the invasion. This resistance was divided into two main groups. The first was that of *Balli Kombëtar* (the National Front), a nationalist movement initially led by Mithat Frashëri. The second movement that emerged was the communists, a group that had existed in embryonic form in cities like Shkodra and Korça before the war. The communist movement ultimately achieved greater popular support. It initially organized partisan detachments that—upon Albania's occupation by Nazi Germany in 1943—turned into the National Liberation Army. The National War of Anti-Fascist Liberation allowed Albania to align itself with the victors of World War II, and it also made possible the Communist Party's coming to power in Albania in November 1944.

In September 1943, fascist Italy capitulated and Albania was occupied by Nazi Germany.



Anonymous,  
Cafe Kursal in Tirana, 1940s

In October 1944, the National Liberation Anti-Fascist Committee was transformed into the Provisional Democratic Government of Albania under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, and the philosopher, poet and politician Sejfulla Malëshova was appointed as the Minister of Press, Propaganda and Folk Culture. Malëshova had studied medicine in Italy in the early 1920s,

while in 1924 he had been involved in Fan Noli's June Movement. When the movement failed, he immigrated to the Soviet Union, where he studied philosophy at the State University of Moscow (Lomonosov University) in the second half of the 1920s, also teaching there in the early 1930s. During his stay in the USSR, Malëshova became politically involved in the international communist movement, becoming a member of the Comintern as well as a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He returned to Albania during the war years, and after the Communist Party of Albania came to power, he immediately engaged in directing the art and culture sector and later the education sector.

On 29 November the Nazi troops left Albania. Subsequently, having fought against the both Italian fascists and the Nazis, the Communist party established its government.

Malëshova's views on the direction that new art and culture should assume in the post-liberation period—articulated in his programmatic speech "The Role of Culture in Today's Albania", published in the first issue of the magazine *Bota e Re* (*The New World*) under the pseudonym Lame Kodra—have been interpreted retrospectively as liberal. In his speech, Malëshova called for establishing close cultural relations with all countries that had positioned themselves against fascism and Nazism during World War II, including the United States and Great Britain. However, there is no information indicating that Malëshova's positions were interpreted as liberal in July 1945, when his speech was made public, even though these positions would later be used to level accusations of "opportunism" against him.<sup>5</sup>

In January 1945, under the direction of director Sokrat Mio, a Drama School opened in Tirana. This "school"—which was not actually a proper school but a course (initially lasting only several months)—aimed at creating a theatrical group that would serve as the nucleus of new professional (and socialist) Albanian theater.

5 Lame Kodra, "The role of culture in today's Albania", *Bota e Re*, no. 1, July 1945, pp. 5-16.

In March 1945, at the request of the Ministry of Press, Propaganda and Folk Culture, Yugoslav actor and director Boža Nikolić came to Tirana to assist in establishing the first professional state theater in Albania.<sup>6</sup> During his six-month stay in Albania, Nikolić also worked with the state theatrical group (after its creation) to stage the drama *Dashnori* (The Lover), which premiered in September 1945.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1945, the first post-liberation exhibition of figurative arts opened, featuring contributions from 23 artists, with a total of 111 works.<sup>8</sup> Presented as the first exhibition of the new order, this exhibition best shows the aspirations of the new state for a dynamic artistic climate, the need for reflection on the “glorious years” of war and the thematic orientations that would become better formulated in the following years.

On 8 May 1945, World War II ended in Europe, and in early September of the same year, Japan also surrendered, thus closing one of the darkest chapters in human history.

In the early post-war years, the foundations were laid for the division of Europe and the world in general into two blocs: the capitalist one, led by the United States, and the socialist bloc, led by the Soviet Union. The epicenter of this division is Europe, where the initial political clashes transpired, in occupied Germany. In the area under Soviet control, the German Democratic Republic (known as the DDR by local acronyms) was established. The areas under French, British and American jurisdiction united to form the Federal Republic of Germany. From 1960 onwards, the most

tangible representation of this division would become the construction of a wall stretching for tens of kilometers that separated the western part of the city from the eastern part, which also served as the capital of East Germany.

On 24 May 1945, the State Professional Theater (later known as the People’s Theater) was established. The organization of courses in the so-called Drama School continued, now with the main aim of professionalizing the state theatrical group. A number of Soviet theater professionals would contribute to this effort over the years, including directors Alexander Fyodorovich Dudin (1947) and Andrey Ivanovich Krichko (1948), who seem to have made the first attempts to introduce Stanislavski’s System into Albanian theater.<sup>9</sup>

In July 1945, the first issue of the cultural magazine *Bota e Re* is published. Named after a progressive Korça-based publication from the 1930s, *Bota e Re* sought to be “the continuation of positive and progressive traditions of our National Awakening movement—aiming to link two glorious historical periods and move with newfound vigor on the path of progress”. The magazine closed without existing for even a year—its eighth and last issue came out in February 1946.

On 7 October 1945, the Albanian Union of Writers (Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve e Shqipërisë) was established, with a wide membership that included “writers from all generations, from the National Awakening, from 1924, from the time of Zogu and from the National Liberation Movement”.<sup>10</sup> It aimed for “writers to get to know each other, to revisit issues in the field of art and literature, and from this process a

6 Boza Nikolić, “About our theater”, *Bashkimi (Unity)*, 25 March 1945.

7 A. Burnazian, “Event of the month: Theater - *The Lover (Gjido)*”, *Bota e Re*, no. 4, October 1945, pp. 48-50.

8 Andon Kuqali recalls: “Many works had ordinary themes and content: landscapes, still lifes, figures in folk costumes. But there was also a reflection of the war in different aspects, busts and paintings of a partisan, a female partisan, drawings that showed the war and partisan life or presented the misfortunes caused by the enemy: refugees, portraits of orphaned children, landscapes of ruined places.” Andon Kuqali, *History of Albanian Art 2*, Tirana: Instituti i Lartë i Arteve, 1988, p. 77.

9 See: “Cultural life of the country: Theater – *The Russian issue*”, *Literatura jonë (Our Literature)*, no. 9, November 1947, pp. 55-57; “Cultural life of the country: Soviet director Andre Krichko arrives in Tirana, to work in our People’s Theatre”, *Literatura jonë*, no. 8, October 1948, pp. 80-81; Andon Pano, “Cultural life of the country: The first year of the decoration of the People’s Theater”, *Letërsia jonë (Our Literature)*, no. 6, June 1950, pp. 67-69.

10 “Life and books among us - Albanian Union of Writers”, *Bota e Re*, no. 3, September 1945, pp. 54-56.



unity in thoughts and actions is to emerge”.<sup>11</sup> With the establishment of the Union of Writers, *Bota e Re* transitioned to serving as its official publication for the final four issues.



*The New World,*  
August 1945

In January 1946 Albania was declared a People’s Republic by a Constitutional Assembly that was elected solely with lists of voters from the Democratic Front, controlled by the Communist Party. This event, coupled with Albania’s rejection of US aid under the Marshall Plan in 1948, marked in a way two initial moments of the Cold War for Albania, and the definitive inclusion of the country in the Eastern Bloc then led by the Soviet Union.

From 21 February to 3 March 1946, the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Albania convened. At this plenum, there was extensive discussion about the direction that new socialist culture and art should take. Participants in the debate noted that the administration of culture up to that

moment had failed to meet the expectations of the leadership regarding artistic and literary creativity, and concluded that both fields should draw inspiration from the building of socialism in Albania, and should incorporate more characters drawn from the people.

The main figure targeted at the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party was Sejfulla Malëshova, whom Enver Hoxha accused of “opportunism”— although Malëshova continued to hold leadership positions until 1950, when he was interned in Fier.<sup>12</sup> One of the first “victims” of this forum in the artistic-cultural field was the *Bota e Re* magazine, whose publication was discontinued. Meanwhile, Koçi Xoxe emerged from the forum with a strengthened position. After 1948, Xoxe’s reputation for brutality and his working class background would be used as a justification for the subsequent ‘mistreatment’ of intellectuals that followed the plenum.<sup>13</sup>

In late June of 1946, an extraordinary meeting of the Union of Writers was held. During this meeting, the ranks of membership were purged of “those who trumpet the most unfaithful demagogies”, “those who zealously protect war criminals”, “the war criminals”, and those “who were making plans to overthrow our popular regime”. Additionally, it is decided that the country’s new literature should be a genuine mass literature, one that should reflect the process of rebuilding the country, contributing to this same effort of rebuilding.<sup>14</sup>

In August 1946, an educational reform was announced, one that—especially from the point of view of content—aimed at establishing an education system “on the basis of Marxist-Leninist theory and socialist pedagogy”.

11 “Life and books among us - Albanian Union of Writers”, *Bota e Re*, no. 4, October 1945, pp. 50-52.

12 Minutes of the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Albania, 21 February – 3 March, 1946, in the Central State Archive (Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, AQSH), F.14, AP-OU, V.1946, D.1.

13 “A decision of importance: The Central Committee of the Party of Labor of Albania appreciates at the deserved level the activity and creative work of people of culture, arts, sciences and sports”, *Letërsia Jonë*, no. 2-3, April-May 1949, pp. 1-2.

14 Dhimitër Shuteriqi, “On the Organization of the Union of Writers of Albania”, *Bashkimi*, 25-26 June 1946; Shevqet Musaraj, “On the Duties of Writers in Today’s Albania”, *Bashkimi*, 27, 28, 29 June 1946; “Discussions on the Organizational Report”, *Bashkimi*, 30 June 1946; “Discussions on the report on the duties of writers in today’s Albania”, *Bashkimi*, 2 July 1946.

gy”.<sup>15</sup> The reform also aimed at expanding educational institutions in the country and increasing attendance (especially in the case of primary schools, because primary education became compulsory); expanding the respective levels (such as preschool education, vocational schools and night schools) in the existing education system; and establishing the secular and state character of the education system—through the prohibition of religious teaching in schools at all levels and the unification of school programs throughout the country.<sup>16</sup>

In November 1946, the Artistic Lyceum (later called the “Jordan Misja” Artistic Lyceum) opened. With teachers educated in some of the best Western academies, its students remember it as an earnest educational establishment, with a visible enthusiasm, passionate teachers and no prominent political influences. About this school, Vilson Kilica recalled: “It seemed to me a serious school, according to my youthful memories, because there were teachers who had studied in the West, mainly in Italy. Sadik Kaceli, Nexhmedin Zajmi, Odhise Paskali, Kristina Hoshi, Abdurrahim Buza, and others were there. These were passionate teachers who represented a new era. At that time, they were interested in making art flourish.”<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of 1947 the first scientific institution of the post-liberation period opened: the Institute of Studies (later the Institute of Sciences). It initially consisted of three divisions: the section of natural sciences, the section of linguistics and literature, and the section of history-sociology and economics.

This institute would serve as the nucleus of the Academy of Sciences. Simultaneously, the institute maintained a continuity with the Institute of Albanian Studies (1940-1944).

In March 1947, the first issue of the *Literatura Jonë* (*Our Literature*) journal was published, as the official publication of the Albanian Union of Writers (thus replacing *Bota e Re*). In 1950, *Literatura Jonë* would be renamed *Letërsia Jonë*, a name it would keep until it was replaced by the journal *Nëndori* (*November*) in 1954. From the very beginning, these publications featured translations from a significant corpus of Soviet theoretical texts on the methodology of socialist realism, alongside literary texts by well-known Soviet authors (among others) who represented this literary approach.

In June 1948, after several months of escalating tensions between Stalin and Tito regarding the latter’s ambitions and plans to dominate the Balkan Peninsula, Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform.<sup>18</sup> On a narrower scale, this gave the pro-Soviet faction led by Enver Hoxha the opportunity to gain an advantage over the pro-Yugoslav faction led by Koçi Xoxe, who was arrested before the end of the year and executed on June 11, 1949. On a broader scale, the Tito-Stalin split gave Albania the opportunity to emerge from Yugoslav tutelage and position itself alongside the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of an era of intensive “Sovietization” that lasted more than a decade.<sup>19</sup>

On 8 November 1948, during his speech at the First Congress of the Party of Labor of Albania,

15 Enriketa Kambo, *Development of the Cultural Revolution in Albania during the years 1944-1948*, Tirana: Academy of Sciences of PSR of Albania, Institute of History, 1982, pp. 76-86.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-65.

17 Excerpted from an audio-visual interview with Vilson Kilica and Edi Hila conducted by Ermir Hoxha. From the author’s archive.

18 Mark Kramer, “Stalin, the Split with Yugoslavia, and Soviet–East European Efforts to Reassert Control, 1948-1953”, in *The Balkans in the Cold War*, pp. 30-32; Ethem Çeku, *Kosovo and Diplomacy since World War II: Yugoslavia, Albania, and the Path to Kosovan Independence*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 15-35; Jeronim Perović, “The Tito-Stalin Split: A Reassessment in Light of New Evidence”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 42-57; Ivo Banac and Richard West, *Tito and the Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia*, London: Sinclair–Stevenson, 1996, pp. 217-228; Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin*, trans. Michael B. Petrovich, London: Penguin Books, 1962.

19 Ylber Marku, “Shifting Alliances: Albania in the Early Cold War”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, Fall 2022, pp. 80-115.

Enver Hoxha officially declared socialist realism as the “new direction” of post-war Albanian literature and art.<sup>20</sup> Hoxha’s speech shows how the severance of relations with Yugoslavia and the establishment of direct relations with the Soviet Union played a decisive role in shaping the artistic development of Albanian literature and art along the lines of Soviet socialist realism. During this first stage of state socialism in Albania (1944-1948), a network of institutions was also created with the aim of spreading art and culture among the masses. This network included libraries and reading houses, as well as clubs and cultural houses, whose organization began in April 1945 with the inauguration of the House of Culture in Tirana. However, work in these institutions left much to be desired, so in spring of 1948 professional artistic societies were created. Despite a membership that included a mix of amateurs, enthusiasts and professional artists, these organizations laid the foundations for the future of Albanian art.<sup>21</sup>

## 1950

In the 1950s, a significant number of the central artistic institutions in the country were established. Notably, in 1950 the Albanian Philharmonic was created, along with the State Art Gallery (Pinacotheca).<sup>22</sup> The first would serve as the core of the National Theater of Opera, Ballet and the Popular Ensemble, which was created in 1956; while the second would serve as the precursor to the Gallery of Fine Arts (later the National Gallery of Arts), which opened in January 1954.

In 1952, the “New Albania” Film Studio (Shqipëria e Re) (“New Albania”) Film Studio was inaugurated, as part of the First Five-Year Plan (1951-1955) of the People’s Republic of Albania. The film studio—like the five-year plan as a whole—was realized with considerable support from the Soviet Union. Even after it opened, the necessary materials and technology for its operation were imported (mainly) from the Soviet Union. (However, this was often a matter of re-exporting materials and technologies that the Soviet Union itself imported from countries like East Germany and Czechoslovakia, which had relatively more developed techniques compared to the Soviet Union, especially in terms of photographic equipment.) Beyond the importation of essential materials and technology, and the training of local staff, Albania also depended on the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries to import film diaries, documentaries and artistic films. This initiative aimed not only to cultivate the correct cinematic tastes within the local audience, but also to entertain and educate in alignment with socialist ideals. In this way, Albania became part of a wide network of cultural, technical and educational exchanges throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>



Anonymous, “New Albania” Film Studio building, Tirana, photo, 1950s

20 Enver Hoxha, *On Literature and Art*, Tirana: Shtëpia Botuese “8 Nëntori”, 1977, pp. 20-23.

21 Enriketa Kambo, *Development of the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 122-132.

22 “The cultural life of the country”, *Letërsia Jone*, no. 1, January 1950, pp. 70-71.

23 Elidor Mëhilli, “Globalized Socialism, Nationalized Time: Soviet Films, Albanian Subjects, and Chinese Audiences across the Sino-Soviet Split”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 77, no. 3, Fall 2018, pp. 611-637.

In late October 1952, following a two-day conference, the Union of Artists of Albania was established. Underlining the lack of regular forms of “professional education” until that period, its aim was to “organize and bring together the artistic forces of the entire Republic in a single focal point, elevating their work to the necessary level to meet the great demands of our working masses”. The establishment of the Union of Artists also aimed to further the assimilation of socialist realism, drawing from the experience of Soviet art.<sup>24</sup>

On 11 January 1954, the Gallery of Fine Arts opened, boasting an initial collection of 100 works of art by about 40 different artists. The Gallery’s first building was located on Kavaja Street, in a two-story building. Two years later, in 1956, the Gallery was transferred to a two-story villa on Fortuzi Street.

Also in January of 1954, the first edition of the monthly literary and artistic journal *Nëndori*, the main publication of the Union of Writers and the Union of Artists of Albania, was published. It replaced *Letërsia Jonë*, the previous journal of the Union of Writers, which had been published since 1949. Unlike its forerunner, *Nëndori* covered the broad spectrum of Albanian cultural production, including theatre, music and film, alongside literature, poetry and visual arts.

In 1955, Albania joined the Warsaw Pact. This would bring a new material reality to the country, due to considerable economic aid. It also brought a new cultural vitality, thanks to increased cultural exchanges as well as the number of scholarships for young Albanians who studied at Soviet academies during the 1950s.<sup>25</sup>

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev gave his “secret speech” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, denouncing Stalin’s policies, many of which he called criminal. This marked the beginning of what would be known as the process of “de-Stalinization” in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Subsequently, violent protests against the ruling communist parties erupted in Poland and then in Hungary, where the authority of the local communist party was threatened by an armed uprising, to which Moscow responded by invading Hungary and restoring control to the local communists.

The echoes of Khrushchev’s speech were also felt in Albania. During the Tirana Party Conference held in April 1956, a chorus of voices calling for reform and opposing the cult of personality emerged, including some from the ranks of the party organization at the “New Albania” Film Studio, such as Nesti Zoto and Viktor Stratobërdha.<sup>26</sup> Enver Hoxha tried to and succeeded in regaining control of the Conference by refusing de-Stalinization, and later purging the party of those opposing his line.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently Albania and the Soviet Union begin to recalibrate their many exchanges, affecting both the economic and social-cultural domains. China emerged as a possible ally for Albania, since the USSR’s reform policies under Khrushchev were perceived as destabilizing by both sides.<sup>28</sup>



Qamil Prizreni, National Gallery of Arts  
Kavaja street, pencil, 1958

24 Mustafa Krantja, “The Creation of the Union of Artists’ of Albania”, *Letërsia Jonë*, no. 10-11, October-November 1952, pp. 118-120 (p. 119).

25 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017.

26 Ana Lalaj, *The Turbulent Spring of ‘56*, Tirana: Infobotues, 2015.

27 Lalaj, *The Turbulent Spring of ‘56*; Elidor Mëhilli, “Defying De-Stalinization: Albania’s 1956”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, Fall 2011, pp. 4-56.

28 Ylber Marku, “Shifting Alliances: Albania in the Early Cold War”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, Fall 2022, pp. 80-115.

In October 1956, acting upon recommendations from the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Party of Labor and a decision from the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic, the Union of Writers and the Union of Artists are merged into a single entity—the Union of Writers and Artists of Albania.

In May 1957, the State University of Tirana—the first institution of higher education in Albania—was established on the basis of six higher institutes that had been opened in the country during the previous decade (1946–1956), specifically: the Pedagogical Institute, the Polytechnic Institute, the Medical Institute, the Agricultural Institute, the Economic Institute and the Legal Institute.

During the 1950s, thousands of Albanian students, selected for both their abilities and their social background and biography, were sent to the “motherland” of proletarian communism and its satellite countries. Some of the future painters and sculptors who studied at the academies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during this decade were: Sali Shijaku, Kristaq Rama, Jakup Keraj, Guri Madhi, Zef Shoshi, Vilson Kilica, Kujtim Buza, Agim Zajmi, Llambi Blido, Rafael Dembo, Muntaz Dhrami, Shaban Hadëri and Thanas Papa, who studied in the Soviet Union; Thoma Thomai, Hektor Dule, Ksenofon Dilo, Halim Beqiraj and Llazar Myzeqari, who studied in Prague; Hysen Devolli, Perikli Çuli, Spiro Kristo and Isuf Sulovari in Bucharest; Danish Jukniu and Shaban Hysa in Warsaw; Abdulla Cangonji studied in Sofia and Aristotel Papa in Zagreb. Upon their returning, some of them contributed to filling institutional gaps, such as the establishment of higher education institutions for the arts.

In 1959, the “Aleksandër Moisiu” Actor's School, the first higher education institution for up and coming actors, was established as part of the People's Theater.

## 1960

On 4 January 1960, the Institute of Figurative Arts opened, serving as the nucleus of the subsequent Higher Institute of Arts. It initially offered only a two-year program in either painting or sculpture.<sup>29</sup> The institute adopted simplified programs from the Soviet educational model, as its first professors were also a product of Eastern educational institutions. Thus, while in the Artistic Lyceum in the early 1960s a good number of the teachers were still former students of Western academies, such as Sadik Kaceli, Nexhmedin Zajmi, Adburrahim Buza, Kel Kodheli, etc., in the Institute of Figurative Arts the supremacy of the Eastern school was evident. The institute was opened and directed by former students from Eastern European countries such as Vilson Kilica, Sali Shijaku, Kristaq Rama, Guri Madhi, Shaban Hadëri, Danish Jukniu, Hektor Dule, Perikli Çuli, etc. From the state's perspective, these teachers—despite their young age (Kilica, the first director, was only 28 years old)—possessed both the proper ideological framework and the formal tools to enable the unequivocal orientation of every student towards the aesthetics of socialist realism.



Anonymous, group photo, Kujtim Buza, Skënder Kamberi, Llazar Taçi, Guljem Mosi, Prof. Kel Kodheli, Bajram Mata, Izabet Petrela, Liljana Çefa, Bahri Jubani, Alajdin Tabaku, Ferdinand Paci dhe Myrteza Fushekati, photo, Artistic Lyceum 1960

29 Audio-visual interview with Vilson Kilica, the first Dean of the Institute of Visual Arts, conducted on 16 November 2010 by Ermir Hoxha. Part of the author's archive.

In November 1960 during the Conference of Communist Parties taking place in Moscow, Beijing and Tirana decided to denounce Moscow's stance as revisionist, directly blaming and accusing Khrushchev of holding an anti-Marxist position. This conference was followed by a severe reduction in exchanges between Albania and the Soviet Union, the termination of economic relations in 1961, the ultimate withdrawal of all Soviet specialists and the repatriation of all Albanian students studying in the Soviet Union.<sup>30</sup> By the end of 1958, over a thousand Albanian students were pursuing higher studies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup> It is not clear how many of them were studying at art academies in these countries. However, considering the priority that the socialist system had given to the fields of construction and agriculture, it can be inferred that the number art students would have likely been limited to a few dozen.

In 1961 Albania formed a close alliance with the People's Republic of China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Although this repositioning isolated Albania from the Soviet Union and also reduced its ties with other socialist Eastern European countries, it enabled it to concurrently expand relations with countries in East Asia and the so-called "Third World". Albania also gained greater autonomy in shaping its socialist development, no longer directly influenced by the Soviet or the Chinese model. This shift also manifested in local forms that were reflected in art and culture.

In 1960 a reform of the pre-university education system began. In the case of primary education, the eight-year system was introduced, replacing the seven-year system that had preceded it. In the case of secondary education, beginning from the 1959-60 school year, subjects focused on political education were introduced into all high schools, including in institutions such as the Artistic Lyceum.<sup>32</sup>

On 15 January 1962, the State Conservatory of Tirana opened.

In 1965, the four-year study system was introduced at the Institute of Figurative Arts.<sup>33</sup>

A year later, the merger of three art schools took place: the State Conservatory of Tirana, the Institute of Figurative Arts and the "Aleksandër Moisiu" Actors' School. Thus, in 1966, the Higher Institute of Arts (IAL) was inaugurated, a name it would keep until 1990. The first director of the IAL was Vilson Kilica.

The staff teaching artistic subjects initially consisted of Danish Jukniu, Sali Shijaku, Andrea Mano, Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, Pandi Mele, Vasil Konomi and Ismail Lulani, whilst theoretical subjects were developed by Agim Duhaxhiu (Art History), Petro Papadhopulli (Anatomy), Maks Velo (Perspective), and various specialists in different crafts.

In 1966 Albania embarked on the Ideological and Cultural Revolution, a comprehensive mobilization movement that permeated all spheres of creativity. This movement, among other things, emphasized the education of the masses with a special focus on the working and peasant classes. Art, literature and culture in general were assigned a central role in the mission of mass education. The "Hearths of Culture" (often known as cultural houses) had been established earlier, but in this period they spread to all corners of the country, allowing local artists to be engaged in musical and theatrical performances from a young age. The role of these institutions was multifaceted: they were a mixture between a theater and a cabaret, especially in rural areas, and they brought a cultural dimension to contexts that otherwise possessed only work cooperatives. These cultural houses also served as a first platform for emerging talents who were subsequently promoted on more prominent stages, such as local theaters

30 Ylber Marku, "Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of the Soviet-Albanian Relations and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960-61", *The International History Review*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2020, pp. 813-832.

31 Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, p. 62.

32 Enriketa Kambo, *Albanian School in the years 1960-1970*, Tirana: Center for Albanological Studies, Institute of History, 2014, p. 55.

33 Audio-visual interview with Ksenofon Dilo, conducted in 2012 by Ermir Hoxha. Part of the author's archive.

or national institutions. The Variety Theaters in particular benefited significantly from this expansion of popular culture. Many actors who later became national icons began their careers at the local level, in the Hearths of Culture.

In 1969, with the appointment of painter Ksenofon Dilo as head of the Faculty of Figurative Arts, a structural transformation occurred. Previously focused solely on painting and sculpture, the faculty expanded to include other branches and studios, such as textiles, scenography, graphics, ceramics and glass, aligning with the industrial development of the country. While these disciplines had been offered as supplementary subjects in the 1960s, their elevation to the status of full branches of study persisted until the late 1980s at the Faculty of Fine Arts. As Dilo, who had studied at the Bauhaus-style art school in Prague, recalls: “I wanted to change the character of this school, which followed the Russian model, focused only on painting and sculpture. I thought of adding all these studios (Textiles, Fashion, Lacework, Monumental Painting, Ceramics, Glass) and we started working on this together with Danish Jukniu, who had been invited by Vilson [Kilica] right before me, for the textiles branch, which opened a little before I came, in 1968. Danish had been educated at a Bauhaus-style school, so together we decided to make the first changes.”<sup>34</sup>

Significant changes occurred to the building itself. Initially, the Institute of Figurative Arts was located in a building on Kavaja Street, then later on Elbasan Street, later again at the “Mihal Grameno” School, until finally settling in 1966 in the historic building on “Mother Teresa” Square. In the mid-60s, more professional studios were set up in the new buildings designed by architect Mauricio Bega. About this, Dilo adds: “[...] large studios were created, with light from the north, [for media] such as textiles, graphics, monumental painting (mural painting and mosaics), painting,

glass. All studios were equipped with cabinets hung on the wall, to which each student had their own key. The plan was to add more. We wanted to open a space dedicated to fashion as well, because at that time those kind of industries could be applied and influence everyday life.”<sup>35</sup>

In November 1969, the customary annual national exhibition, opened at the National Gallery of Figurative Arts, commemorating the 25th anniversary of national liberation. Among the exhibited works were: Sali Shijaku’s monumental and iconic painting of *Vojo Kushi*; as well as *Workers (Punëtorët)* by Vilson Kilica; *In the Electrification Work Site (Në kantierin e dritës)* by Danish Jukniu; and the cycle of linocuts dedicated to the Albanian woman, entitled *Our Road (Rruga Jonë)* by Lumturi Dhrami. While the majority of the artworks explored Albanian themes, certain paintings by Kujtim Buza depicted the Cultural Revolution in China, and others (like those by Lumturi Dhrami, for example) addressed Albania’s friendship with the Arab world.<sup>36</sup>



Anonymous, Teachers at the “Jordan Misja” Artistic Lyceum, photo, year unknown

34 Interview with Ksenofon Dilo about the Higher Institute of Arts. Interviewed by Prof. Najada Hamza.

35 Ibid.

36 *National Exhibition of Figurative Arts*, Tirana: National Gallery of Figurative Arts, 1969.

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