

David Selenica of Vlora and his painting in the Holy Church of Kukuzeli in the Holy Mountain (1715)

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Abstract

David Selenica belongs to a group of painters who in the beginning of the 18th century saw the renaissance of Byzantine painting as inspired by the early period of Paleolog art. David has painted in many well-known churches and monasteries in the southern Balkans. The focus of this paper is on the earliest fresco depicted by David Selenica of Vlora, which can be seen at the Church of St. Mary of Kukuzeli. The Holy Church of Kukuzeli is the second most important church in the Monastery of Great Lavra after the Central Temple (Katholikon). According to the ktitorik writing, the church has been built in 1713, under the supervision of abbot Josif from island Xios. From its kind it belongs to the Athonit style of construction. The small size of the narthex which can be seen inside the church is outweighed by its important role in revealing David's talent associated with great professionalism, as well as his artistic program. This study is based on different kinds of sources which give us accurate information on, the tradition which has given the Church its name, and its architectural features. We will likewise go through the iconographic program applied by the author by describing particular scenes. In addition, by referring to articles, research materials, and bibliographies prepared by Albanian and foreign authors, as well as on an analysis of the fresco which stands at the center of this research paper, we will endeavor to create the profile of this great master of the post-byzantine painting of the early 18th century.

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After the research made by Viktori Puzanova¹ and Theofan Popa² on the work of David Selenica in the Church of St. Kolli in Voskopoje, it was the Greek scholar M. Haxhidhaqi who in the 1980's wrote about the activity of David outside Albania. In an article of 1975³, followed by a bibliography of 1987⁴, Haxhidhaqi provides information about the origin of David based on the fresco which the latter one skillfully painted on the narthex of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Kukuzeli, located inside the Monastery of Great Lavra in Mount Athos⁵. After this discovery, Albanian scholars too engaged in a series of writings on the topic⁶.

According to the information gathered so far, the 1715 mural painting of St. Mary of Kukuzeli is the first prominent fresco realized by David. He has latter contributed to, the decoration of the church of St. Kolli in Voskopoje (1722-1726), the church of Joan Prodhomi in Apozari (Kostur 1727), and the church of Megali Panagia in Thessaloniki (1727-1730). In addition, David has been attributed the authorship for some paintings of saints on the eksonarthex of the Monastery of Docheariut⁷, and for the painting dedicated to the vision of Joan Theologos which can be seen in the Monastery of Simonos Petras⁸ in the Holy Mountain. It is thought that he has worked in the last two mentioned monasteries in the early 18th century.

The Monastery of Great Lavra is among the first ones built in the Holy Mountain. Located in the south-east corner of the peninsula, this monastery was founded by St. Athanas Athoniti, during

¹ V. Puzanova, Shënime mbi artin shqiptar ne sh. XVIII. Buletini i Shkencave Shoqërore. Nr. 1, 1957.

² Th. Popa, Piktorët mesjetarë shqiptarë, Tiranë 1961.

³ " " (1975).249-250.

⁴ " " , 1450 - 1830 :. μ , , 1987.

⁵ According to an inscription that did not survive to our days, "this fresco has been painted by David Selenica of Vlora from Albania". , μ ,po,c.

⁶ Dhimitër Shuteriqi, Gazeta Drita: *Mbi piktorin David Selenica dhe mbi Voskopojen*, 29 janar, 1984; Dhimo Dh."Piktoret Shqiptare te shek.XVI-XVIII dhe vepra e tyre ne Shqiperi dhe vise te tjera te Ballkanit" seria; *Studime Historike*.3.(1985).169-173. Zeqo M."Gjenia e piktorit David nga Vlora" *Gazeta Republika*. tetor(19).1998

⁷ " " μ " " 1957.308-309. .67,3. , μ μ " " μ μ 18 ,2001. .147-151 ,op,c.

⁸ " " μ , 1450 - 1830 :. μ , ,2010. 229

the ruling of the byzantine emperor Niqifor Foka. This monastery is considered as one of great importance among the 20 Athonit monasteries which are today in existence. It is made of 37 chapels, 3 skits, (St. Ana, St, Johan the baptizer and St, Triada, otherwise referred to as Kavsoalyvia), and of many independent cells.

Inside the Monastery of Great Lavra has been built the Church of the Holy Virgin of Kukuzeli, which is also the first building that grasps one's attention once entering the monastery. The small size of the narthex that can be seen inside the church is outweighed by its important role in revealing the artistic program followed by David, and his talent associated with great professionalism. This church carries such name because of the "miraculous" icon of St. Mary of Kukuzeli⁹. Each year, the first day of October is dedicated to St. Mary of Kukuzeli, and it also commemorates the passing away of the great singer and composer, Jan Kukuzeli. He is honored and respected even today in the Holy Mountain for his simple way of living and for his profound knowledge of music. His writings of religious songs are archived inside the Monastery of Great Lavra, and they serve as a clear proof of his activity. Those who have had access to such documents can easily understand why Jan Kukuzeli is so highly appraised in the Holy Mountain¹⁰.

The Holy church of Kukuzeli is considered as the second most important church after the Central Temple (Katholikon) of the Monastery of Great Lavra, which has been dedicated to the evangelism of the Holy Virgin Mary and to St. Athanas Athonit. "Kukuzelissa" is also referred to as Portaitissa or Ikonomissa. According to the ktitorik writing, this temple has been built in 1713¹¹, under the supervision of abbot Josif from island Xios. From its kind it belongs to the Athonit style of construction. It is an instilled cross temple, with a dome and a narthex. Its size is about 16 m- 7.5 m together with the narthex (not including the apse) and 12 meters height. The dome is positioned upon a long and narrow structure. The outside part has an octagonal form. The four columns forming the sole central nave are made of grey marble. This is a hint indicating that perhaps they have been brought here ready made from another place, whereas their capitals have been built for this particular type of construction because they carry carvings and size typical of that period. The temple is enlightened from the eight windows of the dome, from the open windows of the side apses and from the window of the central apse. There are three arched windows in each apse. They are of equal size and of equal distance from one another. Below every central window there is a rectangular shaped window, one for each apse. Narrow vertical shaped windows have built in the corners of the temple. There are six in total. The interior part of the church has been decorated with frescos by "Damaskinos of Janina"¹². According to his own writing, he finished painting the central nave of this church in 1719¹³. This writing can be found

⁹ The legend claims that the church has been raised at the place where Mary appeared to the composer Jan Kukuzeli.

¹⁰ Dhimiter Beduli; "*Kishe dhe kulture*", faqja 29, Tiranë 2006.

¹¹ Millet G." *Recueil des inscriptions chretiennes de l'Athos*" Paris.1904.fq.124.

¹² Millet G." *Recueil des inscriptions chretiennes de l'Athos*"op.c.1904

¹³ Millet G. " l'Athos.."op.c.1904

on the western part, on the gate connecting the central temple with the narthex. The narthex, which is the object of our study, has a rectangular shape and covered by a dome. It is enlightened by four big windows decorated with stained glass. Two of them are located in the northern wall and two on the southern wall. The central gate is surrounded by marble. It is likely that the gate and the windows have been built on a latter period for the purpose of preserving the narthex's painting. Those who have had the chance to observe it recently could notice that it is in a very good condition. As mentioned earlier, according to a writing that did not survive to this day, the frescos of the narthex of St. Mary of Kukuzeli have been painted in 1715 by David of Selenica, from Vlora, Albania¹⁴.

The moment you step inside the narthex you get caught by the diverse and rich scenes. You can also note the artistic elements employed by the author. The limited space looks bigger and gains more volume due to the decorations made by David who shows great skill in applying the architectonic element. The dome, the tromps, the drums, the sustaining arches, the arches of the windows and all the surroundings have been decorated with images of saints, martyrs' medallions, static and vivid scenes which together create a beautiful assemble that gets the full admiration of the visitors. In the first line of the paintings located in the eastern wall there are scenes from the evangelism with Archangel Gabriel and St. Mary, standing on both sides of the gate which leads to the central nave. Above, in the second line of paintings one can view the miracles performed by St. Athanas Athoniti, and on the right, on the southern part of the narthex, is the young martyr St. Stefan, depicted in between two windows. There are four drums – one for each wall – which have been decorated with scenes such as the Grapes, the old Bible, the first Ecumenical Synod and the martyrism of St. Stefan. The scenes on the supporting arches have been dedicated to the Apocalypse. Here we can see a cordon with martyrs' medallions surrounded by dense vegetation. On the gate which leads to the central nave, right in the center of the scenes which show St. Athanas, there is Mary, sitting on her throne with Jesus resting on her knees. In the center of the dome stands the Pantokrator, surrounded from nine angelic orders. All together, they are surrounded from zodiacal symbols, which in subsequence are surrounded by praises (psalm 148, 149, 150). Here we will notice the dance of the Virgins¹⁵, in the depiction of which the artistic creativity of David has relied upon these verses: “Praise him with the sounds of your horns, praise him with the sounds of lutes and harps¹⁶.” “Praise him with tambourines and dancing, praise him with wire and wind musical instruments”. Here, David Selenica has created a scene with fifteen popular characters, linked together by a unique rhythm. King David is standing in the middle, holding a harp in his hands, surrounded by young men who are playing wire and wind musical instruments, accompanied also by the sounds of the tambourines. The girls are holding each other by their hands and dancing happily to the music. This is a very

¹⁴ ,” μ , 1450 – 1830.op,c.

¹⁵ This scene has been at the focus of many studies and it has been called many names but I prefer to name it “the dance of the Parthenas” (the virgins), as the monks of this Monastery did.

¹⁶ Psalmi 148-149,Bibla ”*Dhjata e vjeter dhe Dhjata e Re*” Shoqata Shqipetare e Bibles.botim 1995.fq.1136

expressive scene, which has adopted both folkloric elements, as well as a western concept of the image¹⁷. “The dance” is a festive moment full of life.

The painting on the narthex of the Church of the Holy Virgin of Kukuzeli is important because it is telling about the level of artistic maturity that “David of Selenica” had reached. If we add to his portfolio some icons located on the iconostas of the Monastery of St. Naum, which the scholar Viktorija Popovska Korobar¹⁸ insists that were painted by David of Selenica in 1711, than we can conclude that he had achieved a very high level of artistic maturity. This conclusion gets further support by the fact that David has personally written a “Manual Painting”¹⁹ in 1711. It seems like the author wanted to document the skills which he earned during his experience as an agiograf master.²⁰

David works by making use of “Paleolog models” of painting and by combining all the aesthetical trends of the time, including indirect influences from West European art and folkloric art²¹. He does not wish to simply copy the style which was popular at the time, but he advances in establishing an artistic creativity which reflects his person and is featured by strong expressivity. It is argued that David was among those painters who worked in Mount Athos whose artistic style was a combination of the aesthetic characteristics they learned in their homelands with the traditional Athonite agiografia. He belongs to the elite of painters which raised to the highest level the painting style of the early 18th century, and undoubtedly influenced the following generations of agiograf painters.

¹⁷ For instance, the depiction of the profile of the girls that are dancing.

¹⁸ We refer to the small festive icons attributed to David Selenica, see; “*Ikonopisot vo Ohrid vo XVIII.vek.Skopje* 2005.Korobar.V.“ от А „fq.53.

¹⁹ This painting manual can be found in the library of the Monastery of Great Lavra under the name “codex 127”. See μ’ « Z », .1998.

²⁰ This information supports the hypothesis of Dhorka Dhamo that claims that David Selenica was born around 1680 or perhaps earlier than that, see; Dhamo Dh.”Piktoret Shqiptare te shek.XVI-XVIII dhe vepra e tyre ne Shqiperi dhe vise te tjera te Ballkanit”op,c.

²¹ ” μ μ 18 ,2001.op,c.



Photo 1. (It shows the southern side of the church) A. Palushi



Photo 2. (It shows the entrance of the Church) A.Palushi

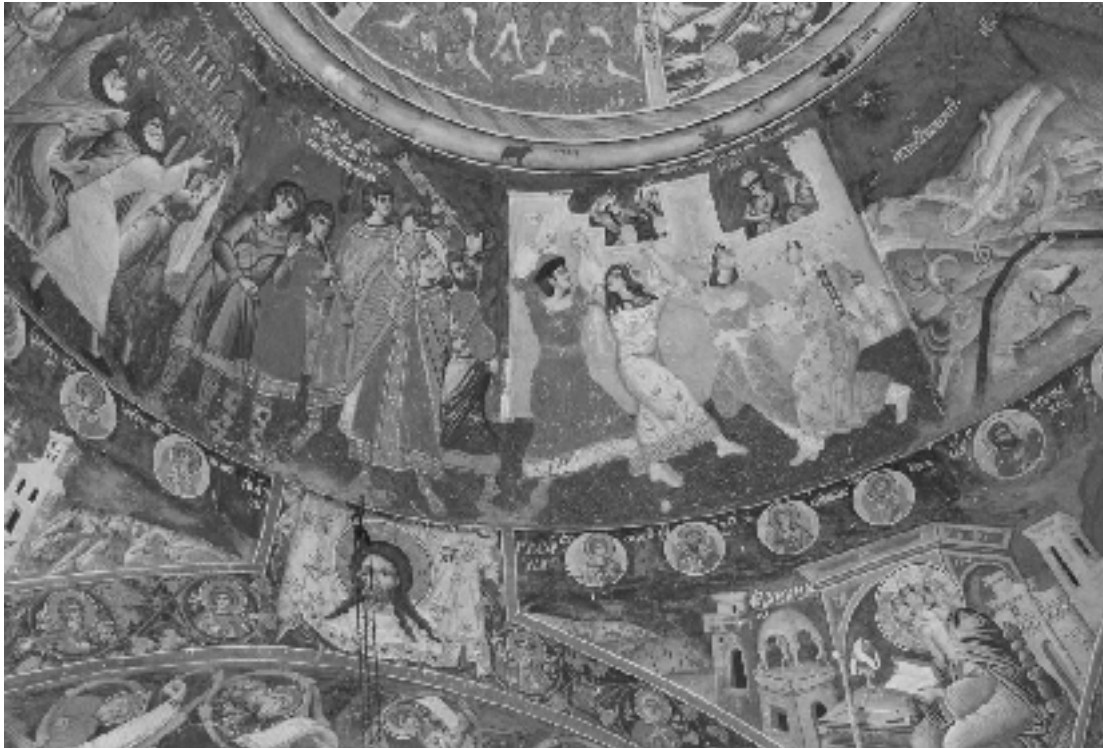


Photo 3. (It shows the scene of the Dance of the Parthenas on the narthex of the church. This is a fresco depicted by David) A. Palushi