

The Future of the Past: Bringing Attention to Plovdiv's Forgotten Mural Art

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Abstract. This paper presents a project initiated by National Library "Ivan Vazov", which aims to raise awareness of Plovdiv's socialist-era mural artworks and to rethink the essence of their presence in the city. The library holds 95 project proposals for monumental art which will be digitized and included within the discourse. The 30-year distance allows a dispassionate view of this heritage, fostering a sense of awareness for their value. The project includes the realization of a bilingual monograph, a traveling exhibition and a website.

Keywords: Digitization, Plovdiv, Cultural Heritage, Mural.

1 Introduction

The proposal of the National Library "Ivan Vazov" – Plovdiv (NLIV) for a project titled "Art and public space: mural and decorative art projects by Plovdiv artists from the collections of Plovdiv National Library", was chosen for funding by the Plovdiv 2019 Foundation. The project activities will take place 2021-2022.

The project is part of the Legacy II program of Plovdiv - European Capital of Culture 2019, which distributes the financial resources of the Melina Mercouri Prize, and is implemented in the Creative Plovdiv segment. This direction aims to promote the potential of Plovdiv artists and cultural organizations.

The aim of the project is to present the collection "Project proposals for works of mural and decorative art in synthesis with architecture" to the public through the realization of a bilingual monograph - an album with the projects and their realizations in Plovdiv, as photographed in 2021, a traveling exhibition and a website with four routes in Plovdiv, following the artists authors of the projects, Yoan Leviev, Anastasiya Kmetova, Dimitar Kirov and Encho Pironkov.

The chronological boundaries of the NLIV collection cover the period 1961–1983. The authors of the projects are Yoan Leviev (31 projects), Anastasiya Kmetova (24 projects), Dimitar Kirov (23 projects) and Encho Pironkov (17 projects). Co-authors are Ana Grebenarova, Kolyu Vitkovski, Sabi Sabev, Georgi Boyadzhiev. The geographical coverage of the works is significant and speaks convincingly about the influence of the Plovdiv group of muralists in the Bulgarian artistic life. The sites in Plovdiv

are 55, in Plovdiv region 11 (in the towns of Hissar, Parvomay, Karlovo, Banya, Stamboliyski, Sadovo) and there are 22 across the country (in Sofia, Burgas, Shumen, Silistra, Kozloduy, Blagoevgrad, Botevgrad, Yambol, Sliven, Chirpan, Devin, Bratan peak monument - Sredna Gora, Buzludzha monument, etc.).

The building of the library itself is an example of the synthesis between architecture and monumental art. Inside, on the second floor, is located a large mural triptych, paying tribute to the patron of the library Ivan Vazov and the literary characters created by him (Fig.1.). The mural is accomplished with the “wet fresco” technique and was finished at the time of the official opening of the newly built library in 1974. The images depict characters and scenes from the emblematic works by Vazov: "Uncles" created by Georgi “The Elephant” Bozhilov (1935–2001), “Under the Yoke” and “Sluzhbogontsi” - Ioan Leviev (1934–1994), “The Epic of the Forgotten” - Hristo Stefanov (1931–2013). Guided by the idea of preserving this exceptional monumental work for future generations, in 2020 the library initiated a restoration procedure¹.



Fig. 1. Mural triptych at the National Library “Ivan Vazov”

According to preliminary information, currently 14 project realizations in the city of Plovdiv no longer exist, are in bad condition or have been compromised due to inadequate subsequent intervention.

Work on the project is underway with the following activities planned for 2021:

Table 1. Project activities planned for 2021.

Type of activity	Beginning	End
Digitization of the project proposals	May 2021	June 2021
Field work: localization and study of the current state of the works; formation of four walking routes in the city to showcase the four authors' works	June 2021	August 2021
Photographing the current state of the works in Plovdiv	September 2021	October 2021

¹ A video footage of the restoration may be seen in the library's YouTube profile: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3_ul7ujFyU

2 Aim and Scope of the Project

Monumental art as a form of artistic activity is permanently present in the artistic panorama of Bulgarian art from the second half of the XX century. After 1990, its status as official state-supported art began to disintegrate progressively, and the institutional mechanisms of commissioning and reimbursement disappeared. Civic consciousness is looking for a way to free itself from the oppressive grip of the past, and the reaction of the collective public attitude seeks to erase its visual signs. Due to its axiomatic connection with government commissioning, and hence with state-party power, the works of mural art remain on the periphery of public attention to this day. The topic thus becomes a means to develop an awareness of historicity, so that the culture of one society would strive to preserve its past - if not for any other reason, to learn from its mistakes. (Chulova-Markova, *The mural decoration of entertainment establishments in Plovdiv (60's-90's of the XX century)*, 2007, p. 187)

Taking into account its inherent connection with the political conjuncture of the time, we focus on the aesthetic and sociological existence of the mural and decorative art in our city today. The 30-year distance allows a dispassionate view of this heritage. Many of the buildings with mural decoration in Plovdiv no longer exist, others are deteriorating, have their functions changed and others have mural artworks that are deliberately neglected, erasing their traces. With the lack of purpose, the mural ceases to live in a functional environment. It remains possible to preserve, show and study it as part of the polemical and diverse history of Bulgarian art.



Fig. 2. LEFT - Yoan LEVIEV, underpass at G. Dimitrov Blvd. – Plovdiv (renamed to Tsar Boris III Unifier Blvd.), Proposal for mosaic artwork “ΦΙΛΙΠΠΟΠΟΛΙΣ”, realized in 1969, call number: МД Левиев/6; RIGHT – recent photograph of the realized mosaic artwork

The project initiated by NLIV focuses on raising awareness of cultural specifics, fostering a sense of responsibility for their value, and making the city vibrant and more attractive - by discovering forgotten urban spaces and changing the way we think about Plovdiv - a better place to live and a more desirable tourist destination. We turn the past into the future by creating a bridge between epochs, generations, and cultural layers.

The project is aimed at the citizenship of Plovdiv and the audience professionally related to the topic of "mural and decorative art" nationwide.

Public space is a matrix of urban memory, because the city is a living organism, connecting people with their daily needs and dreams. The design of the urban environment should serve as a unified integrative tool through which the various public spaces are coordinated in ensembles. The design must guarantee sustainability over time - a combination of historical continuity and development. This requires a sense of understanding and sensitivity to the existing environment and its historical value, as well as to the inherited decorative and architectural solutions. Authenticity is important because a city, preserving itself in time, exemplifies the very essence of the coexistence of its citizens in a single community. By ensuring cultural continuity in terms of the visual environment, today's physical appearance of the city corresponds to its authentic history - so people would be much more willing to be committed to their city, to participate and contribute to its well-being. The album, exhibition and website, which will be created for the project, will illustrate the relationship between the murals' birth and their current state, which can be seen as a bridge between generations living in different aesthetic and visual contexts from the recent past and today.

3 Artists and Monumental Art

The "April Plenum" of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, which took place in early April 1956, was an important moment in the political history of Bulgaria during its communist period. The direction of the decisions taken were determined by the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956. The "April Plenum" steered the ideological course in a renewed direction, changed the party's top governing bodies and renounced the cult of personality. In the field of arts, the plenum led to a certain "thawing" of the ideological grip on cultural production. Despite not being given full freedom of expression, artists were provided with a broader scope of communicative possibilities, the tolerated modes of expression widened, notions of acceptable aesthetic stretched beyond the strictly political and outside contemporary modernist art influences were allowed to be incorporated.

The works of monumental art became more and more ambitious, gradually "taking over" architecture. They spread over a larger area and imposed their status as both accents and as factors shaping the architectural space. The late 70's and early 80's marked an expansion of the boundaries of the individual arts, through their mutual diffusion into each other. It was no longer enough for artists to make wall artwork, the dimensions of which are exhausted by drawing a clear line between mural and architecture, or by a transition between the depicted and the architectural space. (Markov, 2014)

It was at the end of the 50's and especially in the 60's that a generation of talented Plovdiv artists emerged, who took advantage of the newly acquired deregulation of artistic expression and started an artistic upheaval in the city. Yoan Leviev, Dimitar Kirov, Encho Pironkov, Hristo Stefanov and Georgi Bozhilov, known as the "Plovdiv Five", are among the most recognized. Each of them, to a different degree, is engaged in the monumental arts and together with their colleagues Anastasiya Kmetova, Dimitar

Mitsev, Ivan Kirkov and others, changed the look of Plovdiv by developing building facades, interiors and public spaces. Their works, created in the late 60's and early 70's, may be considered a new step in the development of contemporary Bulgarian monumental and decorative painting. Undoubtedly, Plovdiv at this time became a kind of a centre of Bulgarian monumentalism. (Stefanov & Kirov, 1986, p. 122)

The artists' work employed a variety of materials and techniques, such as murals, sgraffito, ceramics, mosaics, glass and more. In their art, history, mythology and folklore are not confined to the narrow confines of past epochs, but are interpreted broadly, becoming a visual code for presenting the present. (Chulova-Markova, History and Mythology in the Works of Plovdiv Monumental Artists in the 1960s and 1980s, 2004, p. 88)

The artists represented in NLIV's collection of 95 project proposals for monumental artworks are Yoan Leviev (1934-1994), Anastasiya Kmetova (1933-), Dimitar Kirov (1935-2008) and Encho Pironkov (1932-).

Yoan Leviev (Fig.2.) and Dimitar Kirov (Fig.3.) both studied Monumental and Decorative Art at the National Art Academy in Sofia at the end of the 50's, in the class of Prof. Georgi Bogdanov, who was the founder of the discipline at the Academy and instrumental in defining the technical and aesthetic objectives of Bulgarian large-scale art in the years to come. Both Leviev and Kirov were active as creators of monumental artworks, such as large-scale murals and mosaics, and have many realized projects throughout the whole country. They were also prolific painters and worked in scenography for opera, theatre and film.



Fig. 3. LEFT - Dimitar KIROV, "Orpheus" project for sgraffito mural - Plovdiv, Saborna Str., realized in 1972 (Call number: МД Киров/1) ; RIGHT – recent photograph of the realized project

Plovdiv is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the World. (The Guardian, n.d.) During its long history it has been settled by numerous peoples: Thracians, Romans, Byzantines, Bulgarians, Ottoman Turks, Greeks, Jewish, Armenians all of which contributed to the city's rich historical heritage and left an abundance of architectural and pictorial artifacts, which have been preserved and shape the city's appearance to this day. Leviev, Kirov and their colleagues at the time emphasized the ancient origin of the pictorial culture connected with Plovdiv as the center of the Bulgarian tradition, and envisioned the role of Plovdiv artists as continuators of the direction begun centuries ago. (Chulova-Markova, The mural decoration of entertainment establishments in Plovdiv (60's-90's of the XX century), 2007, p. 187)

Anastasiya Kmetova graduated the National Art Academy in Sofia in 1958 with a degree in Ceramics. This knowledge she transferred to creating monumental art, preferring to work with the ceramic medium (Fig.4.), but also sgraffito, relief, etc.

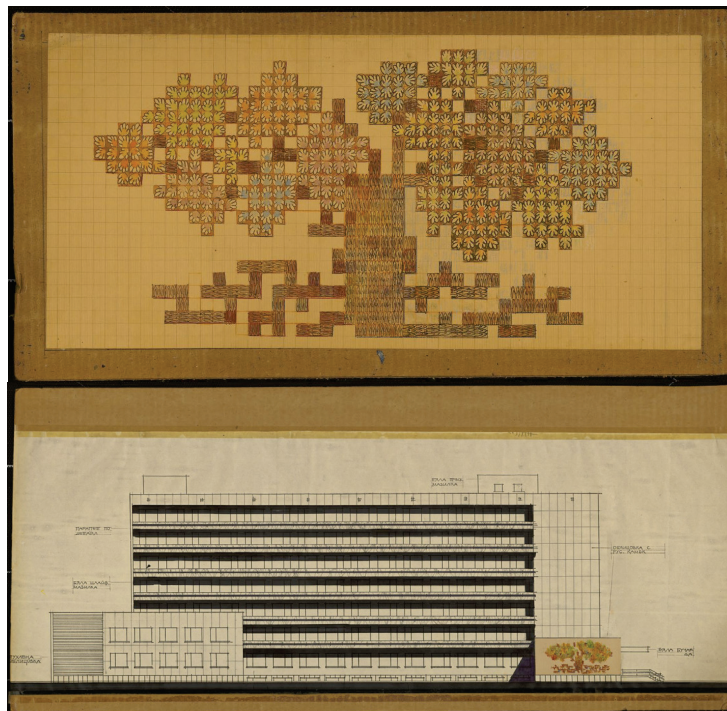


Fig. 4. Anastasiya KMETOVA, “The Tree of Life” Retirement home – South facade – Plovdiv, proposal for a module composition with glazed tiles, realized in 1983 in 55 m size. Scale 1:25 (Call number: МД Кметова/3)

Encho Pironkov (Fig. 5.) was born in 1932 in the village of Rozovets (Plovdiv Municipality). Despite not having an academic education in the arts, he became an integral

figure of the emerging Plovdiv artistic transformation of the late 50s. His powerful expressive painting relies on the intoxicating impact of color and dramatic spatial structure constructed by means of extreme usages of light and shadow. (Linkov, 2016, p. 8)

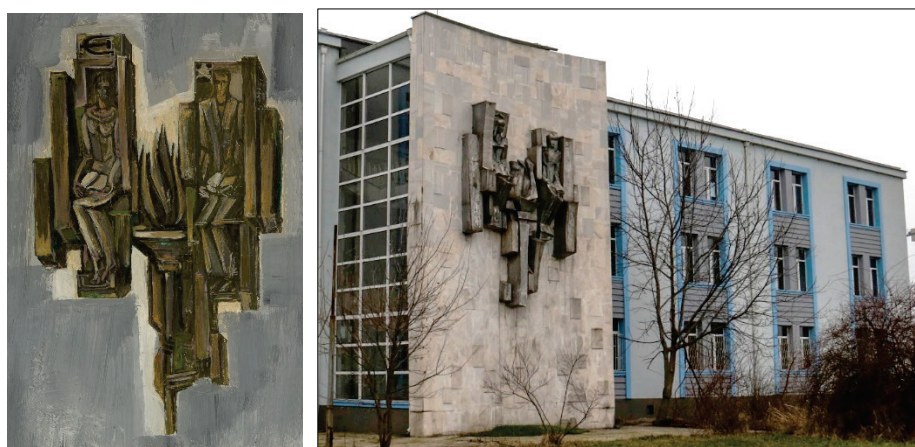


Fig. 5. LEFT – Encho PIRONKOV, project proposal for wall-mounted metal sculpture – English Language School - Plovdiv, realized (Call number: МД Пиронков/1); RIGHT – recent photograph of the realized project

4 The “Project Proposals” Collection and Its Digitization

The project proposals collection in the library was formed on the basis of a contract that was concluded between the NLIV and The State Commission for Fine and Applied Arts and Architecture on March 5, 1979, which at the time was headed by the Hristo Stefanov, a renowned artist associated with Plovdiv and the author of a mural in the library. The commission undertook to organize the collection and to transfer all projects, cardboard cutouts, models and other auxiliary materials and to provide them free of charge for storage and for the formation of a specialized collection. The library in turn was responsible to organize the collection into a library unit, to preserve it, to process it and to make it available for use, to create bibliographical records and to promote it.



Fig. 6. Restoration and conservation works on a project proposal by Yoan Leviev and Ana Grebenarova with call number МД Левиев/21

After their arrival in the library, the project proposals were physically organized into a separate collection and the necessary preservation conditions were ensured. Thus only one of the projects required preliminary restoration work prior to digitization (Fig.6.). The digitization of the originals will be accomplished with a planetary scanner i2S A0 format, which can effectively scan large format documents, such as maps and graphic materials. In this way a high quality image may be achieved without the need to resort to stitching separate images together in post-processing.

The project "Art and public space: mural and decorative art projects by Plovdiv artists from the collections of Plovdiv National Library" includes the preparation of a website where the scanned project proposals will be displayed together with the photographed current state of the realized monumental works. However, the images will be made available also in the library's permanent digital collection, so that access to them will be guaranteed – a task especially important in the current times, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, as the demand for credible e-resources surges, digital libraries have emerged as vital pathways to high-quality e-books, journals and educational content. Statistics from the world's leading e-libraries testify to their cultural significance (Falt & Das, 2020)

5 Conclusion

Ultimately, society's memories of the past inform its present. The examples of monumental art, point of interest for the project, were born out of critical historical episodes which deserve to be kept in the public conscious as points of reference. An inanimate object itself is devoid of any intrinsic meaning - it is formed as a product of the mind's cognitive processes. From a semiotic standpoint, much of the meaning attached to Socialist-era Bulgarian art may be considered a myth, "a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alteration." (Barthes, 1972, p. 118) Recognizing myths, deconstructing them and disentangling their power relations is of utmost

importance and nurtures critical thought, which is essential for the well-being of society.

The word "monumental" comes from the Latin "moneo" - "reminder". We are confident that the implementation of the project will remind the citizens and guests of the city of this forgotten layer of cultural heritage from the recent past and will preserve the memory of the mural monuments, which no longer exist in our city.

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