

Communicating Politics through Artwork

A Case Study on the “Mother Albania” Monument

Erisa Korumi¹

¹Graduate Student of International Relations and Political Sciences at University of New York Tirana, Albania, erisakorumi@outlook.com

ABSTRACT: Art has always something to say. And artworks such as the Mother Albania lapidary statue carry much history with it. The Mother Albania is a monument close to the outer part of Tirana. This statue has been there for half a century now, holding history and especially symbolism, which communicates to us realities, that Albania, used to live. The work on this monument begins in a very intense period of political, economic and ideological activity. This ideological activity from the state was part of the ‘revolutionization’ of the country, where art was also included. By and large, the communication of the leader’s political ideology came through art, specifically through sculpture. This paper might seem as a ‘find the hidden treasure’ game to you, tracking the details in art pieces, specifically in sculpture, that communicated the communist ideology.

KEYWORDS: Mother Albania, lapidary, political, art, communication, revolutionary, significance, Enver Hoxha

Introduction

To a large extent, the majority of Albanian monuments were created between the periods 1945-1990. During this time Albania was under communist regime, headed by Enver Hoxha, the First Secretary of People’s Socialist Republic of Albania (Van Gerven Oei, 2015). As such, there was no way for artwork as well, not to be influenced or used by the party’s ideologies, historian Van Gerven Oei states (2015). Architect Maks Velo also underlines “Sculpture’s development in Albania runs parallel with the roughening of dictatorship and the increasing paranoia of the period” (Velo 2005). Sculpture, and especially the monumental one, took a very important position. This what I intend to mirror in this paper; the presence of the communist propaganda in artworks, by analyzing the political communist rhetoric of First Secretary Enver Hoxha and the party. I intend to

compare and describe the two by providing evidences on respectively, the lapidary statue, the political rhetoric of the head of the state and by thereafter analyzing the two.

Mother Albania Lapidary Statue

The monument was built in 1972 by Kristaq Rama, Muntaz Dhrami and Shaban Haderi, in order to honor the memory of the martyrs sacrificed in the war against the fascist conqueror. They won the competition to design the new cemetery after it was announced, in 1966 (van Gerven Oei 2015). The statue is 12 meters high and placed over a 3 meters pedestal. It is made of granite and cement to gain the white color it was planned to have. Mother Albania stands tall, with her right leg moving forward, creating the idea as if she is walking (Fig.1). Her right hand is lifted up towards the sky, while the left one stands parallel to the ground. Researcher van Gerven Oei interprets this position as the spiritual part of the lapidary. Mother Albania is the one who creates the connection or touch between the martyrs (symbolized by the left hand parallel to earth) and the divine, the celestial (symbolized by the right hand lifted up to the sky). Linking the divine/ immortal to the earthly/ mortal beings; it is as if through this artistic metaphor, the statue makes the martyrs eternal, by connecting them to the divine. As if this is the message it wants to give. Mother Albania has in her right hand a laurel branch and a star (Fig.1). The laurel, according to Oxford Student's dictionary, is an evergreen shrub with shiny leaves, which was used by the ancient Romans and Greeks as an emblem of victory, success and distinction. It can be again linked to the everlasting memory of the martyrs, which will never fade in this case and to the triumph against the fascist conqueror. The statue as well, seems to be facing a strong wind as the robe she has dressed is taken away to the back. The cap has fallen from her head and we can see the hair and the face showing forward. The dramatic effect can suggest a sort of a revolutionary emotion in the way.

Up to this point we encounter no obvious political rhetoric in the lapidary statue. Only the star placed in the right hand could be interpreted as the first direct political symbol in this monument, as the main symbol of communism (Pearson, 2006).



Figure 1, Untitled print

Political rhetoric

To better analyze the aforementioned elements of the statue, we will have to explore and perceive an idea of the overall socio-political rhetoric in Albania during the time the lapidary was built. Similarly, to all communist countries, the political and economic plan of Albania was organized in five-year cycles alongside party's conventions. As Smirnova and Zavalani describe in their researches, this meant that with the beginning of every cycle there were massive campaigns coming from the party (Smirnova 2004 & Zavalani 1998). By 1969, the Albanian party ideologists gave to the political plan the character of a new era of discovery and of a revolutionary one. The word 'revolutionary' was added to every initiative (Smirnova 2004 & Zavalani 1998). In one of the plenums of the Central Committee of Albanian Labor Party in 1969, Enver Hoxha unveiled the slogan: "1970 must be the year of an unprecedented revolutionary attack in all directions" (Smirnova 2004).

In specific, art was part of these campaigns. The beginning of the 70's, as Pearson emphasizes, brought to life the campaign of 'ideo-aesthetical war' against outer and foreign influences, specifically against those of liberal character. This period also brought many changes for women's role in society. It was part of the socialist agenda the emancipation of women in society, their right to vote, of inheritance, etc. (Pearson 2006). Even the term

“Mother Albania” was used widely during communism. The party was differently called “Mother Party”. Therefore, we see that the terminology of the socialist package was used in many aspects.

During another plenum of the party in 1973, First Secretary Hoxha would state: “Writers and artists are aiders and helpers of the Party for the communist education of the people” (Velo 2005). In other words, it was evidently expected for art to serve political aims and educate people on the system. Not only, but the well-known architect Velo goes on to further the limits. He writes: “Dictators look for artists to do symbol artworks of themselves. They recruit sculptors to do their busts and monuments, during their lives and after it” (Velo 2005). And in fact, on May 5th 1985, a picture of Mother Albania in the Drita newspaper, as presented in Figure 2, was published. In the photo there are numerous small pictures of partisans and martyrs drawn in the robe, of the statue, and right in the middle the face of Enver Hoxha wearing the signature scarf of the partisans. To be specific this happened on the National Day of Martyrs of the Nation. According to Van Gerven Oei this is a concrete attempt to equalize the figure of Hoxha with the nurturing figure of the nation-mother (Van Gerven Oei 2014). Could this be an attempt for Hoxha to eternalize his figure, through personifying himself with the statue and its message? By the time Hoxha had passed away, and this photo is classifying him as a martyr. There is a clear intention to use art as a form of political embodiment.

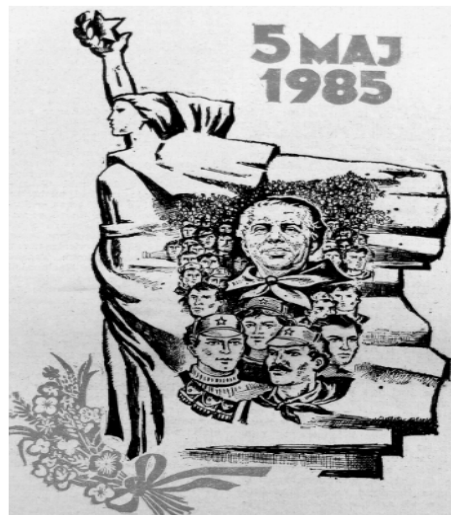


Figure 2, Untitled print, From Drita, May 5, 1985

Analysis and Discussion

One of the first details that Van Gerven Oei also emphasizes is the fact that the lapidary is specifically a woman. This should sound particularly odd in a society as patriarchal as the Albanian one was. But while studying Pearson and understanding that the emancipation of women was part of the socialist agenda, the monument takes much political nuances. It becomes clear that the fact the lapidary itself is a woman gives a political message. The figure of mother, the nurturing and caring one, was equalized with the party. “Mother Albania” or “Mother Party”, kept being used, hence we can create an immediate link between the monument and its political significance. The artwork is in this case communicating an element of the political ideology; that of the emancipation of women.

In addition, considering the position the statue has, (tall and in a walking motion) the specific way it stands gives the idea of a ‘revolutionary’ act. The wind that moves back the veil she has dressed, adds up to this tone, as if she is facing the Wind of Change. If we go back to Hoxha’s rhetoric about the ‘revolutionary’ actions of the party, it could create a relation with the effect created by the position of the statue. The revolutionary ideas being mirrored in the statue. Furthermore, we observe the hand lifted to the sky, where Mother Albania holds the laurel branch and a star. Let us recall that the star is the main symbol of communist era. And it could be the most evident political detail communicated to us from the statue. The fact that it is positioned in the higher position of the monument, headed to the sky could be interpreted as a glorification of communism. The star is at the highest point of the monument, by lifting therefore the symbolic of the system above everyone else. Not only, but if we add to this the position of her hands, creating the spiritual connection between the divine and eternal and the earthly people, by making them eternal, she is making it through communism, or making communism eternal (with the star in her hand facing the sky). So, one could interpret this as if the martyrs are glorified, immortalized and eternalized through communism and with it.

Lastly, going back to figure 2 being published in the newspaper, with the figure of Enver Hoxha pictured in the lapidary we can unify once more the concept of ‘Mother Albania’ with the ‘Mother Party’ and their correlation with Hoxha. The maternal nurturing figure being linked to the state and the party. It seems as if willingly the dictator wanted the people to relate his figure to that of a mother, the one that provides for and secures her infants. And yet again, if the eternalization of the martyrs is messaged through the position of the statue, in this case, more obviously is messaged the one of Hoxha. Hence, that of communism too.

Conclusions

Through our observation we were able to describe the lapidary statue, to present the political background of the time and to finally offer a comparison between the two by using this data. We were able to crystalize the fact that, without considering the political and historical context of the time the monument was built, we cannot see the communist touch on this artwork. But that rather, through studying the language of the head of state, his rhetoric and that of the party, we find numerous ideological symbols mirrored in the monument as well. Hence, by comprehending how artwork and especially the monumental sculpturing were highly linked to the political rhetoric through symbolism. I would invite other students and researchers to further and widen this research through studying other artworks or specifically the Mother Albania lapidary statue by expanding so the work on the communist propaganda. The general lack of research in the field of art related to politics during the communist years constitutes in fact the main difficulties through this research.

References:

2000. *Oxford Student's Dictionary of Current English*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, pp. 358.
- Pearson, O. 2006. *Albania as dictatorship and Democracy: From Isolation to the Kososvo War, 1946-1998*. Centre for Albanian Studies, London, England, vol.3, pp. 172-340.
- Smirnova, N. 2004. *Historia e Shqipërisë Përgjatë shek.XX*. përkth. Korab Hoxha, Fatmir Mborja. Ideart Editions, Tiranë, Albania, pp. 30-205.
- Van Gerven Oei, V.W.J. 2015. “*We raise our Eyes and Feel as if She rules the Sky*”: *The Mother Albania Monument and the Visualization of National History*, ed. Van Gerven Oei, Punctum Books, Brooklyn, New York & The Department of Eagles, Tiranë, Albania, pp. 73-88.
- Velo, M. 2005. *Kohe Antishenje*. Zenit Editions, Tirane, Albania, pp. 213- 275.
- Zavalani, Tajar. 1998. *Histori e Shqipnis*. ed. Ilir Nikolla, Sejdin Cekani, PHOENIX Press, Albania, pp. 343-359.