

first publication

IMAGE-ING THE BALKANS: Non-creative Others, Attention Deficits, and Art as a Problem

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1 Faroqhi, Suraiya/Adanir, Fikret (Eds.): *The Ottomans and the Balkans: a Discussion of Historiography*. Leiden: Brill 2002; Naimark, Norman M./Case, Holly (Eds.): *Yugoslavia and Its Historians: Understanding the Balkan Wars of the 1990s*. Stanford: Stanford UP 2003; Ivanišević, Andreas/Kappeler, Walter Lukan/Suppan, Arnold (Eds.): *Klio ohne Fesseln? Historiographie im östlichen Europa nach dem Zusammenbruch des Kommunismus*. Vienna: Peter Lang 2002; Brunnbauer, Ulf (Ed.): *(Re)writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*. Münster: Lit 2004. The latter provides thus far the most systematic, country-by-country survey of developments in the field since 1989. For a questioning of the general discussion's regionalist logic – less as a critique than as a product of that dialogue – cf. also the other papers in *Balkan Studies: Quo Vadis?* (eds. Maximilian Hartmuth and Ursula Reber) at <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans> (Vienna: Kakanien Revisited 2009).

2 Hartmuth, Maximilian: Is there a crisis in *Balkan Studies*? A Position Paper. In: *Kakanien Revisited*, <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/MHartmuth1.pdf>, 15.09.2009, p. 3.

3 While not explicitly using this terminology, cf. the articles in Bédarida, François (Ed.): *The Social Responsibility of the Historian*. Providence/RI: Berghahn 1994, for insightful thoughts on the relationship between historian and society.

4 Cf. Baleva, Martina: *Nationalmythos Batak: die Dekonstruktion eines Bildes und die Folgen*. In: *Kritische Berichte* 2 (2008), pp. 21–30.

5 The proceedings were published nevertheless: Baleva, Martina/Brunnbauer, Ulf (Eds.): *Batak kato mjesto na pametta / Batak als bulgarischer Erinnerungsort*. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad 2007.

6 Riding, Alan: *An Essay; Islamic Art as a Mediator for Cultures in Confrontation*. In: *New York Times* (06.04.2004); <http://www.nytimes>.

The past decade has seen the publication of a number of collective volumes on the state of history-writing in, or on, the Southeast European region.¹ As already noted in my position paper preceding the workshop *Balkan Studies: Quo Vadis?*,² these volumes, however compelling, espouse a strict focus on history as written in institutions devoted to research on and education in »history proper« on the one hand, and on the too often neglected historiographical output by amateur historians, which similarly partakes in the process of a »social production of history«,³ on the other. This essay seeks to question the premises and effects of an externalization of art and art history from this discourse inside and outside academia. I shall introduce its problématique with the case of a recent event on the history scene and its visual dimension: in 2007 a German-Bulgarian team of researchers was to organize in Batak, site of a massacre perpetrated in the last years of Ottoman rule, a conference and exhibition addressing this massacre's afterlife. The researchers diagnosed that Batak had become a Bulgarian *lieu de mémoire*, and one to which anti-Muslim stereotypes were attached. One of the scholars was to report about her research on a Polish artist's painting produced long after the event, and the apparently fabricated photographs he used for purpose of study. All had later served on many occasions to visually illustrate the horrors of this massacre in particular and the national suffering under the »Ottoman yoke« in general.⁴ When extremist rightist groups and populist media got word of the event, however, they began reporting that the researchers' goal was really to deny that the massacre as such had ever happened. The ensuing upheaval forced not only the cancellation of the conference but also saw its organizers receive death threats.⁵ In the staged controversy nuances, such as the fact that deconstructing paintings and photographs is not the same as questioning the historical event, were completely swallowed up.

The Batak episode surprised many in that it showed how strong emotions could be stirred up by a single painting. Most of us would also have to admit to have never seen this painting – though it apparently claims a highly significant place in Bulgarian historical consciousness – nor, for that matter, a large number of other recognizable and knowable artworks from the region that are of relevance while discussing the history of the region in general. Why is this so? As so often, there is not one but several reasons. We shall here discuss some of the factors resulting in the lack of acquaintance with this heritage, pointing first to a certain paradox: the 1990s witnessed a boom in publications on the Balkans, both academic and popular. This, of course, owed to the conflicts then escalating in the region, which had people all around the world puzzled as to the reasons for this seemingly sudden hostility. A decade later, a similar boom in publications – now on Islam and Muslims – could be witnessed after 9/11, especially in the United States. Not only had this new powder keg – a volatile Middle East bereft of its geographical located-ness – decreased the interest the Balkans could briefly enjoy, but it also resulted in a somewhat different response at the pertinent institutions: university chairs and museum exhibitions of Islamic Art were newly founded or revitalized; a conciliatory essayist at the *New York Times* pointed to the potential role of Islamic Art as »a mediator for cultures in confrontation«.⁶

When they did not deal with terrorist organizations as such, books on Islam and Muslims published after 2001 tended to stress that there was actually nothing inherently wicked about Islam, and that terrorist fundamentalism was in actual fact a misunderstanding of this faith's fundamentals. Many 1990s books on the Balkans, by contrast, rather hinted at supposed continuities in violence and violent-ness; a take often referred to as the »ancient hatreds thesis«.⁷ Moreover, nobody then was heard pointing to the potential of art as »a mediator for cultures in confrontation«. Chairs were founded not in art history departments but in those engaged with Nationalism Studies and Conflict Management.⁸

At the same time it could not be claimed that Western audiences were not principally familiar with the fact that in Southeast Europe there could also be found, among other things, remarkable architectural monuments. Images of burning and shelled Sarajevo or Dubrovnik were, after all, quite commonplace in Western media during the 1990s. But, somehow, this did not translate into a greater interest in the region's cultural heritage abroad, or at least not as far as can be measured through an increase of academic publications in this field.⁹

com/2004/04/06/arts/an-essay-islamic-art-as-a-mediator-for-cultures-in-confrontation.html. Cf. also Flood, Finbarr Barry: *From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art*. In: Mansfield, Elisabeth (Ed.): *Making Art History: a Changing Discipline and its Institutions*. London: Routledge 2007, pp. 31-53, esp. p. 38f.

7 On which cf. also Hartmuth 15.09.2009, p. 4 (note 19).

8 I know of only one museum in non-Balkan Europe that displayed objects specifically from the cultural history of Southeast Europe in a standing exhibition – the Austrian Museum of Folk Art's dependency in Kittsee – and that institution closed last year due to chronic lack of funds.

9 One of the few exceptions is Pašić, Amir: *Islamic Architecture in Bosnia and Hercegovina*. Istanbul: IRCICA 1994, a publication hastily prepared in response to the destruction in that former Yugoslav republic. While articles (and even books) on the destruction of monuments abound, few of these have as their aim the dissemination of knowledge about the monuments as such, addressing instead their fate in the 1990s as a result of nationalist mobilization. The many restoration and (re)construction projects following these destructions, usually sponsored by Western or Arab institutions and donors, have generally not resulted in academic studies on these monuments.

10 Cf. projects like Elkins, James (Ed.): *Is Art History Global?* New York: Routledge 2007.

Not even the recent wave of interest in Islamic Art has resulted in a greater interest in this facet of the Balkan heritage [ill. 1].



ill. 1: Skopje, Çifte Hamam/Çifte Amam, mid-15th century; in terms of its exquisite ornamentation a noteworthy, yet little known, monument of the early Ottoman period. Its founder, İsa Bey, the grandson of the commander who conquered Skopje in 1391 or 1392, is also considered the founder of the town of Sarajevo. In the 15th century he and his father İshak proved responsible for much of the new infrastructure of Skopje. This architectural heritage – in terms of typology, style, and function – is quite different from that dating from the 16th century and later periods, yet is most often lumped together as »Ottoman« or »Turkish«. The ornament – interestingly in the two extant public baths applied more generously than in other architectural types – may be described as expressive of an internationalist Islamic idiom (with later examples more distinctly Ottoman), while construction techniques appear to have changed little compared with the pre-Ottoman period (cf. the many Christian monuments spread around Skopje). Today the building serves as an art gallery.

It is one of the claims of this essay that this situation, which might be referred to as an »attention deficit«, serves but to maintain and reinforce the image of the Balkans as an essentially conflictuous, non-creative, or creatively invisible space, which is an image I deem misleading. The almost total absence of examples from Southeast Europe in standard art history survey textbooks indeed implies that there was nothing from this region that deserved mention, at least not in matters beyond merely local concern. This brings us to the following problems in art-historical scholarship: outside the region, few efforts have been made to consider the region's cultural heritage on its own terms and not solely in its relation to other (and better known) historical cultures [ill. 2].

Where considered, the question was not necessarily how works of art and architecture relate to the culture or society that produced them, or what this case might be able to tell us in a more integrated history of art about universal cultural processes. Rather, how works of art and architecture from Southeast Europe relate to, and compare with, contemporary or earlier works of art in Byzantium, Venice, or the Ottoman and Habsburg empires was examined. From such a perspective the region's artistic phenomena indeed appeared as mere provincial echoes of metropolitan cultures centred elsewhere. It is now a dated understanding of the discipline's mission that individual works of art need only be considered where they have verifiably contributed to the development of a given style in an evolutionist narrative history of Art (i.e. Western art) that begins in Egypt, triumphs in Italy, and ends in France. But even now that there are again voices stressing the necessity of a global, or at least more encompassing, history of art,¹⁰ one is still more likely to hear of the traditions of truly remote societies than about this corner of the European continent.

11 O.M.D. In: The Burlington Magazine
for Connoisseurs 37/211 (1920),
pp. 205-7, cit. p. 205.



ill. 2: Ferres (Ferai), monastery church of the Panagia Kosmosoteira, 1152. Despite its unpretentious size, this church is generally thought of as the prime example of Byzantine architecture between Constantinople and Thessaloniki. In fact, it has been considered unusually monumental for a provincial building, in terms of size corresponding roughly with the most remarkable expressions of Christian architecture in the Balkans in the later medieval period. With regard to their dimensions these buildings are no match to the grand Gothic cathedrals built in the booming towns of the medieval West, but to compare them on this basis overlooks the different purposes buildings served in their respective socio-cultural contexts.

In the region itself, by contrast, art history suffered perhaps most from its own institutional traditions and inhibitions. It rose in tandem with the discipline of history which, in turn, developed in accordance with the needs of emerging or consolidating modern nation-states. Where not merely descriptive, the objective of art-historical publications from 20th-century Southeast Europe seldom seemed to do more than confirm or illustrate claims made by historians. When histories proclaimed the perennial existence of a given nation now »resurrected« after centuries-long Dark Ages, art histories would similarly »prove« that a »national art« had *always* existed. It must be stressed that this was not a Balkan-specific phenomenon. In the West, the objectives of such projects were at times not only found perfectly tolerable but even endorsed. I quote from a 1920 review of Bogdan Filov's book *Early Bulgarian Art* by an English connoisseur:

The contents of this book may without offence be described as propaganda, but propaganda of a legitimate kind, since it is the plain right of any people to support its claim to culture by effective evidence. [W]e may agree with the author and his learned collaborators that there is and always has been a Bulgarian art. It was indeed impossible that a folk with so much individuality should not have its own artistic impulse...¹¹

The existence of architectural monuments attributed to a given polity or patron could be used as evidence for historical presence and, by extension, territorial claims. The role played by medieval architecture in visualizing Serbian claims over Kosovo is well known, as is the rationale behind the destruction of mosques and churches in Bosnia in the first half of the '90s. With these monuments perished the material evidence of another group's historical presence.

In scholarship, the obsession with the constructions of linear and national histories of art had yet another effect: obvious connections with products of artistic traditions now claimed by neighbouring modern nations in the region were downplayed to the extent that the construction of a coherent and explanatory narrative became increasingly difficult. The outcomes were isolated histories of art informed by Hegelian »spirits« rather than by mechanisms of artistic diffusion in which modern borders are but obstructions to attaining a better understanding of this heritage. In a regional and international context, this ultimately had individual monuments become virtually invisible for anyone but their supposed »inheritor culture«, by which they were celebrated as evidence of one-time greatness and as a remin-

12 On this point, cf. also the singularly relevant essay by Milevska, Suzana: Is Balkan Art History Global?. In: Elkins 1920, pp. 214-22.

der of continuity with this past. The firm insistence on themes like nationhood, continuity, liminality, and specificity have effectively impeded the understanding of this art as a product of its time and socio-cultural context.

Trends in Western art-historical scholarship since the 1970s have gone, with very few exceptions, completely unnoticed. (Not even Marxist trends in Western art-historical scholarship of the Cold War period seem to have had the slightest impact on the Socialist countries of Southeast Europe.) What Western and Balkan art-historians now have is a communication problem because the disciplinary language has changed.¹² Now that art history is no longer as fixated on style, development, monumentality, and narrative, and is more (or at least also) interested in questions of centres and peripheries, the politics of patronage, or socio-economic bases of artistic development, the chance to remedy this short-coming may have been missed. More recent scholarship has largely failed to make this heritage more than locally relevant.

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The first part of my paper has dealt with the impact of what I have called an »attention deficit« in terms of the cognition of the historical art and architecture of the Balkan region internationally. This I see, at least in part, as a legacy of how art history was written both in the region and abroad. In the second part of my paper I will address the absence of art and visual culture more generally in historical training and practice. More specifically, I will seek to question the implicit postulation that the visual – be it as art, material culture, or pictorial evidence – was of little concern to the historian, whose prime directive is the analysis of written sources. This view sets her or him in opposition to the art historian or ethnologist who works complementarily on the material evidence, but in many cases seems to merely illustrate the work of those working on texts. This already points to several functions of the visual that I shall like to discuss: art as evidence, art as illustration, and art as a medium for something else.

Broadening our perspective to the visual more generally, we may note that most of the literature on the Balkans consists almost exclusively of text. The images most frequently encountered in writings about the Balkans are maps, very often so-called »ethnic maps«. Their use, I feel compelled to add, is somewhat problematic. Employing them as explanatory evidence silently agrees with the conjecture that only a majority, however minor, is to be granted rights, and that physical separation is the only sustainable way out of a perceived impasse. Graphically, they rarely reflect demographic imbalances caused by population concentrations in cities, thereby privileging the countryside over the city. They also do not take into account what individuals in a given place might actually want, because such questions were not asked in population censuses. Instead, they suggest that one's declaring of belonging to a »national body« automatically determines the will of the individual. And if we see, graphically or statistically visualized, the demographic change in a given locale as evidenced by identification with certain groups – toward the state, it must be noted, not toward themselves – then we further ignore the implications such identification would elicit at a given point in time. »Ethnic maps«, in sum, downplay the nuances that are actually the object of the historian.

The didactic utility of visual material, other than the use of such maps, cannot be contested, however. Drawings by the many Western travellers, for instance, often visually recording the »trivial« things of everyday life, can serve to help us better understand how people lived, worked, or dressed in the past [ill. 3&4]. Comparing them can enable us to better understand change in these respects. That these were actually snapshots of real life by contemporaries, however tainted by bias, is quite relevant in this regard. In books of all sorts we often also find reproductions of 19th-century »history paintings«, which are quite a different category. Not only do they purport to be quasi snapshots of historical events, some of which are of doubtful historicity, but also the way they are reproduced alone, often without information as to such artworks' context, represents them as quasi evidence for the event. In such frameworks, they serve as illustrations of what is claimed in the text, but not, as they should, as illustrations for how moderns imagined these events. In such cases the image is not merely illustration; the image is text.

13 Kanitz, Felix: Serbiens byzantinische Monumente. Vienna: K.K. Hof- u. Staatsdruckerei 1862.

14 Goldstein, Ivo: The Use of History: Croatian Historiography and Politics.

In: Helsinki Monitor 5/3 (1994), pp. 85-97, cit. p. 85. Cf. also Bošković-Stalli, Maja: Folk Poetry as an Identity Creating Instrument (on Serbian and Croatian examples).

In: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe 2/2 (2002), pp. 45-54, esp. p. 49. The western Bosnian town of Duvno was renamed Tomislavgrad in commemoration of this event.

15 Žanić, Ivo: Nationale Symbole zwischen Mythos und Propaganda. In: Melčić, Dunja (Ed.): Der Jugoslawien-Krieg: Handbuch zu Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Konsequenzen. Wiesbaden: Westdt. Verl. 1999, pp. 287-99, cit. p. 291. In Žanić's interpretation this was to emphasize the Croats' capability to found a state, Tuđman identifying with Tomislav.



ills. 3-4: Felix Kanitz (1829-1904), drawings documenting the reaping of roses in Kazanlāk and their procession into rose oil in Trjavna, 1860 and '70s; from his *Donau-Bulgarien und der Balkan*, Vol. II. Leipzig: Hermann Fries, 1877, p. 110, 123. Kanitz also wrote the first earnest study of Serbia's medieval architecture.¹³



Take for example Oton Iveković's 1905 painting of the coronation of King Tomislav at an assembly on the Plain of Duvno in 925 [ill. 5]. Considering it a legend (based on a chronicle from the late 12th century), some historians now claim this event never actually took place.¹⁴ The painting, however, still powerfully illustrates the happening. For the Croatian wartime president Franjo Tuđman it was, on certain official occasions, apparently protocol to have the painting in the background.¹⁵ Given that the locale in question is in present-day Bosnia, it also visualized the claim on this now-independent country as a »Croatian land«. Yet, to speak of this case as a misuse of art for political purposes misconstrues its original purpose and intention. The function of the image in this case is that of a medium for something else than pictorial content. It similarly takes no genius to recognize that the objective of Uroš Predić when painting his famous *Kosovo Maiden* of 1919, so often reproduced when the 1389 battle is addressed, was not to reconstruct this event pictorially but to emphasize the useable emotional content embedded in the collective memory of the battle. A handsome, severely wounded warrior resting on the body of an overpowered Ottoman soldier is poured water from a jug by a young woman. This is an image of collective national suffering and solidarity.

16 Cf. Likovna Enciklopedija Jugoslavije, Vol. I (A-J), Zagreb: Jugoslavenski Leksikografski Zavod *Miroslav Krleža*, Zagreb 1984, p. 660f. (The last volume of this useful encyclopaedic work was never published due to the dissolution of the country, making its objective obsolete.) The image is reproduced from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oton_Ivekovic_Krunidba_kralja_Tomislava.jpg, according to which it is in the public domain.

Predić, to be clear, did not aim to reconstruct a historical event; he merely supplied a visual aid for the commemoration of an event that was already popular and needed no explanation, but here was individualized, didactic, and teleological. Such works of art are, and should not serve as anything but, evidence for the mindset of moderns.



iii.5: Oton Iveković, *Krunidba Kralja Tomislava* (1905). Iveković (1869-1939) studied painting in Zagreb (with the prominent [history] painter and Yugoslavist Ferdo Quiquerez [1845-1893]), Vienna, Munich, and Karlsruhe. Developing an early interest in historical subjects pertinent to his native Croatia, he is among the prime representatives of this genre of painting in the region. His brother Ćiril (1864-1933), an architect (similarly trained in Vienna), has likewise left a mark on history: working for the Austro-Hungarian administration in 1890s Bosnia, he there restored the Ali Pasha Mosque in Sarajevo, designed the Travnik medrese, and, following the death of Alexander Wittek [1852-94], proved responsible for the neo-Islamic City Hall of Sarajevo (Vijećnica).¹⁶

To conclude, if we historians of the Balkans exclude the visual from our studies – be it by ignoring art and material culture as beyond »history proper«, or be it by the way images have been used and have spoken for certain historical events – then we should not treat this omission as self-evident or inherently justified. This, I have argued, would not only be an unnecessary self-limitation of one’s evidence to the textual; it also ignores the function of images as factors in the social production of history. I have also pointed to an impact of the neglect of art beyond the academia: as art produced in the past serves to advertise the position of cultures and societies vis-à-vis others and the world, the fact that the Balkans are virtually invisible in the art-historical discourse only reinforces the cliché of a region peopled by societies passionate only about argument. It suggests that the region is a field of study for the political scientist rather than for the historian of art and culture, or for the ethnographer rather than for the art historian, and that the study of this region’s cultural heritage has relevance solely to the local scholar. Any agenda for the future of our discipline, reflection on which was the objective of the workshop *Balkan Studies: Quo Vadis?*, should take this into consideration.

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