Whose Cultural Patrimony Is It?

Kosovo officials say that museum treasures removed to Serbia must be restituted

BY KONSTANTIN AKINSHA

In 2000, a year after NATO intervention ended the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo by Serbs, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) issued new postage stamps for the province. Although it formally remained a part of what was then Yugoslavia, Kosovo was in reality governed by UNMIK.

Three of the five stamps depicted archeological treasures from the collection of the Kosovo Museum in Pristina: the 3500 B.C. Dardanian Idol, one of the oldest artifacts found in the region; a fourth-century B.C. silver coin; and a fifth-century A.D. Roman mosaic fragment. At the time, however, the objects were not in the Kosovo Museum. They were not in Kosovo at all.

By order of the Serbian Ministry of Culture, 676 of the most valuable archeological artifacts from three important collections in Kosovo—the Municipal Museum in Mitrovica and the Regional Archaeological Museum in Prizren are by the Serbian and Kosovar culture ministries have failed. In 2004 ethnic violence within Kosovo led to the damage and destruction of Serbian churches and monasteries (see “Icons in the Ashes,” Summer 2005), which seriously undermined Kosovar requests for the return of cultural patrimony.

The Kosovo Status Settlement proposal, prepared by a group headed by the UN’s special envoy Martti Ahtisaari, included a provision—Article 6—dealing with the return of all three Kosovar collections from Belgrade. During negotiations in Vienna last year, the Serbian delegation agreed that the collections would be returned. After Russia vetoed the settlement proposal in the UN Security Council, however, attempts to reach international agreement on the status of Kosovo failed, and last February the province declared its independence.

Branimir Jokić, the Kosovo Museum’s Serbian former director, was contacted by ARTnews in the office of the Center for Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija, housed in the building of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade. Among other activities, the center publishes books on the endangered Serbian heritage in Kosovo and organizes exhibitions of the ethnographic collections of the Kosovo Museum.

Jokić asserts that only 5 percent of the museum’s collection was removed to Belgrade. He says that 20,000 objects remained in the museum and adds that their fate is unknown. In fact, the collection and the archives were saved by museum staff members. Before the Serbian army ransacked the building, taking all its computers, staff members removed the archives and hid them in private houses. (Most of the archives of Kosovar cultural institutions were taken to Serbia.) Jokić opposes the return of any artifacts or archives to Kosovo. He says...
they should be kept in a Serbian cultural institution that can guarantee their protection.

Before the war, Jokić says, most of the Kosovo Museum’s employees were Albanian. After the war he and 17 Serbian staff members fled Kosovo. He thinks that the return of the museum collection and the resumption of joint activities might have come about if a special entity for the protection of Serbian cultural patrimony had been established in Kosovo and the museum had become a part of it, but this solution, he says, is no longer possible.

Jokić is disillusioned with international efforts and the inability of UNMIK to protect Serbian cultural sites. But his allegations of Albanian destruction of cultural property at times conflict with the findings of international bodies that have investigated the situation. Jokić states, for example, that the fate of the National and University Library in Pristina is unknown, but according to the report of the joint UNESCO, Council of Europe, and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions mission to Kosovo in 2000, the library survived the war “essentially intact.” The mission documented mass destruction of Albanian books by the Serbian administration.

The Serbs fixate on the wrongs done them by the Albanians and tend to forget their own crimes against Kosovar culture. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia documented the destruction by Serbian troops of 600 mosques, Roman Catholic churches, and objects related to the Albanian cultural heritage on the eve of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. International observers report that both sides have been guilty of destroying cultural property, but say that organized and deliberate destruction began with the Serbs.

Ylber Hysa, a member of the Kosovo Assembly, who was involved in the Vienna negotiations, told ARTnews that Kosovars will adhere to the Ahtisaari plan. He believes that Kosovo’s museum collections must be restituted. Hysa says that Dusan Bataković, head of the Serbian delegation in Vienna, pledged publicly that the Serbian side would respect Article 6 of the settlement proposal. “I can recall that Mr. Bataković even said that he gave ‘besa’ to our delegation,” Hysa says. “Besa” is the Albanian word for “honor.”

Last March the Kosovo Assembly adopted a law for the protection of Serbian monasteries, which was recommended in the Ahtisaari plan. “It will be strange to see the Belgrade side blocking implementation of this law by refusing to return to Kosovo its collections,” Hysa says.

Meanwhile, the Kosovar treasures that were borrowed for the 1999 exhibition continue their tour. They were most recently on view at the National Archaeological Museum in Adria, Italy. It remains unclear when they will return home.

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