

The Synthesis of Mosaics, Decorative Arts and Architecture in Buzludzha Monument – Aspects of Significance

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Let us explain the value of the mosaics in the Buzludzha Monument by comparing them with a work from the Louvre. You have seen the Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo. Its material value is the price of the board and the applied paints. Shortly after the pandemic crisis, the French society was called upon, half-jokingly, half-realistically, to consider parting ways with the Mona Lisa by selling it to a museum in Abu Dhabi and using the funds to support the French economy. What greater recognition of value than this? Of course, the French society was adamant that it would keep the portrait of this Italian lady shown before a hazy landscape and painted by a white-bearded man, because it expresses France's idea of value.

Unlike the Mona Lisa, sites such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and the Buzludzha Monument have a different interaction with humans. We recognise them as part of our lives; they influence our personal ideas; they are to blame for the passage of time, for the unrealised possibilities; they witness our ups and downs. Thus, the Reichstag building was "guilty" and set on fire. The rage of the people destroyed the Bastille, made a balefire of the gilded chairs of Louis XVI, or scraped off the image of Todor Zhivkov at Buzludzha and fired a Kalashnikov assault rifle at the 12-metre five-pointed star at the top of the pylon (Fig. 1). These are objects of pride and scorn.

Of course, a long time ago, at the dawn of the formation of our value system, long before the Mona Lisa and the Arc de Triomphe, the decorative arts served their purpose to decorate everyday life, to emphasise the importance of the one who orders and owns them. They became a symbol of greatness and prestige. However, when, in the course of the years, the name of the one who possessed them is lost, the images of people, the ornaments, the splendour, the magnificence, the expressiveness, the symbolism of the original work of art remain, capturing a moment of time with precision and comprehensiveness, as is only the case in the longest novels. Such an endless narrative is represented by the mosaics. From those with the simplest ornamentation of the flooring to the scenes with the 3rd century feast in the style of "unprejudiced eye" and those from Villa Romana del Casale from the 4th century, where in detail exotic animals are depicted brought to the crowd and intended for slaughtering. Byzantine Christian churches made extensive use of wall mosaics on curved apses and ceilings and domes. Typical is the use of gold tiles which create a brilliant, unearthly, divine background for the portraits of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints and the emperors.

Historically, the value of the mosaics from the House of Monuments of the Bulgarian Communist Party on Buzludzha



Fig. 1 The twelve-metre five-pointed star from the pylon at Buzludzha, made of glass and metal, current state

Peak consists in the revival of the technology in Bulgaria from the times of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Constantinople, and Ravenna after a period of 1600 years. Stylistically, the compositions are a continuation of the traditions of European styles such as New Objectivity and Novecento and, thanks to the convergence of the policy of the People's Republic of Bulgaria and Mexico, are a continuation of the strong-



Fig. 2 The ceiling in the ceremonial hall by Vladislav Paskalev and Kancho Kanev, made of stone and smalt mosaic, current state

est manifestations of revolutionary art in Latin America. Buzludzha is a park as well as an architectural and design project. With the joint work of architects, artists, sculpturers, it is the only object in the world showing a synthesis of monumental arts, architecture and park environment on such a scale; a vivid expression of time, political system and aesthetic point of view (Fig. 2). The connection of decorative techniques, mosaics, glass panels, sculptural reliefs, floor materials, window frames is a multifaceted manifestation of sophistication and style.

Architects, engineers, contractors were facing the challenges of huge scale, unfriendly environment and short deadlines. The construction took up a huge area, and new technologies required solutions. Technically, many things were happening for the first time. Great manpower was involved in the construction of Buzludzha, new complex technologies required new specialists. The site is located on a high peak with very low temperatures and strong winds. The construction of such a technologically complex building was a real challenge. Propaganda works in favor of mythologizing the building as a “national affair”. A majority of the Bulgarians perceived the building as a symbol of pride or humiliation. This extremity of feelings is also the reason for the monument’s destruction. The socialist propaganda slogan “Art by the people, for the people” finds its brightest expression in the Buzludzha Memorial House.

Aesthetically, although implemented in the party’s policy of glorifying the existing system, many of the authors distanced themselves from the propaganda style imposed under the influence of the Soviet policy and developed their personal pursuits in the field of form and composition, continuing the achievements of plastic art. The composition of the mosaics from the inner ring is a series of scenes that has unified sounding. The portraits are the work of Hristo Stefanov and the compositions of Yoan Leviev. There is a gold background behind the relatively dark images. The gestures are tense, the shape is highly stylised, a theatrical dramat-



Fig. 3 The inner ring at Buzludzha with mosaics by Hristo Stefanov and Yoan Leviev, current state

ic effect is created (Fig. 3). The long strip of the decorative panel emphasises the height of the dome.

Scenes from the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party are located in the outer ring, intended for chronological examination and discussion on the topics of the compositions. Stylistically, some of the mosaics are major works in the development of the artists. The compliance with the architecture and the material is indicative of the works of the artist Ivan Kirkov and his attempts in the fields of abstraction and natural forms, and of Ivan Kozuharov (Fig. 4) and his rhythmic decorative compositions. Ivan B. Ivanov used symbolic images and examined the image of the woman in its diversity of Greek classics and the canonical images of the Virgin with child in a brightly decorative and harmonious, exquisitely monochrome composition.

In the socialist regime women were emancipated; they received rights, equal to those of men: equal labour rights and salary, access to education, qualification and all professions. Maternity was protected, creating conditions for combining the economic and social role of women. “With a decision of the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the State Council of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, a programme was developed to raise the role of women in building a developed socialist society to create conditions in which women/mothers combine their participation in business with its social function” (Fig. 5).¹

As Deputy Chairman of the State Commission for Monumental Arts at the Committee on Culture and Union of Bulgarian Artists and responsible for the distribution of topics, it seems that my father Ivan B. Ivanov, who was born in 1933, chose one of the most favourable topics for himself personally. On the other hand, at that time he painted in Greece with Yoan Leviev, got acquainted with the ancient works in the museums in Athens, had already made several exhibitions in which he interpreted the topics of women and motherhood, and therefore received one of the most unburdened political topics.

In this composition we see the beloved woman, the woman-mother, the demiurge-creator and the woman as powerful ruler of the world. The beloved woman was hardly a tolerated image in the art of socialist times, but she becomes decisive in this composition once at top left in a Chagall-influenced image of flying lovers and once again in running figures like the mythological Daphne, who turns into a tree as she runs away from her captor. Historically and globally, art so far had been dominated by images of the Virgin Mother. Here we see on the right a Mother of God in an almost canonical pose and another lying down and playing with her child. There is also a third one suffering, with a tragic gesture and her head caught under something like a kite or a sun, and curiously one of the few surviving details after the vandalism of Buzludzha (Fig. 6). The family is especially emphasised in an almost sculptural image. The strongest figure is the central image that I associate with the multi-armed Shiva – a role that socialism continues to impose on me to this day, forcing to do all different sorts of activities very often in opposite in directions.

The panel does not differ in quality from the artist's other murals: secco and painted ceramics "The Birth of Life" in the Dobrudja Hotel in Albena; a fresco in the library in Lovech – the only one in this technique in Bulgaria –, two panels secco in the armoured brigade building in Sliven; "Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship" in the building of the same name in Sofia, now a covered wall in a Lidl supermarket; painted ceramics in the Dobrich Cultural Centre. Neither does it differ from his paintings, graphics and drawings that are in many galleries in Europe and worldwide. The arrangement of the mosaic is of uneven quality due to the changing teams during the work. Some of the heads and hands were executed by the author himself.

Stoimen Stoilov is more lyrical and uses different sizes and structures in the arrangement of the stones, indicating the development of mosaic towards a freer and improvisational style. Dimo Zaimov expresses himself through a more even rhythm in the figurative composition "Socialist Industrialization". This rhythm will be the main motif of the metal curtain-shield of the stage of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia with the changing colours of the metal plates. On the three stairwells are the glass sculptures by Ekaterina Getsova. The composition consists of poppies and hands holding torches (Fig. 7) Made and installed by specialists from Czechoslovakia, the reliefs are a technical achievement and an aesthetically unique work that relies on the effect of lightness and transparency of the passage areas. This early work by Getsova already hints at her later works – the reliefs in the Tokyo subway, the human glass figures, the decoration of the Central Department Store and the Court House.

The design of the star makes skilful use of the perspective, which turns the strongly elongated star at a height of twelve metres into a well-proportioned form when viewed from below. The star of Buzludzha uses the technology of the star from the Party House in Sofia, but is more firmly attached due to the strong winds at the top.

The mosaics, frescoes and wood carvings in the National Palace of Culture in Sofia are later than those in Buzludzha and are more secular in nature, without propaganda and with a less theatrical effect. Artists such as Atanas Yaranov



Fig. 4 The outer ring at Buzludzha, mosaics by Ivan Kozuharov; state at the opening



Fig. 5 Ivan B. Ivanov, project for "Woman in Socialist Society" in the outer ring, tempera and paper



Fig. 6 The outer ring with mosaics by Ivan B. Ivanov, current state



Fig. 7 Ekaterina Getsova, glass relief of stair landings, detail; state at the opening

(Fig. 8) and Dimitar Kirov (Fig. 9) were given the opportunity to develop their skills on a large scale and with the possibilities of decorative techniques, and one can see the difference in effect between large-scale decorative panels in an architectural setting and exhibited in a museum.

I hope we have overcome the stage of questioning whether sites like Buzludzha should be protected. Now our main obligation is to preserve them in their authenticity. Let's not allow the replacement. No options for a transparent roof that will completely change the brutalist look of the site, illuminate the mosaics from above and change the impression. Preservation of the shape of the openings and maximum proximity to the original in the materials for glazing, floor-

ing, lighting fixtures, and railings. No interference with the original shape of the "plate" and the pylon. The site must be secured to provide the necessary comfort for tourists and workers there, but without seeking a change in function. The building is well suited to present a documentary exhibition about the time and technology, to be a place for temporary events and concerts, but it should be allowed to speak with its authentic appearance, which is expressive enough.

The existence of a strong state power, a policy of tolerating and improving artistic staff, a system for securing and guaranteeing large-scale orders led to the flourishing of culture in this period (Fig. 10). Buzludzha is, along with the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, one of the sites where the processes of the planned economy, the concentration of financial and labour resources, the synthesis of the arts, and brilliant artistic achievements are concentrated. Other examples of such large-scale projects in the world are the frescoes by Diego Rivera in the Mexican capital, and works by the architect Oscar Niemeyer and the ceramic artist Athos Bulcao in the capital Brasilia.

The vandalism of the monument in the years after 1989 is a strong symbol of the ongoing historical processes in Eastern Europe. The protection of the monument should be approached as in the protection of archaeology and existing documents and methods. Interference with the authenticity of mosaics and architecture should not be allowed. We should stop the processes of destruction, restore some iconic scenes, but preserve the traces of barbarism so that we can explain to future generations what happened during that time, what was the art of the totalitarian state. And that art, although generated by the political system, has its own means of expression, its own achievements, its own life outside the realm of politics. Let us take care to preserve the authentic appearance in its entirety – the glass reliefs, the star, the mosaics, their connection with the architecture, and the architecture in connection with the landscape. Let us recognise the value of Buzludzha as our common value – of Kazanlak, of Bulgaria, of Europe, and of the world.



Fig. 8 Atanas Yaranov, mosaic in the National Palace of Culture, Sofia



Fig. 9 Dimitar Kirov, mosaic in the National Palace of Culture, Sofia



Fig. 10 Ivan B. Ivanov, project for painted ceramics for a school in the district of Druzhba Sofia, tempera, paper

Credits

Mariela Malamatenova and photo archives of the artists
Ivan B. Ivanov and Ekaterina Getsova

¹ Decision of the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party „On raising the role of women in the construction of the developed socialist society“, dated 03/06/1973.