



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL  
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (K) Kathleen, (C) Condon

Accession Numbers:

KC-02-1-FN

Fieldnotes

KC-02-1-C

Audio recordings

KC--02-1-CN

Photographic documentation

KC-02-1-M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 3/2/02 Contact Date: 3/25/2002

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Dhimitri Cika

Address: [REDACTED]

City: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED] County: [REDACTED]

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: [REDACTED]

E-mail: none Website: [REDACTED]

Contact person: contact Cika directly or through church in case of language difficulties.

Title: [REDACTED]

Location of Interview: Saint Mary's Assumption Albanian Orthodox Church

Street Address: 535 Salisbury St. (phone: Rev. Dennis Schutte, Tel: (508) 756-1690)

City: Worcester Zip: 01609 County: Worcester

Special Needs (including translation): I was able to get a translator through Agnon Afezzoli, who works for "Friendly House," a social service agency that serves recent Albanian emigres; his phone is [REDACTED]. The translator was Orgest Ruco, [REDACTED], and his email is [REDACTED] just for the record. He was lovely but I would suggest getting someone else next time because although Orgest was very good, he was also a busy college student and would probably be reluctant to do this again.

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community):

Albanian Iconography

Traditions noted for follow-up:

If Cika will consent to being recorded in his limited English, and a place where he can work which does not have sound difficulties could be located, it would be nice to document him talking and explaining while he is painting. Part of this process involves making the paint, which he makes from an egg-based glue and pigment. When Cika mixes this up it makes a scratching sound which might make good audio for radio.

Saint Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church (126 Morris Street, Southbridge, MA albboschurch@juno.com) has an annual Albanian Day Picnic in June on the Picnic Grounds surrounding Church which includes traditional foods, music and dancing. Rev John Daley, Jr., [REDACTED], home phone: [REDACTED]

In Boston, there is a dance group whose choreographer, Mr. Bashkim Braho, has worked with beginning ethnic dancers. There is also a music instrumental group led by Mr. Kreshniuk Merdani and a singing group led by Mr. Edouard Bajrami. They can be reached through Rev. Arthur Liolin, who gave me these leads. Rev. Liolin is the Chancellor of the Orthodox Church in America's Albanian Archdiocese. He can be reached through St George Cathedral, Boston, MA, 523 E Broadway, So. Boston MA 02127 617-268-1275. Rev. Lionel's email is albboschurch@juno.com.

Other Possible Contacts: Rev. Spero Page [REDACTED] Greg Steffon [REDACTED]

Summary Description: Dhimitri Cika speaks (through a translator) about how he became an iconographer in Albania during a period in which all religious practice (including icon painting) was forbidden by the government. He discusses how he was trained as a general artist and then assigned a job in Corce at a national museum where his job was to conserve many of Albania's very best icons, some of which were hundreds of years old. He notes that he was "trained" by the long-dead masters of Albanian iconography when whose paintings he was restoring. He considers himself very lucky because in Albania only he and a few other co-workers had this opportunity during those years. Cika now lives in Worcester where he is being paid to fill St. Mary's Assumption Albanian Orthodox Church (which was built in 1982) with his icons.

[Note: Cika gave me a copy of a letter of reference, which I have included as KC-02-1-FN.]

Audio Transcript:

Tape One, Side A

07

Cika majored in graphic arts, or applied arts, High Institute of Art in Tirana, Albania. Interpreter notes that by “applied arts” Cika means arts in which you working by hand, without today’s connotations of computer-aided design, etc. Cika has never used a computer.

32

Applied arts, in the way Cika is using the term, would include a range of things, for example, making “simple pictures” to decorate textiles, making a more intricate patterns to decorate rugs (there is an Albanian rug-making tradition which is similar to Persian rugs in design), or painting theatre scenery. Notes that one begins with the simple textiles, and then progressed to painting pictures of monuments (or painting on monuments themselves—unclear).

65

In 1967, Albanian churches and mosques were closed, and the practice of religion was criminalized. There are three basic major religions in Albania, Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim. Cika feels lucky that when he graduated from school in 1984, he got a job working for nineteen years as a restorer in a museum in Corce [alternate spelling Korca], restoring Orthodox icons which had been salvaged from Albanian churches. He notes that while now anyone can see existing icons and paint icons, at the time he was one of the very few in his country with such access. So while working at the museum Cika was exposed to the many Albanian icons painting styles represented in the museum’s collection, which was composed of icons salvaged when the churches were destroyed.

91

The icons were allowed in museums because this was a secular context and the icons were viewed within an art-historical frame.

118

Cika worked in Corce, the third largest Albanian city, at the country’s largest museum, the National National Museum of Medieval Art (part of the Institute of Monuments) in Corce. Cika considers himself very lucky to have landed a job in this museum as a restorer. He notes that the people working at this museum were in effect able to practice their religion, though illegally, because while they were

attending to physical restoration needs, they were also practicing their belief in God by keeping the icons safe for religious worship at some point in the future.

Cika was 14 or 15 years old in 1967, the year in which religious institutions were closed in Albania.

How/when did Cika decide to be an iconographer?

155

Cika explains that he did not choose what he would do after he finished art school, but rather that he, like everyone else, was assigned based on need. Notes that at this time 70% of Albanian was small villages, and that because of this, if a village needed a painter or an art teacher, they wouldn't put notice in the local paper newspaper, but instead, would approach the art school, who would then assign a person to that job. Translator adds to what Cika said, "It was a centralized economy, which meant centralized jobs, which meant centralized a lot of things."

202

Cika's grandmother (mother's mother) was very involved in the Orthodox church, and when Cika was young, she tried to educate him in religion. Being a kid, he was more interested in the actual, in what was relevant to the day-to-day world, but when he grew up and was working with the icons, "then he saw what role did it play, and what were the laws of this Byzantine art and how could he apply this to the church, and how could be related to the overall church mechanism." When he became an artist, "he could relate Byzantine art to the overall mechanism of the church and religion."

225

Clarifies, when Cika was a child, he felt iconographic art wasn't realistic enough, and also at that point he couldn't understand the style and the rules of Byzantine art. Makes point that the realism of Renaissance art was easier for him to understand at first glance than Byzantine Art, which is so highly symbolic. [The interpreter does not say this, but I believe Cika is talking here about the period referred to as the Renaissance in Albania—this was the period beginning in the 1880s, which included a movement to greater realism.] At the time, it was hard to find literature in order to study Byzantine art. [This is because during this period socialist realism was the only legally sanctioned form of contemporary art; painters were forbidden to work not only in the Byzantine style but also many other styles such as cubism and surrealism.] However, he did what he could with what books he could find in libraries. Also, with one of his professors, he participated in one of his professor's documentary

expeditions to isolated rural churches then being used as warehouses Byzantine art [this, officially, was strictly for art-historical purposes]. By the time he finished school, he felt very confident in the Byzantine style, and ended up liking it more than he thought he would.

KC asks if Cika had a specialization in art school.

295

No, Cika's was a general diploma in art. It was later, when he was working, that he specialized in Byzantine art in particular.

300

He got in contact with Byzantine art and pictures when he was placed in the High Institute of Art in Tirana, which was Albania's national art school. [This is where Cika went to school. The school has now been re-named the National Academy of the Arts.]

330

"To talk about it [icon painting] was impossible to think of. The only thing was, when he got the job, he was working with those monuments and icons. No way somebody could teach it in school or give any help."

KC

Did he ever meet another iconographer when he was a young man? Did any teachers work with him on iconography?

When Cika was in school, professors sometimes spoke about the development of Byzantine art from an art historical perspective. "During this time it was not allowed for someone to paint the whole thing from scratch, and do icon, or do anything like that." The only time he came in touch with Byzantine art was during lectures.

KC comments that this is very sad for the iconographers who were working on this as their career before 1967.

412

Cika notes that in the years before 1967 there were not that many churches built, and so there were a limited number of iconographers practicing within these few churches. Most Albanian churches then had been created before WW II, and were already totally covered with icons. Interpreter interjects here that priests and others related to church, including iconographers, were often jailed (also uses the word “hit”) during this period, then continues translating: “It wasn’t too many people that were related to paintings. And even them that were related to it, they got hit. They were hurt in many ways. And, yes, it is very sad for those painters that spent their lives doing it. Even though it was a small number, it is sad, for what happened. They couldn’t do whatever they liked to do, and for a living they had to do something else.”

448

KC asks if he ever spoke to any of those people who had been working iconographers before 1967.

487

“There’s no connection. There’s no knowing any persons who directly worked with the church before 1967.”

End of Side A; Interview continued on Side B

Tape One, Side B

01

Talking about the icons in the Museum collection, some of which had been saved from churches dating back to the year 1300. Cika and his colleagues worked with them to make them look “new again.” So the only other “iconographers” he came in contact were those who, like himself, were working to restore the icons. Notes that he graduated from school in 1979 and started at the Museum in 1983, so it would have been very hard at that point, because of the time elapsed but also because of the stigma associated with the activity, to find someone who had been working with the church before 1967. [Cika worked at the Museum for 19 years.]

KC notes that when she has interviewed other iconographers, their style was always influence by their teacher. Asks Cika how he found his style without a master?

39

Cika notes, yes, that it is true that in painting in general you usually work under one professor who teaches you his style, his rules. However, because this art form was forbidden during this period he was not allowed this personal connection to a master artist who could teach him this style. However, he says that his teachers were the greatest Albanian icon painters of all time—those artists whose work he was restoring. Cika mentions some of the names of the iconographers, and the translator is very impressed, says hearing those names in that context gave him a chill, because all Albanians know about them, even those who aren't involved in Byzantine art. The iconographers he mentioned were Onufri, a sixteenth century iconographer who is considered the greatest, and Kostandin Shpataraku, an 18th century painter. "Even though illegally at the time he was studying them, they are his teachers. They are the ones that influenced him and made him work with them more, and kind of taught him the rules, and the styles."

[See the end of this transcript for background information on early Albanian iconography.]

KC asks: They weren't his teachers, but he saw their work?

"Yes. Only they were dead at the time." Translator calls Onufri the "superman" of Albanian painting, and says that all Albania has heard of these painters.

KC asks how did he get to see these? Slides in college? Field trips? In the Museum?

85

One or two of the churches were saved and were used as warehouses for keeping the art. "If you were a painter it was really hard to get there. They would be in a certain village far from the city. If he ever went there, he is saying, it was only him taking a look at them. The biggest connection was the time he worked in museums. He was working with the stuff like, right there. He had the stuff. He had their paintings. He could see their style, and then he got the books, too."

116

In 1800s, the Macedonian and the Greek style of icon painting were very influential on Albanian Orthodox art. Onufri, Shpataraku and many other Albanian iconographers studied at Mount Athos, a sacred Greek mountain where Byzantine art is still taught today. When these artists went back to different parts of Albania, they created their influence in different places. Mentions here the Zeografi Brothers.

KC

Is their stuff in the Museum?

164

It was mostly Onufri and the Zeografi Brothers (18th century Albanian iconographers). In 1967 when the churches were destroyed, a group of people connected to art talked the government into saving whatever was left. A museum was created in Corce. It contains mostly the work of Onufri and Zeogafri, because that is what was in the churches of this region. Iconography from other regions in the country did not survive this period so well.

KC asks for more specifics on how Cika learned from Onufri?

230

“In general those icons have a certain shape. An artist has his own identity. Even though if you go into churches you are going to see a lot of things looking almost the same, you can tell that it’s a little different because every painter wants to have his own individual style. Let’s say that those paintings first were graphed on a piece of paper and then in the wood and then painted. One of the most successful things he’s done so far and why they like his work here [meaning at the church] is because he’s trying to put different things of his own ideas. And when I asked him, can he tell me the details what he got from them, it’s the main shape, the saints, and the main shape of the picture he got from them.

He’s trying to put his own ideas in order to say, ‘this is my work’.... So if somebody else looks at it they can tell this is his work. It has his own ideas, even though he’s been influenced in general from those big artists he was talking about.

KC asks if one could tell that Cika’s were painted by an Albanian? Is there something distinctive about Albanian iconography? Is there a school?

333

“In general, it’s hard to say that this is from this school or this school, or from this culture or from this country. With Byzantine art it’s much harder to distinguish between one country and the other country. Even though it is that hard, he can still tell. If you take some time to study this, take a class in college, and you see the difference between countries, you can tell that something is done by an Albanian. Not only that, but he can tell the difference between one region and the other. Let’s say the south, the north,

the middle, they have different schools of painting, all of their churches. If he sees them today, he can tell the difference.”

KC asks if he would he put himself in one of those regions?

360

“The region of Corce. He lived close to middle Albania. Not exactly the north, not exactly the south. He lived there before getting a job and going to Corce to the Museum. So there’s a little influence from the school of Shpataraku. But the main influence is the region of Corce, Onufri and the Zeografi Brothers painters. That’s the biggest influence on him. If he had to put himself in one place it would be there, with their pictures.”

393

Reiterates that his biggest influences are the school of Macedonian icon painting, the style of the above mentioned sacred mountain of Athos, and the icon painting of Crete, where there is another monastery famous for this. “If he had to choose, he likes the Macedonian school style best.”

KC asks why Cika came here to the United States?

455

Before answering the question, Cika makes another point:

“Besides those great artists we were talking about, it’s important to tell that there’s this genre called naive painters. They’re not really formed, they didn’t go to any school, but it’s very satisfying to look at their work. Even though, he is saying, he cannot mention any names, you have to know that if you go to church these days maybe you’re not going to see any big names, but you’re going to see those churches with very good paintings, its the work of these naive painters. He is saying, ‘If there’s something to be said about these paintings, I have to say something about them, too.’”

488

“If you look at the number of churches with the materials they saved in the museums and that he worked with for 19 years, he can say that Albania is rich in those big names and big works, like those big artists that started in the great schools of the time....”

End of Side B

End of Tape 1; Continued on Tape Two

Tape Two, Side A

Cika answers KC's question about why he came to U.S.:

21

"Like many other Albanians after the 1990's, when our borders were opened—and like I told you before, it was only the birds coming in and out—now people could go in and out. So, he had the chance in order to make a better living and do arts, because the pay wasn't good back home. The average pay is \$120 to \$140 bucks." So first he went Thessaloniki (in English, Salonica), Greece in 1992.

38

Cika lived in Thessaloniki for seven years, 1992-99, but didn't have much opportunity to work with the churches there. This is because there are so many Greek iconographers there, and they were known in their country. So while he was there he filled mostly personal orders of "free-style" art unrelated to the church.

77

Comments that some iconographers today in Greece are skillful but are not exactly artists in his eyes because their process includes using a stamp to make icons rather than painting them totally by hand.

122

Came to the United States in 1998. Was able to come because his mother-in-law was an American citizen, and was able to apply on behalf of her daughter and son-in-law. Talks about how he left Greece for the U.S. in part because it is much harder in Europe [or at least at that time] to work legally as an artist if you are a foreigner. So this was the main reason him came to the United States. Says that all who have seen his work here at this church in Worcester have responded very positively, and that he is getting requests to paint icons from other Albanian churches and even from Orthodox churches outside the Albanian Orthodoxy.

KC asks him how the icons he has seen in this country in Orthodox churches compare with the icons he had seen in churches in Albania and Greece.

171

Cika visited the Russian Orthodox Church in Boston [that is, the Russian Orthodox Church of the Epiphany in Roslindale, MA] and has seen photos of icons in other U.S. Orthodox churches in books. The biggest difference, he says, is that the churches in Greece are completely covered with icons (“the side walls and the ceilings, they are 100% painted”), and that this was also true in Albania before 1967. Here in the U.S. churches are only partly painted. His current project at this church is to make it the second church in all of Massachusetts that is 100% painted. [He does not say what the other one is; perhaps the one in Boston?]

214

Cika says he cannot comment on Albania today because he has not been there for 10 years. Talks about a new trend in which icon copies are made by adhering photos of original icons to wood. “It is much cheaper, but it is not a good thing for the art. It is only one work, and it’s all over the place, in two many churches you go, you see almost the same thing done. Stamp, stamp, stamp. Everywhere you go. You can see only the different name of the church, because the work, for him, seems to be the same.” Cika feels that most icons in churches here today are “photo-stamps” that is, made in the above-mentioned fashion.

KC asks who is doing the photo-stamping, the iconographers?

256

Cika thinks that perhaps the iconographers are getting a percentage of the printing company profits.

KC asks, is there something more holy about seeing the original rather than a copy?

302

“When he starts to do an icon, for the church or for a personal order, it is his wish that first he has to pray to God before he starts doing it.... He has to pray when he finishes it. And then when it goes to church, it can’t just go there and become an icon.” It has to be reviewed and then sanctified by a group of priests before it can go on the wall. Usually there is a special celebration held in honor of a new icon.

Conversation here about photo-stamp murals. Cika asks, if you see an icons in a church in which “the painter has put his work and his soul into it,” and you see icons in a church that are copies, which would be a better experience? His belief is that original icons will be preferred.

369

Interview ends, and then the tape is turned back on while Cika shows me a small portfolio of his work beyond iconography. Reflects the kind of work he did when he was in Greece.

End of Interview

END OF TAPE TWO (SIDE B BLANK)

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The website [www.albanianculturalheritage.com](http://www.albanianculturalheritage.com) includes quite a bit of background material on Albanian art in general. Below I have quoted the section on iconography:

“Though the country fell under the Ottoman occupation, new artistic paintings were created during the 16th century in the post-Byzantine style. The most celebrated personality in this period is Onufri (16th century). Onufri is the most distinguished Albanian painter of the 16th century. He created in the Byzantine art style and became one of the most eminent representatives of this art. One of the most striking features in his works is the realistic elements that come to mollify in their own way the rigid Byzantine canons and give a greater place to the Albanian everyday life and its characteristic environments. He depicted frescos in a number of churches in Albania as well as in Macedonia and Greece. His frescos in Albanian churches have been restored, and his icons are housed in the principal museums of the country. In 1986, the Onufri Museum was inaugurated in the castle of Berat, where some of his best icons are housed. Another part is exhibited at the Medieval Arts Museum in Korça and the National Historical Museum in Tirana. Onufri’s icons have also been exhibited abroad and have attracted attention with their scarlet red color, which was characterized as “original and inimitable”. Onufri's work has played an important role in the Albanian painting not only during his lifetime, but also in later centuries. His direct followers were his son Nikolla, Onufër Qiprioti and some other anonymous painters. His paintings are distinguished for their rich colours and decorative shades, realization of interesting types in tragic states, and introduction of certain ethnographic national elements that would be more conspicuous with his successors; his son Nikolla (16th century), and other distinguished

painters such as David Selenicasi (18th century), Kostandin Shpataraku (18th century), Kostandin and Athanas Zografi (18th century), Katro family (18th century) etc., who decorated a number of churches in both Albania and the neighboring countries.

Kostandin SHPATARAKU, 18th century painter was born in Shpati, a region of Elbasan district, and has worked there. Along with Onufri and Selenica, he was one of the three eminent painters of the medieval period of Albanian painting. Shpataraku was distinguished by his miniatures, realized with great mastery, and by introducing elements from everyday life in painting. His characteristic features include a more adroit style as well, which finds expression in his vivid compositions.

A part of his artistic work is represented by frescoes in a church near Pogradec and in a number of icons in Adrenica Monastery of Fieri region, in Cikallesh near Kavaja, in Verdova of Pogradec etc. The best icons of Shpataraku have been collected and restored and now are in display at the Medieval Arts Museum in Korça, the Museum of National History in Tirana and in other museums. Many foreign specialists have appreciated and commented on their values.

David SELENICA, 18th century painter painted the interiors of some well-known churches in Albania and Greece. Among his works, the most important are the frescoes in Athos Mountain (Greece) of 1715 and the frescoes of Church of Saint Nichola of Voskopoja, painted in 1726 with the help of Kostantin and Kristo. Other paintings are to be found near Kosturi in Greece. Selenica represents the last splendour of post-Byzantine painting in Albania and the Balkans generally. He distinguished himself by introducing elements from life and the national ethnography and by intensifying the realistic trend of his works under the influence of the baroque from the Western European painting. Frescoes at Voskopoja Church stand out for their monumental character and masterliness in painting. They include more than 1000 figures. The Athos Mountain fresco represents a group of girls painted by Selenica in realistic garments of the time and therefore the whole composition gives the impression of a realistic secular painting, breaking away from post-Byzantine canons.

Some of Selenica icons are exhibited at the Museum of National History in Tirana, the Medieval Art Museum in Korça and the museums in Berat. A careful work has been carried out in Albania concerning the post-Byzantine art works, for they are esteemed to be an important part of the richest national legacy. Explorations for discovering other authors and the restoration of damaged works over the centuries are still going on. So far several exhibitions with works of this art have been opened in cities such as Paris (1975), Rome (1985), Nice (1993) etc., which have aroused great interest with art specialists. Illustrated publications and abundant commentaries have accompanied exhibitions by

foreign press. The most valuable creations of this art are housed in the Museum of Medieval Art in Korçë, Onufri Museum in Berat, National Historical Museum, National Art Gallery and other museums in both Tiranë and other cities of the country. In Korçë, a private museum has also been built, the only one so far in Albania, which houses a rich collection of post-Byzantine art.