SURPRISES FROM AN ARCHIVE:

On Kolë Idromeno's Photographic Heritage[1]

AGRON MESI

Abstract

This article aims to bring to light the particularly fortuitous fact that a large portion of Kolë Idromeno's photographic oeuvre is housed in the physical archive of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and the Study of Art (IAKSA). This information has perhaps not become as widely known as it should be within the current research community, and this lack of awareness has also prevented the archive from being accessed broadly, by anyone with an interest in the subject. There are limited opportunities to directly access physical works in the archive, an understandable limitation

[1] Translated into English by Raino Isto.

imposed by the standards of conservation. Aiming to eliminate these barriers to access, IAKSA has recently begun a project to digitize this archive—which includes both negatives and printed photographs by Kolë Idromeno—and create an online platform to facilitate free access to the works.

Keywords: Kolë Idromeno, photography, modernity, realism, cultural heritage, IAKSA, archive, digitization

Nikolla Arsen Idromeno, known as Kolë Idromeno (1860-1939) in his mutlidimensional career as a creator, is a figure whose legacy is closely linked with the city of Shkodra's cultural heritage and at the same time one of the most significant individuals of the Albanian National Awakening period. He was born in Shkodra on 15 August 1860. His father, Arsen Ideomeno, was a self-taught architect and a construction expert, as well as a master wood-worker. Idromeno's grandfather, Papa Andrea, had been an amatuer painter.[2]

Kolë completed his primary education in 1867-1871, in the Catholic school in Shkodra, where lessons were taught in both Albanian and Italian. One of his first art teachers (aside from the educators in the primary school, and his own father) was the photographer Pietro Marubi, the first in a line of photographers who took the Marubi name. Pietro is considered to have been an important influence on Kolë Idromeno's development as an artist working across numerous disciplines. Another important early influence on Kolë was Andrea

[2] Mikel Prendushi, *Kolë Idromeno*, Tirana, 1984, p. 13.

Skanjeti, also a citizen of Shkodra from an Italian background. Skanjeti was Kolë's private instructor for a time, but he would later become a son-in-law in the Idromeno family, marrying Kolë's sister Tone (widely known through Kolë's famous protrait of her, painted in 1883).

With the encouragement and support of Pietro Marubi, from whom he would later learn the art of photography, in 1876 Kolë traveled to Venice at the young age of 16 to begin his sudies at the Academy of Fine Arts in the city. While he was not able to complete his studies at the Academy, Kolë remained in Italy and worked there for two years, as an assistant to a Venetian painter. During this stay, Idromeno not only developed skills in painting, but also received a broader education in the visual arts, having the opportunity to see the architectural wonders of Venice firsthand and encountering Renaissance masters such as Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, and Carlo Crivelli, among others, whose works were located in the city's cathedrals.

Idromeno returned to his place of birth in 1878. Upon returning to Shkodra, he became interested in photography, learning the basics of the practice from Pietro Marubi. With Marubi's assistance, in 1886 he opened his own independent photo studio, calling it "Dritëshkronja e Kolës" ("Kolë's Photo Studio").[3] It was the city's second photo studio, after the Marubi studio, which bore the name "Dritëshkronja Marubi"

[3] "Dritëshkronjë" means, literally, "writing by light", and it is an old term for photo studio in Albanian.

("Marubi Photo Studio"). Idromeno's first photographs as an independent photographer date from this year.[4]

During this time Idromeno pursued work as both a painter and a photographer—and as an architect—and he would soon become known for his multifaceted personality, recognized for his creative output in a wide variety of art mediums and crafts. He gained a reputation as a painter; as a sculptor and decorator; as a construction engineer; as an achitect and urban planner; as a musician; as a scenographer and a prop-maker; as a worker of iron, wood, stone, and cast-iron; and as a master of cresting sculptural decorative facades for homes and churches.

Idromeno's various contributions played a major role in Shkodra's cultural development as a city, but he was also a unique figure in Albanian history. While he worked in architecture, mechanics, sculpture, and music, Kolë was above all a painter and a photographer, and it was in these fields that he would leave a definitive mark on the history of Albanian art. In 1895, Kolë Idromeno was listed as a photographer in the professional register, alongside Kel Marubi, and it was photography that pushed him, in turn, towards the art of the cinema. In 1908, he made possible the screening of films in the "Gjuha Shqipe" ("Albanian Language") Cultural Center in Shkodra. In 1912, he imported a film projector—for the first time in Albania—and through a contract with the Josef Stauber Company in Austria, he regularly screened foreign films,

[4] Kahreman Ulqini, *Gjurmë të historisë kombëtare në Fototekën e Shkodrës*, Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1988, p. 2.

creating what might be called "the first cinema in Albania".[5] Idromeno also broadened the commercial possibilities of photography, publishing postcards featuring his photographs—printed in Austria and Germany—and selling them on the open market. These photos circulated not only within Albania, but also in several major cities in Europe.

Idromeno's working method was a traditional one, characterized by the creation of numerous detailed preparatory sketches which informed the eventual work, in color, on the canvas. He carried a sketchbook with him at all times, which he used to draw and keep notes on the scenes he observed. Idromeno's preparatory drawings and sketchbooks are held in the Central State Archive in Tirana. However, aside from his sketches, Idromeno also followed the practice of many Impressionist painters and used photography as a means to capture—by means of light—elements and situations that he would later use to compose, plan, and complete his painted compositions. (Fig. 1 and 2)

In twelve of these photographs, whose negatives are preserved in the Marubi National Museum in Shkodra, we see arranged—with an artistic sensibility rare for the time—groups of figures posed in the height of theatrical action. These photographs were later used as references by Idromeno for composing particular paintings, or for the representations of particular groups of figures within a larger composition, as was the case with the complex tableau *The Two Roads.* The twelve grotesque scenes that are part of this tableau, full of

[5] Loïc Chauvin and Christian Raby, *Albania 1858-1945, a photographic journey*, Paris: Ecrits Lumiere and Tirana: Albimazh, 2011, pp. 8-9.

expressiveness and irony, are believed to have been staged and photographed in 1892-1894, which corresponds with the time period when Idromeno was working on this particular painting. Looked at from today's perspective, Rubin Mandia argues (in his study *The Photography of Kolë Idromeno*) that "these photos show Idromeno to be the most modern photographer in Albania at the time".[6]

The archive of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and the Study of Art (IAKSA) in Tirana has the good fortune to hold the majority of Idromeno's photographs. This research institute possesses 1,285 negatives on glass, in a number of different sizes: 6x9 cm, 8x12 cm, 9x13 cm, 10x15 cm, 12x16 cm, and 13x18 cm, as well as a number of large-format negatives that measure 21x27 cm. These negatives are the products of French, Austrian, and German companies. In terms of technique, Idromeno most frequently utilized *collodion (wet plate)* and *dry plate* processes.[7]

The majority of the photographs in this body of work are shots taken in the artist's studio, and depict people posing in various ways. These composed photos include portraits, partial- and full-body images of individuals, and images of groups of people. However, for us, the most important part of Idromeno's photographic practice are his photographs taken outside the studio, capturing various scenes and moments from everyday life in both urban and rural Shkodra.

[6] Rubin Mandia, *Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos*, doctoral thesis, Tirana: IAKSA, 2018, p. 141.

[7] Gjergj Dinelli, "Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos", Third International Seminar *Shkodra through the Centuries*, vol. III, p. 111.

These numerous images frequently take the form of snapshots.[8] Demonstrating his mastery of the photographic medium in ways that are admirable, innovative, and often surprising, Idromeno reveals himself to be a moderate artist for his time, and a careful observer of the specificities of the social life and culture of Shkodra at the time. Thanks to his interest in exteriors, he created a series of photographs that ethnologist Afërdita Onuzi has argued represent some of the most authentic and accurate depictions of various forms of dress from the time. In these photographs, we often find information about manners of dress that are absent from the works of the Marubis, who composed their images in the studio and often intervened in the arrangement of traditional costumes worn by their subjects, as Onuzi notes.[9]

This article focuses on the archive of Idromeno's photographic work held in IAKSA's collection, and more precisely on the unique and surprising character of several of the discoveries that this archive possesses. Within this scope, the article will analyze just a few of these photographs, gathering these analyses together under the title "Surprises from an Archive".

Some of the most extraordinary photos in this collection—the ones that are most surprising, as we have chosen to put it—are those that depict the material culture of Shkodra at the time of their creation, depicting alleyways and traditional houses, modern streets, urban peripheries, and

[8] Rubin Mandia, *Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos*, p. 141.

[9] Afërdita Onuzi, "Fotografitë e vjetra shqiptare dhe vlerat e tyre etnokulturore", *Kultura Popullore* no. 1-2, 2010, 2010, p. 58.

residents of the city belonging to all sorts of groups—sometimes dressed in traditional costumes, or at other times *alla franca*, but just as often *malësorçe* (in the traditional costumes of the northern mountain regions of Albania) or *katundarçe* (in the costumes of the western lowland villages of Zadrima).

In a series of rare photos taken in Shkodra (we assume during World War I, since in them we note the presence of Austro-Hungarian troops and military units marching past in formation), several visual elements come together as if by magic in the period of a few seconds, in configurations that are unique as much for the information they give us as for the emotions contained within them. These three photos are snapshots realized from the same position, apparently taken one after another over a short interval of time, in which the most visible difference is that between the three figures who appear—respectively—in the left foreground of the images. (Fig. 3a, 3b, 3c)

In these three photos, we see a number of shared or similar elements, including the "Piazza Pedonale" in the center of Shkodra, which had just been designed by Idromeno himself in those years (and which stands out for the clearly Western influence of its architectural plan), visible to us with all its facades and decorative elements, while at the same time it sharply withdraws into the distance along a dynamic line of Albertian perspective. It seems to us as if the buildings are absorbed and lost in what we might describe—for the sake of analysis and interpretation—as the golden 'semicolon' of this topological plane (that is, of the photograph), a single unifying point that draws together all the lines of energy that run through

the photograph. These elements of energy are: the buildings themselves; several soldiers, in a column, passing by along the street in lock-step; and the foggy, unclear figures of several people moving along the sidewalk to the left, pressed against the wall in the shadow. However, most significant are the three discrete figures, each one completely different from the others, and each captured in a separate moment in the left area of the foreground.

In the first photo in the series, we see the figure of a *malësor* (a highlander from the northern regions of Albania), who appears almost frozen in place, having pulled back to the point that his body is almost pressed against the wall, his head and his gaze turned towards the band of musicians moving along the middle of the street in advance of the soldiers. It seems that this event represents a strange occurrence, something unseen in the everyday life of the subject of the photograph, the highlander who has come down into the city. (Fig. 3a) In the second photo, we see the figure of a woman wrapped in a traditional garment, who seems as if she is about to emerge from the frame and collide with us. She remains indifferent to the events nearby (the military parade). Her form—almost sculptural and certainly mysterious beneath its oriental covering—is positioned at the perfect point within the composition, precisely at the point of convergence of the lines of sight. The small dark triangle that constitutes all we can see of this woman's face becomes a strong element of the photograph, a point around which all the formal "events" of the photograph coalesce. (Fig. 3b) In the third photograph, we see a young man from the city, dressed in modern civilian clothes, in

the Western style. This person also seems indifferent to the passage of the military column, but he is not in the slightest bit indifferent to the presence of the camera and the photographer; in fact, he walks carelessly towards the lens, boldly looking the camera directly "in the eye". (Fig. 3c)

The archive holds only three photographs of this particular moment. It is very probable that these are the only three images made of this subject, all similar but each also possessing its own unique qualities, not coincidentally in the case of the figures positioned in the foreground. Each of these three figures represents a different social group from among those that lived in Shkodra at the time the photographs were taken. As such, these three figures might serve as the most representative archetypes of both the time (*chronos*) and the place (*topos*).

The visual force of these photographs and the relatively complete amount of information they present—so equivocal in its presentation of reality, in its ability to summarize in a single second a wide swathe of reality—coupled with the "accidental" presence of the "lucky" artist in precisely these fragmentary moments of time and at this precise point in space, together constitute a phenomenon that we encounter only in the photographs of the great masters from the history of world photography, such as Henri Cartier Bresson (1908-2004). Bresson and others brought to life masterpieces, precisely because they themselves lived—at every moment of their life—inside the image, without ever leaving it. At the same time,

Bresson himself asserted: "The photograph itself doesn't interest me. I want only to capture a minute part of reality."[10]

With the three photographs above, we can comfortably say that Idromeno proves himself as a master of photography, an artist who wishes, like Bresson, to capture a definitive moment, a moment that holds a wealth of anthropological information and that captures the essence of the situation.

While he so adeptly "chased" these scenes within the heart of the city, Idromeno's photographs taken outside the studio also sought to catalog every episode and place that held within it the promise of typifying the life of the times. In this vein, we might consider another informal and organic situation captured by his camera, this time in the outskirts of the city. The photograph *The Market* is undated, and we do not know the location in which it was taken either. Moreover, it is difficult to estimate the time and place of this particular image with any certainty compared to the previous photos, in which the elements of the images themselves provided quite complete information about the situation. (Fig. 4) This is because Western modernity, or contemporaneity, that also came to Albania after it achieved its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, together with the reforms undertaken by the various governments at the time, only transformed the urban landscape of the city centers. The periphery, on the other hand, remained as it had always been, informal in its urban sprawl, full of organic, unpaved alleyways; lacking a sewer system or

[10] *Fotografia del XX secolo*, Museum Ludwing Colonia: Taschen Verlag, 1997, p. 96.

lighting; featuring markets where the livestock and agricultural products were laid out on the ground by the villagers who came down to the city to sell their goods.

It is precisely this informal urban character of the periphery that Idromeno wants to uncover through the masterful composition of the scene he captures with his camera. In this shot, we see that the foreground is "overrun" in a chaotic way by several figures, who look on in a surprised and curious way at the camera's lens, clearly unfamiliar with the object itself and the process of photography. In such moments, Idromeno appears to remain "cold" in the face of their annoyance, their surprise, or their antagonism. The photographer instead benefits from this "accidental" occurrence, conveying value upon it and in so doing compounding the value of the photograph itself, engendering another significant moment through his artistic mastery. The foreground of this photograph, although it takes up a considerable portion of the composition, is exempted from dominating the scene. Had the foreground presented a more legible and detailed collection of information, it would have yielded a decidedly more mundane scene. The photographer's bold experimentation with an unfocused foreground has deftly avoided creating this kind of image. Instead we read the opposite: unexpectedness, suddenness, misunderstanding; furthermore, we perceive not so much the foreground as the background, where we see the true subject of the photograph, the village market located in the periphery of the city.

We read this compositional decision as an artistic strategy that is decidedly advanced for its time, since such artistic "games"—the juxtaposition of in-focus and out-of-focus

elements within a single frame, or the anatomical deformation of figures and objects in motion—would appear later in the history of world photography, such as in the work of the well-known French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue (1894-1986), who is known for his distorted images capturing automobiles and aeronautical subjects while in motion. In connection with his own photographic approach, Lartigue explained: "I always believe my eyes. But there are times when the images I capture, when they are printed, surprise even me."[11]

Idromeno frequently used a larger aperture in order to let a greater amount of light into the camera lens so as to reduce the shutter speed. Because photographic technology was not very advanced at the time and negatives were not as light-sensitive as necessary, exposure times were inevitably rather long. Children, in particular, often appear out of focus in Idromeno's photos, chaotic and formless from their constant movement while the photograph was being taken. Even if only a few seconds (or even one second) were needed to fix the moment in time, still the camera was unable to focus completely on these moving subjects, as we see in the photo below. (Fig. 5)

These cases might simply be accidents, or miscalculations of the exposure time, producing what some might perceive as a technical failure. However, as Clement Cheroux, among others, has pointed out, technical mistakes during the process of taking a photograph or printing the negative on paper, can be interpreted as actions by the

[11] Ibid., p. 374.

photographer that have an artistic character. In the case of the two images we have just examined—and in the case of several other photos by Idromeno, of a similar kind or otherwise displaying this unusual focal approach—it is the presence of the "warm" artist that we feel more strongly than that of the "cold" technical expert.

The application of longer exposure times has created an artistic result, one that—in a sense—might lead us to call this portion of Idromeno's creative output *impressionist*.[12] At the same time, we know that he was one of the first Albanian painters who treated light—in the context of painting—in an impressionist way, which we see in several of his works. In some of his photographs, light itself becomes a foundational element, emotive as much as technical, creating a pictorial and impressionistic effect in the context of the composition of these images, in which blurriness, halos, and shadows are suddenly created within the same frame.

A different photograph by Idromeno, picturing a Catholic monk in the process of cooking, appears at once ordinary and unexpected. (Fig. 6) The image is prosaic, insofar as it presents a figure framed in the center of the composition, with symmetry of volumes and tones distributed more or less equally on either side of the composition. In this, there is nothing that would lend the scene the kind of significance that would warrant being preserved eternally in time. But perhaps precisely the simplicity of the composition is the significant aspect of this photograph, since this simplicity fails to enliven our instinctive emotional reaction to the scene, allowing us

[12] Rubin Mandia, *Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos*, p. 148.

instead to absorb ourselves in the thematic and logical content of the situation. A believer, whose entire life has been dedicated to Christ alone, like the monk in the photo, might well be considered metaphorically as the "shepherd of human souls". However, Idromeno presents him to us quite differently, in a very natural way, as a cook busy at work preparing the lunchtime meal. A monk who must—in addition to the spiritual nourishment derived from his prayers at regular hours throughout the day—also feed himself in a physical, material sense.

Idromeno (who was also known as a devoted believer) has here daringly captured the monk during the most mundane and perhaps "ordinary" moment in the day of this man of God, who—despite having dedicated his life to his faith—here thinks only of filling his belly. In principle, for a monk, the material body and therefore food as well, as material nourishment, should not take priority. In this case, it seems as if—for a moment—the metaphysics of heavenly ideas has been brought down to the level of gastronomic need, reframed by a phenomenological understanding of the body's needs. The monk's dark, solemn habit is juxtaposed with the white cook's apron, and the towel draped over his shoulder, turning this spiritual figure into an ordinary person who wishes, for a moment, just to feed himself. Instead of liturgical objects, the holy book, a lit candle perhaps, or a cross, he holds a ladle. Even the pan behind his head appears like a "halo" that waits for him, off to the side, hung on the wall with a nail. The whole scene is miraculous in its simultaneous normalcy and its openness to multiple readings; the metaphysical realm of ideas

is replaced by the phenomenological realm of immediate physiological needs, and *spirit* is transformed into *body,* giving us a photograph in which the inspired touch of the artist is readily apparent.

Coincidentally, this photo bears a striking outward resemblance to the famous photograph by the well-known Austrian photographer August Sander (1876-1964), realized several years later in 1928. (Fig. 7) But the resemblance between these two photos is merely due to several formal similarities between the two compositions, and the partial similarity of the subjects depicted—the pastrycook, in Sander's case, is simply that. As close as the two photographs seem to each other, they are in fact very distinct. In this comparison, Idromeno's photograph of the monk cook seems even more special, incomparable in its layers of meaning and its multiple potential interpretations.

As we consider works that are closely intertwined with the veracity of their own subject matter, we must also take into account another photograph, one that Idromeno took of his own father, Arsen Idromeno. Idromeno has positioned his father in the middle of the composition, perhaps in order to allow him to make his own decisions about his pose. Arsen must be, in this image, quite advanced in age, and naturally he has placed one hand in the pocket of his coat while he rests the other on a staged segment of fence. It seems that he has utilizes these two gestures not so much because of the pose that he holds, but because his age makes them a necessity. The son does not encourage the father to engage in a theatrical performance. Rather, he allows him to present himself naturally, quite

discreetly and truthfully. Arsen Idromeno appears to us as he must have looked in his modest daily life. We are not looking—as is so often the case—at a photograph of someone who comes to the studio as part of a rare and esteemed ritual that occurs only once in his life, and who therefore prepares in advance for this moment: cleaning himself, shaving, dressing in his best clothes, adorning himself with expensive accessories, standing stiffly or positioning himself proudly before the camera's lens, and so forth. Rather, in Idromeno's photograph of his father (one of the few taken of him), the artist prefers to fix Arsen perpetually in time as he had in fact been throughout his life: a wise and simple man. There is a great deal of honor, honesty, respect, and love in this decision. The figure of Arsen appears to us as a model parent, imposing himself upon us not through majesty or luxury, but with his truthfulness, with his humanity and the dignity it carries with it. (Fig. 8)

We might also find surprising and unusual another photograph by Idromeno, about which—as is generally the case—we do not know the precise information about the date or the place of its realization. However, above all else, it is the anonymity of the person Idromeno has invited to be photographed that intrigues us. The image is a portrait taken within an interior possessing abundant natural light, perhaps even the artist's photographic studio. The person in the photo is completely different from the types of people Idromeno typically photographed, and indeed from anyone living in the territory of Shkodra at the time. Who might this utterly strange person have been, who caught Idromeno's artistic attention? A bizarre hat rests upon the head of an old woman, who wears an

even more outlandish pair of glasses that fight tightly to her face. Her clothing, at least from what we can see in the photograph, appears to be that of a wanderer. She may have been a person simply passing through on her wandering and boundless travels, simply a visitor to the city of Shkodra, but one who drew Idromeno's attention and interest precisely because of her untimely appearance. The artist's boldness in this case has documented the presence of a traveler completely abnormal for Albania at the time. (Fig 9)

In the case of this photo, as in the instance of Idromeno's photo of the monk cooking and of his father Arsen, we are again reminded of August Sander's photography, and his discreet treatment of his subjects in his encyclopedic and systematic series of portraits of individuals and groups of people, entitled *Face of Our Time,* published in 1929. Precisely because of the truthfulness of Sander's approach in terms of ignoring the directives of Nazi ideology about the purity of the Aryan race as a standard when documenting the people of the time, his photographic work was censored by the Nazi regime.[13]

Sander's photograph entitled *Porter,* created in 1929, shows a typical member of the German working class from the 1920s. This man, who is not young in age, and the way he has been photographed—his pose; the lifeless background behind

[13] Copies of Sander's book *Face of Our Time: Sixty Portraits of 20th-century Germans (Antlitz der Zeit: Sechzig Aufnahmen Deutscher Menschen Des 20. Jahrhunderts)* were confiscated and destroyed in 1936 by Nazi representatives, and the photographic plates were also destroyed, Sander's son Erich, who was a member of the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (SAPD, a left-wing party), was arrested in 1934 and sentences to 10 years in prison, where he died in 1944, shortly before the end of his sentence.

him, where we can make out a weathered door and an ordinary door handle; and the washed out light that strikes his face—best illustrates Sander's approach to photography as a medium. (Fig. 10) In this case, Sanders, with his compositional choices and his treatment of the subject, shows himself to be an uncompromising documenter of the reality of his time, bringing that reality before our eyes without any ornamentation, and without the need to display an arsenal of technical skills. We have neither a carefully composed background (of the kind we might call dignified) nor any technical manipulations (of the kind that might be associated with skillful mastery) in the photographic process. This comes precisely from the photographer's decision to focus on the discreet veracity of the moment; the image derives its strength precisely from its apparent poverty, from the simplicity of its appearance and the way it has been photographed.

Returning to Idromeno, we are also reminded of precisely Sander's photo of the porter when we look at Idromeno's negative (inventory number 2806). (Fig. 11) When we see Idromeno's photograph, a flood of analogies intuitively and immediately remind us of Sander's image. Idromeno has chosen to photograph a part of a seated figure, apparently positioned at the doorway of a store, or a marketplace *duga*, as it was called at the time. The figure of a middle-aged man faces us directly, framed symetrically, with his arms down and his hands resting on his knees. As a marker of social class, his clothing appears quite simple not to say poor. In the same way, the door that appears in the background is open, but from its depths nothing awaits us. It seems as if the key to this door is

the only thing that it protects. Both the position of the subject and the lighting are head-on, without any significant graphic contrast. It seems to us that Idromeno must have chosen the nearly absolute symmetry of the scene intentionally, with the aim of conveying the endless monotony that characterizes the subject's everyday life. The man's eyes gaze directly at us, and encompass—in a single moment of expression—an entire life spent in privation, suffering, endurance, and the long wait for happiness. His head covering is part of a typical garb worn by Muslim men. As such, the man appears to be a typical believer—more than devoted, he has subjected himself, unconditionally, to fate and the mercy of God, and perhaps because of this he accepts his poverty for the sake or in hopes of a better life in the afterworld. In this photo by Idromeno, as in the case of Sander's portrait, it is the subjects who are encouraged to take center stage through their honest humanity, rather than the photographers as authors through their technical mastery.[14] The paleness of the visual contrast, the simplicity of the pose, and above all the technical simplicity of the process of exposure, in these cases, becomes more than artistic enrichment—it gives us actual information about the content of the photograph's subject. We might refer to this, in the language of today's aesthetic discourses, as a conceptual approach, rather than a realistic or a naturalistic one.

The last photo we will consider presents a young girl, seated in an armchair—an image that Idromeno imbues with a unique artistic sensibility and a distinctly modern approach. (Fig. 12) Perfect symmetry might have served this composition

[14] Rubin Mandia, *Fotografia e Kolë Idromenos*, p. 93.

quite well, but the photographer has brilliantly broken it with the choice of the two vases placed to either side of the girl that contain different plants. In the same vein, one of the girl's hands is placed in her lap, while the other grasps the arm of the chair. In reality, only the girl's headscarf is asymmetrical, since the piece of cloth is tied on one side of her head and draped down from that point. The other elements that break the photo's symmetry, however, certainly cannot be there by accident—rather they must have been selected and staged intentionally by the photographer. Quite unique, and quite unexpected, is the background of the image. Here, we do not see a typical romantic studio set, since the photograph is not realized within a studio but rather outside, in front of the exterior of a house. The gridded pattern of the background is something that we do not find anywhere in the logic of photographic compositions from the time. This background, with its repetitive and severe decorative pattern, enlivens the entire scene, and echoes in a very evocative way the organic structural fragmentation of the two plants located to either side of the seated girl. Idromeno presents us with an inversion of the typical visual *gestalt* that presents a calm background and a fragmented figure. Here, these two elements switch places: we have a background that is fragmented, and a figure that is still and calm. This compositional decision causes our attention to be focused all the more on the girl's calm and unified figure, and particularly on her face and expressive eyes. This is a decidedly modern approach, one that we rarely see in photography of the time, but which we encounter in modern art from the time, such as in the works of the Austrian Secessionist painter from the late 19th

century, Gustav Klimt. Klimt often made his backgrounds busy and crowded, an aesthetic he sometimes extended to clothing as well, leaving only faces and hands clear and still, with the goal of making them the first visual element that viewers read when encountering the works. This approach arrives in modern art around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, influenced by traditional Japanese woodblocks. Looking even further back in time and in art history, we see this same strategy employed in Flemish tapestries of the 16th-18th centuries, or even earlier, in Byzantine icons painted on wood.

In general, all of Idromeno's photos that we have explored above represent works that break with the typical visual schema of their time. They are also photographs that show us contrasts, sometimes ones that are readily evident and other times ones that are hidden, that emerge in the dialogue amongst the diverse elements within each image, and between different images. These are masterful "writings" with light, and the photographs surprise us when we encounter them. At the same time however, the photos that we have presented above are just a small selection out of a tremendous number of negatives that the artist Kolë Idromeno created. These images have been selected out of Idromeno's much more expansive archive in order to evidence his interest in exploring the dynamism of the time in which he lived and created his works. The modernity of Albanian society at the turn of the century—and its contemporaneity—are more clearly conveyed, fully and truthfully, in the photographs that Idromeno took, rather than in the paintings he made. These photographic works testify to Idromeno's multifaceted character as a cultural personality,

demonstrating how he applied a technology that was relatively new even in Europe, much less in peripheral Albania. The artist shows himself to be both emotionally open and artistically emancipated, leaving space for the exploration of numerous new approaches to the practice of photography, exploiting the potential of the medium as both an artistic method and as a documentary and realist one.

As a result, the materials found in IAKSA's archive can truly be considered as visual texts with a rare value because of the rich artistic treatments they present, but above all because of their realist, documentary, and historical approaches to their subject matter, and the layering of ethnological details that are to be found within them. Therefore, this archival material represents a store of opportunities for further research by scholars working in various fields, who will undoubtedly be tempted to offer their own alternative readings and re-readings of specific exemplars within this body of work.

Fig. 1-2. Photograph of a scene composed by Kolë Idromeno in his studio, taken between 1892-94, and a painting based on the same photograph, completed in 1896.

Fig. 3a. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, taken between 1914-18, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 970.

Fig. 3b. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, taken between 1914-18, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 962.

Fig. 3c. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, taken between 1914-18, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 965.

Fig. 4. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 864.

Fig. 5. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 737.

Fig. 6. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, taken between 1883 and 1910, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 2746.

Fig. 7. *Pastrycook* (1928), photograph by August Sander.

Fig. 8. *Arsen Idromeno*, photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 1150.

Fig. 9. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 2665.

Fig. 10. *Porter* (1929), photograph by August Sander.

Fig. 11. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 2806.

Fig. 12. Photograph by Kolë Idromeno, undated, IAKSA Archive (negative), inventory no. 2816.