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Author: KUJTIM HALILI
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KUJTIM HALILI
POLIS University

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Abstract
Albanian monumental art produced between 1968 and 1985 represents one of the most dynamic yet highly constrained periods in the country's art history. Guided predominantly by the norms of Socialist Realism and shaped by an atmosphere of strong ideological control, the monumental sculpture of this era frequently oscillates between formal cliché and efforts toward aesthetic emancipation. Within this context, the figure of Thoma Thomai (Dhamo) emerges as one of the most distinctive and inventive voices of his generation—an artist who, quietly but persistently, sought to preserve professional integrity and the autonomy of plastic expression.
In comparison with his contemporaries—such as Mumtas Dhrami, Shaban Hadëri, Kristaq Rama, and Hektor Dule—Thomai works within a space that is less monumentalizing and more intimate, pursuing more human and emotionally resonant dimensions of sculptural representation. Unlike those artists whose practice became closely aligned with ideological sculpture, Thomai cultivates an approach that intertwines psychological observation, formal sensitivity, and greater freedom in shaping the portrait and the human figure.
This study aims to analyze Thomai's creative output within the constraints and opportunities of the period, highlighting the key features of his artistic language, his relationship to Socialist Realism, and the traces of European modernism that, although limited, surface in several of his works. Through an examination of the historical context, a plastic analysis of selected key sculptures, and references to contemporary theoretical and critical discourse, the article seeks to illuminate the creative dimension of an artist who quietly challenged the boundaries of the official artistic method.
The study also demonstrates the wide spectrum of formal approaches within Socialist Realism, showing that despite thematic uniformity, style was not fully standardized. Alongside the heroic pathos of certain monuments, one encounters more expressive tendencies, psychological depth, and intimate treatments of the human figure. Within this framework, Thomai's oeuvre stands out as one of the most original voices of the period, contributing to the expansion of the boundaries of Albanian monumental art.

Keywords: *Sculpture, Monumental Art, Socialist Realism, Humanism, Expressiveness*

Introduction

Albanian monumental sculpture of the Socialist Realist period reveals a persistent tension between ideological imperatives and artists' individual efforts to preserve professional integrity and plastic expression. While public themes were clearly prescribed, artistic form was never strictly codified, allowing room for formal and aesthetic exploration.

Artists retained a certain degree of freedom in terms of formal language, which led to works that, although officially commissioned and exhibited in state-sponsored exhibitions, did not fully adhere to the official artistic method. A representative example of this diversity is the relief The Peasantry Upheavals of 1915–1920, installed in the National Historic Museum in 1981 by Thoma Thomai. This work is notable for its dynamism and expressive power. According to sculptor Dhrami (1983), these are characteristics that also appear in other works by the same artist: they "…also display internal tension and original plastic solutions." (Figure 1).

Using what conventionally he has been allowed to and sticking to what the relief demands from him, the sculptor Thoma Thomai Dhamo gives to us through his original, many-faceted and energetic composition the social revolt of the people. "All this is shown thanks to the drawing and modelling, which are clean, laconic, and rich in movement and possessing an internal dramatic strength. Distinguishable, in the centre, stands out the best figure of the relief: the villager of Middle Albania who pushes forward barefoot but full of tension and passion. This central figure focuses with artistic force the anger, bravery..." according to Andon Kuqali (1982).

The 1970s and 1980s are characterized by an interplay between monumental scale and more introspective, humanizing treatments of the figure, in which expressiveness, internal dynamism, and psychological analysis increasingly prevail over schematic and folkloric approaches. Artists such as Thoma Thomai, Shaban Hadëri, Mumtaz Dhrami, and Kristaq Rama developed diverse artistic trajectories: some emphasized heroism and dramatization, while others sought to harmonize monumentality with emotional and psychological depth.

This period also marks a shift toward psychological characterization rather than ethnographic detail, accompanied by an expansion of monumental portraiture that reflects a measured humanism and a freer plastic idiom. These developments demonstrate that, even within the confines of a rigid ideological system, Albanian art could evolve and enrich the formal language of national sculpture.

Within this context, the monumental sculpture of Rrapo Hekali (1977), created by Thoma Thomai, stands as one of the most compelling examples of the interplay between monumentality and emotional expression in Albanian Socialist Realist sculpture (Figure 2).

The figure of Hekali integrates heroic strength with an inner composure, avoiding the excessive dramatization and emphatic gestures often associated with representations of historical heroes. The composition is distinguished by a balanced volumetric rhythm and an emphasis on the psychological dimension of the subject, rendering the figure not merely a symbol of heroism but a sensitive and profoundly human presence.

This approach illustrates Thomai's ability to maintain artistic integrity within ideological constraints, shaping a plastic language that merges monumentality with humanism and formal elegance. Rrapo Hekali exemplifies a type of sculpture that conveys emotional intensity without compromising the historical grandeur of its subject.

Cultural and Artistic Context of the Years 1965–1985

During this period, Albanian monumental art was shaped primarily by the norms of Socialist Realism, while also drawing on the Eastern academic training that most sculptors had received. Many works gravitated toward decorativism and ideological schematization, frequently reducing creative individuality in favor of political narrative. As noted by the scholar Andon Kuqali (1971), "themes held great importance in the context of socialism," emphasizing that plastic approach and vivid colors were employed in the service of ideological interpretation rather than aesthetic inquiry. Influences from Soviet, Czech, Polish, and Romanian art were evident in numerous works, though often without clear references to the avant-garde experiences of Western Europe. Exceptions were rare and generally associated with artists who sought to preserve alternative spaces for expression.

Within this narrow horizon, the work of Thoma Thomai gains particular significance. He represents a form of quiet aesthetic resistance; one that does not openly challenge the system but transcends it through artistic quality. Thomai was not a "monumental sculptor" in the classical sense defined by socialist doctrine. He belonged to a group of artists who found greater freedom in portraiture, maquettes, and intimate compositions, areas that were less burdened by grand ideological rhetoric. In this sense, his position contrasts sharply with that of his contemporaries:

- Mumtas Dhrami – oriented toward heroic monuments and dynamic plastic structure;
- Shaban Hadëri – known for an epic and declamatory tone in historical compositions;
- Hektor Dule – author of monumental scenes marked by mythologization of the figure;
- Kristaq Rama – noted for aesthetic sublimation and the pursuit of monumental freedom.

Thomai offers a different approach: less grandiose, more human, and more introspective. He maintains a balance between the demands of the official method and the need for artistic authenticity. "He belongs to the younger members of the older generation". According to painter Basim Tula (1996), such interventions reflect Thomai's passion. In his later interviews, Thomai emphasizes that the effort to avoid overt ideologization was a continuous, often invisible, yet constant process embedded in the conceptual structure of his works (Figure 3).

According to scholar Stefan Çapaliku (2019), it was precisely this focus on "the real theme" and the avoidance of folklorization or glorification that preserved Thomai's artistic integrity. While

other figures became defined by monumentalism, Thomai safeguarded the human scale of the figure, distancing it from the heroic intoxication of the time. This period, although constrained by ideological norms, served as the stage upon which the artist constructed the foundations of his plastic language. In the portrait Girl Singing (1971), Kristaq Rama observes an attempt to "translate a song through sculpture," highlighting the synesthetic dimension of the work. It is not merely a portrait; it constitutes an inquiry into rhythm, musicality, and the figure's internal movement (Figure 4). The quality of formal synthesis and the search for equilibrium between form and spirit set Thomai on a path distinct from official aesthetics.



Figure 1. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): The Peasantry Upheavals of 1915–1920, (1981) installed in the National Historic Museum



Figure 2. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): Rrapo Hekali. Plaster sculpture (1977). Source taken from the author's file: Tirana 2019.

In the art of a nation, especially interesting works that represent more than just the author but a historical event, an act of nature or a notable period emerge from time to time. Such works may even serve as pioneers of a conceptual shift. As noted by painter and art historian Llambi Blido (1995), "The Singing Girl is a sculpture — a symbol of freedom, art, and the modern emancipation of women. And all of this has been conveyed, for the first time in Albanian sculpture, from beginning to end, as a purely plastic idea." This innovative spirit is also reflected in other sculptures by Thomait, such as and the portrait of Tefta Tashko Koço (1974), both of which display a remarkable sense of freedom in their volumetric modeling and the dynamic rhythm of their surfaces (Figure 5).

These works reflect the spirit of the "liberalization" of 1968–1973, a period during which ideological control softened and the arts briefly gained room for experimentation. Thomai's works of the early 1970s exhibit a refined approach to form and expression, visible in several essential characteristics.

One of the most prominent is the reduction of rhetoric in favor of emotion: the artist avoids propagandistic hyperbole and the exaggerated gestures typical of Socialist Realism, focusing instead on conveying internal emotion and naturalness of presence. Another distinguishing element is the gentle and balanced rhythm of the surfaces, where each volumetric value and interplay of forms follows a harmonic logic that maintains calm and visual equilibrium. This approach contributes to the construction of a pure and coherent plastic language, avoiding unnecessary decorative excess. Thomai also demonstrates an acute psychological observation of the subject—a rarity in Albanian art of the time. Through the analysis of facial expression, posture, and composition, the figure articulates an inner state and individual character, imparting vibrancy and sensitivity to the work.

These elements reflect a movement toward a plastic language that, although rooted in academic realism, seeks emotional depth and the communication of inner experience. Thomai thus emerges as one of the most innovative artists of the period, contributing to the development of a freer, more harmonious, and more contemplative sculptural language in Albanian art of the era. The culmination of Thoma Thomai's artistic emancipation is embodied in Portrait of the Student (1972), a maquette that the sculptor himself described as a plastic solution "that could have been realized in any European city." This statement underscores his aspiration to align with contemporary European artistic developments (Figura 6).

The portrait is distinguished by its free gesture, simplified composition, volumetric clarity, and overall sense of fluidity, eliminating any ideological or decorative burden. The scholarly value of this study lies in demonstrating the divide between the artist's professional formation and the constraints imposed by the official canon. It opens an analytical space for understanding the complex relationship between art and ideology—between the sculptor's individual aspirations and institutional norms. The Portrait of the Student represents a brief yet pivotal moment of modernity within Albanian sculpture of the early 1970s.

During the 1980s, Thomai described himself as increasingly free to explore themes that required a more pronounced expressive language. The gradual decline of political control and the broader social transformations of the period created opportunities for works with a more reflective, dramatic, and individualized character. His sculpture from this time reveals heightened expressiveness, a more liberated treatment of volumes, and a tendency toward subtle abstraction—an evolution made possible by themes centered on pain, sacrifice, and human drama.



Figure 3. Photograph with sculptor Thoma Thomai, during the interview. Tirana 19. 07. 2018



Figure 4. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): Vajza që Këndon (The Singing Girl). Bronze, portrait presented at the exhibition "Primavera" (1973).

Plastic Structure and Artistic Expression in the Monument The ambush of Barmash (1984)

Works such as The Fire of Borova and the The ambush of Barmash acquire deeper emotional resonance, distancing themselves from heroic schematism and reflecting the artist's rejection of folklorism and gigantism, traits emphasized by Çapaliku as central to Thomai's artistic identity.

The Fire of Borova (1988), this work in bronze has been placed in an important point of Borova village in southern Albania. Two



Figure 5. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): Tefta Tashko Koço (1974) Bronze. National Gallery of Art.



Figure 6. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): Student (1972) plaster sculpture, 160 x 45 x 33 cm. National Gallery of Art.

arched surfaces of wrought stone facing each other have been built on an elevated point of the village. This was the idea of the architect Vladimir Bregu. In one of the walls, the sculpture Borova, July 6 1943, has been fixed upon. It tells the whole story of that tragic history. It extends horizontally to about four metres and its quadrangle form ends in an irregular way, an effect created by the compositional decision of the author. The subject of the work tells of the three most poignant episodes from that event. Each of them entails a separate impressive subject but in the entirety of the work they are covered by another element that has been turned into a symbol, the Flame. The author, who has not underestimated each of the three moments, has realized them experiencing all the emotions of pain and the anxiety that has overcome the victims.

The ambush of Barmash (1984), created by Thoma Thomai (Dhamo), holds a distinctive place within the repertoire of Albanian socialist-period monumental art. Positioned at a strategic overlook in the Barmash valley, the work seeks to materialize partisan heroism through a dynamic plastic vocabulary and a composition that unites territory, historical narrative, and ideological symbolism.

Conceived within an artistic climate in which monumental sculpture served as an instrument of collective memory and political legitimization, the The ambush of Barmash refers to an episode of the National Liberation War. Through two typified partisan figures depicted in the midst of battle, Dhamo articulates a heroic narrative of sacrifice, solidarity, and the unyielding spirit of resistance (Figure 7).

In this sense, the work conforms to the dominant iconographic model of the 1960s–1980s: athletic, tension-filled figures oriented toward a teleological horizon that projects the socialist future.

The monument is not merely commemorative; it is performative, re-enacting through a frozen form the unbroken energy of struggle. The sculpture presents two male figures atop a rocky block, forming a wide, energetic triangular structure. The foremost figure rises with an outstretched arm and clenched fist—a gesture embodying calling, mobilization, and triumph.

The second figure, crouched and holding a rifle horizontally, completes the vector of tension and dramatic charge (Figure 8). These two axes—the vertical of uplift and the horizontal of combat—construct a powerful symbolic system: moral elevation and material resistance. The sculptor employs a strong diagonal rhythm, imparting to the monument a centrifugal energy that seems to burst forth from the bronze mass. Dhamo follows the principles of heroic realism: animated bodies, pronounced musculature, and rigid drapery that enhance monumental grandeur.

The faces are focused and synthesized yet expressive, avoiding individualized portrayal in order to confer upon the figures the status of archetypal fighters. Plastic weight is distributed through clearly defined volumetric blocks, balancing the figures' heavy mass with their dramatic motion. The monument is set upon a stone platform, minimally detached from the natural terrain. This seamless integration grants the work a topographic character: the figures appear to emerge from the mountain itself, forming an organic part of the landscape.



Figure 7. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): The ambush of Barmash, (1984). Bronze sculpture; Barmash- Albanian.

This connection to nature becomes a metaphor for the partisan's bond with land, soil, and identity. Heroism is articulated not through rhetorical pathos but through a dynamic generated from within the form. The frozen movement of the figures becomes a shared visual language that communicates energy, sacrifice, and resolve. In theoretical terms, the work embodies the paradigm of the "socialist heroic subject," in which the individual dissolves into the collective and rises to a mythical dimension.

The Barmash landscape constitutes an inseparable element of the conceptual composition. The open space and the mountain opposite create a natural scenography that expands the sculpture beyond its physical limits (Figure 9).

The principal figure, with raised arm, establishes a dialogue between earth (the realm of real struggle) and sky (ideal, historical projection). The two figures construct a clear dialectic: the first (with the weapon) represents immediate combat, defense, and tactical action; the second (with the raised arm) embodies calling, idealization, and spiritual leadership. This duality transforms the monument into a conceptual schema: the foundation is physical sacrifice, upon which ideological mobilization rises.

The ambush of Barmash (1984) by Thoma Thomai (Dhamo) stands as one of the significant achievements of twentieth-century Albanian monumental sculpture. It synthesizes the principles of socialist realism with a distinct artistic individuality, forming a work in which form, movement, ideology, and nature converge into a powerful unified structure. The sculpture remains a reference point for its use of diagonal dynamism in composition, its integration of monumental figures with landscape, and its plastic elaboration of the concept of collective heroism. Through this work, Dhamo created not only a monument but also a visual

mechanism of memory and historical identity—one that continues to communicate a potent aesthetic and symbolic energy today.

Thomai's artistic production during this period must be understood as a form of resistance against the schematization typical of monumental sculpture at the time. His resistance was not political but aesthetic and methodological. By preserving his artistic individuality, he forged the model of an artist who, despite existing boundaries, seeks to keep professional inquiry alive.

The analysis of his early-1970s works reveals several key elements that demonstrate a conscious distancing from the dogmatic aesthetics of Socialist Realism and a movement toward a modern plastic syntax. His resistance, far from ideological dissent, was grounded in aesthetic conviction and methodological integrity—an affirmation of individual artistic agency within the constraints of the system.

First, the plastic vocabulary he employs reveals a mode of thinking about form that transcends rigid ideological schemes. Thomai prioritizes the interplay between volume, movement, and compositional simplicity, constructing the figure on the basis of contemporary visual principles rather than rhetorical imperatives.

Second, a significant transformation can be observed in his treatment of the human figure.

Rather than presenting the subject as a monumental hero or a propagandistic instrument, Thomai depicts a real, tangible individual—an everyday human being. This shift toward humanism distances the artist from the theatrical heroization that dominated official sculpture of the era. Another distinctive aspect is the deliberate reduction of pathos, an intentional avoidance of overly dramatic or exaggerated gestures. Instead of relying on artificial tensions, Thomai favors structural calmness and an inner intensity that emanates from the form itself. This approach aligns him with modern European practices, where expression is achieved through an economy of means rather than through scenic hyperbole. His figures communicate through the sovereignty of pure form, avoiding unnecessary narrative intrusion. Silence, as an aesthetic concept, becomes a strategy for articulating presence and emotional depth.

These elements modern plastic syntax, humanization of the figure, reduction of pathos, and an aesthetics of silence; position Thoma Thomai as one of the artists who articulated a distinct moment of emancipation within the constraints of the system, expanding the formal horizon of Albanian sculpture of that period. In this sense, Thomai embodies the typology of an artist who preserves himself and part of the tradition from ideological degradation, generating alternatives that would later serve as preconditions for the aesthetic transition after 1990.

Thomai's principal contribution lies in reintroducing psychological and emotional depth into the portrait genre, distancing it from formal heroism. As noted by art scholar Suzana Varvarica Kuka (1998), the sculptor Dhamo preserves "…a precious sensibility within himself, which he conveys in every one of his works, turning it into the distinctive mark of his artistic individuality and a testimony to an aesthetic phenomenon in culture." At a time when the human figure functioned primarily as a propagandistic tool, he restores it as an intimate and timeless subject. His visual language, while rooted in classical foundations, subtly absorbs elements of modernity. This is where the artist's greatest historical value resides: he exemplifies a disciplined creativity that resists the distortions of the era and upholds professional integrity.

Conclusions

The artistic output of Thoma Thomai (Dhamo) represents one of the most significant chapters in Albanian sculpture during the second half of the twentieth century. Through a sustained and sincere formal inquiry, he succeeded in crafting a distinct artistic profile, distancing himself from the monumental rhetoric and decorative schemata that characterized much of the period's official art. His sculptures demonstrate that, even within a closed ideological system, art can find ways to communicate human depth, sensibility, and aesthetic imagination.

Thomai stands among the few artists who developed a coherent and credible plastic language, preserving professional integrity even in the most challenging phases of Albania's cultural life.

His artistic thinking—nourished by close observation and personal experience—constitutes a creative laboratory through which Albanian sculpture may be studied not only as an ideological instrument but also as a reflection of the human spirit. In this context, the analysis of Thomai's oeuvre contributes to a critical reassessment of Albanian art history, restoring to the center the figure of the individual artist who, quietly yet decisively, altered the trajectory of sculpture in his time.

The chapter dedicated to Thomai's creativity and sculptural evolution between 1968 and 1974 examines a crucial phase in the development of Albanian monumental sculpture, a period in which the art of Socialist Realism intersected with modernizing impulses and refined formal experimentation. The analysis of his monumental works, maquettes, and studies shows that this interval constitutes an experimental moment in which ideological constraints coexisted with mature creativity and advanced technical mastery.

Central to this period is Thomai's artistic activity, which—despite the thematic obligations imposed by official canons—managed to sustain a modern sensibility and a high degree of plastic integrity. His works are characterized by an internal dynamism, original volumetric solutions, and the deliberate reduction of decorative elements. This orientation produced a sculptural language that avoided dominant schematism and promoted a more human, purified, and expressive treatment of the monumental figure. In sum, the article situates Albanian monumental sculpture of 1965–1985 within a framework that integrates formal analysis, political context, and the evolution of artistic language, underscoring the fact that Thomai's contribution marks a critical moment in the consolidation of sculptural modernity in Albania.

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Figure 8. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): The ambush of Barmash, (1984), detail of the sculpture; Barmash- Albanian.



Figure 9. Thoma Thomai (Dhamo): The ambush of Barmash, (1984). Bronze sculpture; Barmash- Albanian

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