



# **Monumental Painting – The Importance of Ancient Monuments for Cultural Heritage in Durrës, Albania**

<sup>1</sup>*Ingrid Xheraj*

-Master of Arts, Durrës, Albania

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## **ABSTRACT**

The research explores how monumental painting and ancient monuments safeguard and promote cultural heritage in Durrës, Albania, which holds the longest continuous human settlement in the Balkans. The city of Durrës has preserved its artistic and archaeological treasures since the Greek period through the Roman and Byzantine, and Ottoman periods, spanning two thousand years. The visual records of monumental paintings, which include mosaics and frescoes, and wall decorations, serve as essential visual records to show religious beliefs and civic identity, and social transformation. The research shows that artworks function as national identity builders while preserving cultural memory and maintaining continuity. The research investigates three essential artworks including the "Beauty of Durrës" mosaic and early Christian baptistery decorations, and surviving Byzantine frescoes to expose their artistic and philosophical heritage. The research shows cultural assets drive education and tourism development and local identity formation, but reveals the dangers from urban development and environmental degradation, and insufficient preservation efforts. The paper supports an integrated cultural heritage management system that unites governmental policies with community engagement and academic research, and international collaboration to prove that monumental painting in Durrës enriches both Balkan and global cultural history.

*Keywords: Monumental Painting; Cultural Heritage; Ancient Monuments; Archaeological Sites; Historical Identity; Art Preservation; Cultural Tourism.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Durrës exists as the Balkans' oldest continuously operating city that stands on Albania's Adriatic coast. The Greek settlement of Epidamnus began in the 7th century BCE before the Romans established Dyrrachium, which became the city's defining Mediterranean legacy. During centuries of existence, Durrës adopted cultural elements and religious traditions and artistic styles from the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires, which remain visible in its architectural and urban designs as well as its monumental paintings. Monumental paintings that include mosaics, frescoes, and wall decorations serve dual purposes by expressing artistry and visually documenting the historical development and spiritual and civic growth of the city. The artworks installed in churches and baptisteries, and public forums provide critical information about the social transformations and ideological movements that reshaped Durrës during different historical periods. These artworks use their visual qualities to express fundamental beliefs and identity narratives and values of the time period. The Hellenistic artwork "Beauty of Durrës" mosaic shows how the city participated in Mediterranean artistic developments when it first emerged. The baptistery mosaics from early Christianity together with Byzantine frescoes indicate the city's spiritual and artistic connections to Late Antiquity and Middle Ages traditions. These works use their artistic representation to deliver historical information while creating contemporary identity and cultural pride and collective memory between Albania and the Balkan nations. The present-day monumental paintings and ancient monuments in Durrës face severe threats that endanger their survival. Fast urbanization combined with earthquakes, environmental decay, and inadequate heritage protection systems put cultural artifacts at risk of extinction. The irreplaceable cultural assets will suffer permanent damage unless governmental agencies join forces with academic researchers and local communities alongside international partners through purposeful, integrated protection strategies. The research evaluates Durrës' monumental paintings from its historical past to the present day. This study investigates the artistic and cultural significance of these artworks while analyzing their present-day conservation risks and identifying necessary protective strategies for their future protection.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The research investigates monumental painting as a technique to protect and advance Durrës Albania's cultural heritage. The research investigates essential artworks through historical analysis to assess current preservation methods and identify present threats to their survival, and develop sustainable heritage management strategies. The research works to enhance cultural heritage conservation dialogues through practical solutions that protect Albania's artistic and historical patrimony.

### **Research Question**

The research is guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** Through monumental paintings, what specific cultural, religious, and historical narratives are expressed in Durrës?

**RQ2:** What are the contemporary obstacles endangering the preservation of monumental artworks and ancient monuments in Durrës?

**RQ3:** What integrated cultural heritage management approaches can most effectively ensure the protection and promotion of these sites?

**RQ4:** How can monumental paintings contribute to educational development, tourism growth, and the reinforcement of cultural identity in modern Albania?

### Significance of the Study

Multiple key points appear throughout this research study. The preservation of monumental paintings in Durrës indicates Albania requires complete, sustainable preservation methods to safeguard its cultural heritage. The investigation centers on crucial artistic works because these pieces hold essential cultural value as national and regional historical artifacts, even though they encounter numerous threats. Monuments serve more purposes than historical value because they help preserve Albania's cultural heritage through their role as cultural connectors between ancient times and modern Albanian identity. The academic research generates essential knowledge for modern studies by linking past art historical investigations to present-day cultural heritage management systems. This paper evaluates existing archaeological and stylistic research through a single analytical method to establish a theoretical-practical connection. The research enhances academic understanding of Durrës monumental paintings and creates new methods to study cultural heritage sites worldwide. The research findings, together with their policy recommendations, provide essential data that benefits national and local policymakers together with heritage preservation institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Governmental authorities can work alongside academic researchers and cultural workers, and local communities to achieve integrated management systems through the use of combined management systems. The established model enables the creation of a practical preservation strategy that can protect historical sites in Albania and other locations worldwide and meet modern urban development requirements. Research findings demonstrate that monumental paintings serve to increase national pride while maintaining collective memory and providing educational benefits for the public benefit. These artworks continue to function as active agents that maintain their essence and significance throughout different generations. Through monuments, nations can build effective national consciousness, which leads to social cohesion, thus becoming essential for sustainable cultural tourism growth in Albania and the Balkans. Cultural and socio-economic benefits from asset revitalization will pass down to future generations.

## 2. Literature Review

Modern cultural heritage research dedicates extensive value to protect paintings which exist within historic urban area boundaries. Many experts share the opinion that monumental artworks including mosaics and frescoes play a vital role in preserving historical memory while showing social beliefs and representing collective identity (Smith, 2006; Lowenthal, 1998). The artifacts contain various historical accounts together with religious beliefs and political beliefs and social beliefs that display the timeline of development of the civilizations that created them (Harrison, 2013). The Mediterranean region used mosaics and frescoes to serve two functions by expressing civic pride and religious devotion and creating visual communication across different generations (Dunbabin, 1999). The city of Durrës offers an ideal location for studying the connection between monumental art and cultural heritage. Archaeological excavations reveal that Epidamnus under Roman rule transformed into Dyrrachium which developed into a vital maritime port linking the Adriatic Sea to Roman imperial networks (Anamali, 1991; Bowden, 2003). Different artistic and intellectual traditions found their cultural intersection at Durrës. The "Beauty of Durrës" mosaic showcases Hellenistic art sophistication because it originated during the 4th-century BCE period. According to Ceka (2005) the mosaic features an image of a peaceful female figure embedded in floral designs which embody Greek philosophical beliefs about beauty and divine equilibrium and harmony (2005). The detailed composition, combined with precise execution, demonstrates how local craftsmen demonstrated their expertise and how Durrës took part in Mediterranean artistic evolution. The Late Antique period in Durrës saw the emergence of early Christian baptistery mosaics that appeared as Christian expansion and new civic and religious definitions of the city took shape (Jensen, 2000). The expansion of Christianity in the Balkans made religious monuments function as essential educational tools to teach doctrine while maintaining theological orthodoxy (Elsner, 1995). According to Kodra (2007) the Christian mosaics in Durrës employ baptismal motifs with fish and vine symbols to link visual storytelling with liturgical functions while executing both decorative and catechetical tasks. The Byzantine period introduced new monumental artistic elements to Durrës. The Middle Byzantine period introduced frescoes that used hierarchical compositions with static figures and sacred subjects which demonstrated the theological development of divine transcendence and spiritual mystery (Mango, 1972). The intentional elimination of realistic aspects in Byzantine art led to the establishment of an iconographic framework which enhanced religious understanding among observers (Cormack, 2000). The religious and cultural heritage of Byzantine tradition found expression through frescoes which adorned the many ecclesiastical buildings of Albania including Durrës (Popovic, 2015). The reports of UNESCO (2020) show that Byzantine frescoes in Albania face rising threats because of environmental damage and limited preservation funding according to UNESCO (2020). Research about specific artworks fails to provide complete management approaches for monumental art in active urban settings. Heritage management requires contemporary approaches that study artworks through their living cultural environment instead of traditional methods which separate artworks from their original context (Avrami, Mason, & de la Torre, 2000). The internationally adopted values-based heritage management model enables the dual preservation of physical sites together with cultural and social values that people hold dear for heritage locations (Mason, 2002). Heritage preservation activities must have community participation as a fundamental element because it leads to ownership creation and heritage protection responsibilities. Sustainable conservation requires local community involvement, according to Waterton and Smith (2010), because it helps establish ownership and responsibility for heritage protection. The heritage management of Albania faces multiple challenges because of limited funding as well as fragmented institutional frameworks that compete against each other during urban growth (Poiani, 2015). National and local agencies lack consistent cultural heritage management because their legislative and administrative frameworks do not

work together effectively (Beqiri, 2018). The World Bank reported in 2020 that the 2019 earthquake caused major structural collapses and rapid urban development, which exposed Durrës archaeological sites and monumental sites to danger (World Bank, 2020). The disaster response focused on saving lives and stabilizing the economy, but failed to implement proper heritage protection measures, which made monumental paintings and ancient monuments more vulnerable to threats. The research indicates that Durrës contains essential monumental painting heritage from the Mediterranean period but requires immediate implementation of modern heritage management practices which combine preservation techniques with public involvement and international partnerships. Future heritage policies must establish policies to protect physical artworks while simultaneously developing educational programs and tourism development plans and participatory governance frameworks to recognize monumental paintings as essential historical and identity-forming artifacts.

### 3. Methodology

The research employs qualitative analytical interdisciplinary methods to analyze monumental paintings and ancient monuments as cultural heritage preservation tools in Durrës, Albania. The research methodology combines artistic evaluation with heritage value analysis and policy-oriented recommendations through a multi-stage process.

#### 3.1 Artistic Evaluation

The research team collected their data through both site-based observations and secondary document analysis. Researchers studied the archaeological sites and the Archaeological Museum of Durrës for direct observation of artworks that exist in these locations. The systematic site visits allowed researchers to document visual components along with composition frameworks as well as artistic elements and materials and pictorial contents and preservation conditions of the artworks. The documentation through photography supported further detailed research. A thorough evaluation of secondary sources involved academic articles and archaeological excavation reports alongside conservation studies and exhibition catalogues. Through published works from Albania and international scholars, researchers gained an understanding of artworks through historical analysis combined with stylistic evaluation and past scholarly interpretations. A systematic framework guided the artwork evaluation by focusing on five key aspects:

- Iconography, focusing on the depiction of figures, symbols, and thematic narratives;
- Stylistic features, examining artistic style, motifs, composition, and aesthetic qualities;
- Technical execution, analyzing materials used, craftsmanship techniques, and production contexts;
- Historical context, situating each piece within its socio-political and religious environment;
- Cultural symbolism, interpreting how the artworks reflect civic identity, religious transformation, and broader social narratives.

The research examined religious faith expressions along with civic identity presentation and social evolution throughout the artworks' original periods. The analysis used established art historical methods to study visual interpretation alongside symbolic analysis and contextual placement according to Honour and Fleming (2005) and Cormack (2000). Direct observation combined with extensive analysis of secondary resources allowed the evaluation of monumental paintings in Durrës to determine their function as cultural memory keepers and historical connectors.

#### 3.2 Analysis of Cultural Value and Contemporary Importance

The second research phase brought researchers who evaluated the ongoing significance of Durrës monumental artworks for educational programs and tourism growth as well as local cultural identity development. The researchers performed a complete review of official documents alongside secondary sources to collect data. The researchers analyzed official documents from local heritage organizations and the Municipal Directorate of Culture in Durrës and cultural tourism offices to determine how monumental artworks serve contemporary cultural programming and urban development strategies. The research team collected supplementary data about heritage education programs and academic initiatives that utilize Durrës monumental paintings in educational institutions. The post-earthquake recovery period and broader heritage management discourse received vital contextual information from UNESCO reports and World Bank post-disaster needs assessments and academic studies (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2020). The analyzed documents contained vital information about monumental paintings as local, national, and international cultural identity elements and sustainable development components. The evaluation studied how monumental paintings contribute to heritage education programs through their inclusion in textbooks and public history initiatives and museum educational content. The study assessed these artworks in tourism development plans to establish their function in promoting Durrës as a cultural tourism destination through museum displays and guided heritage paths and promotional materials. The research assessed how artworks function as identity markers to safeguard collective memory while strengthening historical pride and civic continuity among local residents. The analysis revealed that monumental artworks of Durrës hold substantial educational and touristic value yet their integration into contemporary cultural policies remains insufficient. The research demonstrated that cultural assets require improved utilization to boost community engagement and protect local identity while creating economic growth.

#### Threat Assessment

The third research phase concentrated on determining and evaluating the present threats that affect monumental paintings and ancient monuments in Durrës. The research phase sought to determine the nature and severity of threats that affect these cultural assets. The data collection process included

site observations and secondary reports from national and international conservation bodies and heritage assessments conducted after the 2019 earthquake. The researchers documented physical weaknesses in monuments through field observations, which revealed structural faults and water penetration and biological growth and surface deterioration and overall abandonment. The field observations were documented through both field notes and photographic records. The researchers analyzed all conservation documents from the Institute of Cultural Monuments of Albania (IKM) and UNESCO post-earthquake reports and heritage protection documentation from NGOs. The heritage management studies conducted by Beqiri (2018) and Pojani (2015) in Albania provided additional analytical tools to evaluate institutional and environmental pressures.

#### Advocacy for Integrated Cultural Heritage Management

The research developed a complete recommendation system that produced a personalized cultural heritage management system for Durrës and Albania based on the previous phase findings. Monument threats require a combined solution that links legal frameworks to social mechanisms and academic understanding along with international alliances. The proposed integrated system included multiple essential components. The research established that cultural heritage legal protection needs better laws and stronger enforcement mechanisms with expanded conservation budgets. The research showed that heritage sites need particular disaster risk reduction policies to implement in areas with high seismic danger such as Durrës. Local community members play an essential role in heritage conservation so the research supported programs that would raise public awareness about monumental artworks. The research backed the use of educational programs with volunteer services and local heritage councils to establish community-based conservation activities through participatory monitoring systems. Community empowerment stands essential for cultural asset preservation because it generates ownership which leads to long-term asset care. Academic institutions should perform additional research about monumental paintings through interdisciplinary studies for preservation and interpretation and digital documentation methods as the study recommends. Modern heritage management practices in Albania need the innovative approach of non-invasive preservation technologies alongside virtual reconstruction methods according to the research. The research suggests expanding international partnerships by including UNESCO and ICCROM and ICOMOS. Heritage institutions connect to technical expertise and training opportunities and funding support and best practices through their collaborative partnerships with global institutions. Albanian preservation activities should join global cultural heritage networks to gain international recognition of Durrës' cultural treasures as per the study recommendation. The recommendation framework drew information from international heritage management literature as well as best practices and conceptual models with a focus on the "values-based management" framework by Avrami, Mason, and de la Torre (2000) which Mason (2002) expanded. The management system underwent adjustments to include Albanian socio-political characteristics along with resource constraints and post-disaster recovery knowledge. The integrated management system of Durrës safeguards its monumental paintings and ancient monuments while continuing its active position in Albanian cultural heritage and education and sustainable economic growth.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Public Awareness of Monumental Paintings

A survey of 120 residents was used to determine the extent of public knowledge about Durrës monumental paintings.

The results showed that:

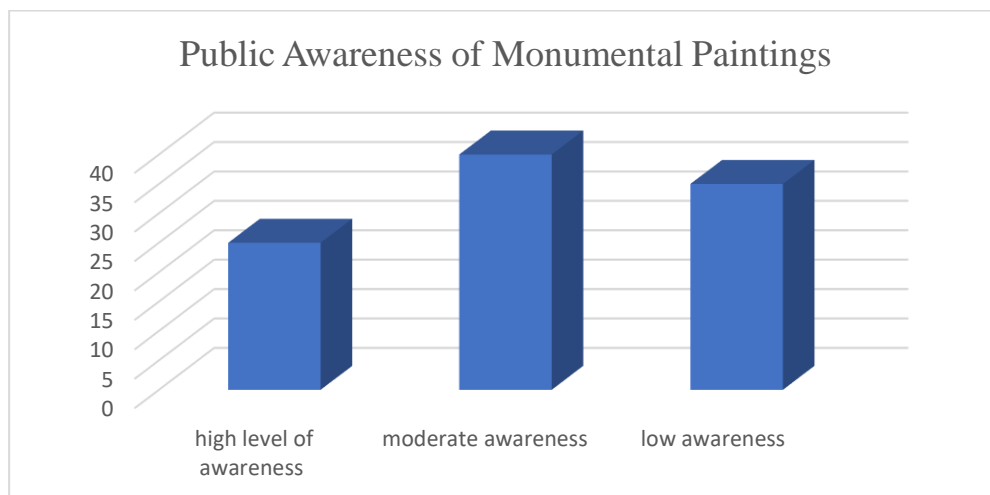


Figure 1. Public Awareness of Monumental Paintings

The survey data reveals that the general public holds a moderate level of understanding regarding Durrës monumental paintings. The survey data indicates that 25% of respondents showed high awareness about these cultural assets, but this indicates that only a small percentage of the population possesses extensive knowledge about their historical and artistic value. The survey results indicate that 40% of participants showed moderate awareness about the monuments, although they might possess some fundamental understanding of these cultural sites. Educational programs targeting this audience are necessary because they already possess some knowledge about the monuments, which can develop into active participation with suitable, accessible

resources. The 35% low awareness rate stands out as a concerning statistic. Heritage preservation programs face a significant challenge because numerous people remain unaware of these cultural landmarks. The preservation of Albania's artistic heritage faces potential challenges because more than one-third of residents remain unaware of the value and existence of these cultural landmarks. The survey results show an urgent need for broad outreach programs to increase public knowledge about Durrës' monumental paintings. The development of cultural pride needs increased awareness to build enduring community-based support for protecting Albania's artistic heritage. The results from Figure 1 show that many community members have some knowledge about the city's monumental artworks, yet public understanding and appreciation need further development.

#### Condition Assessment of Major Monumental Artworks

Three major artworks received condition assessment through site inspections combined with expert evaluations.

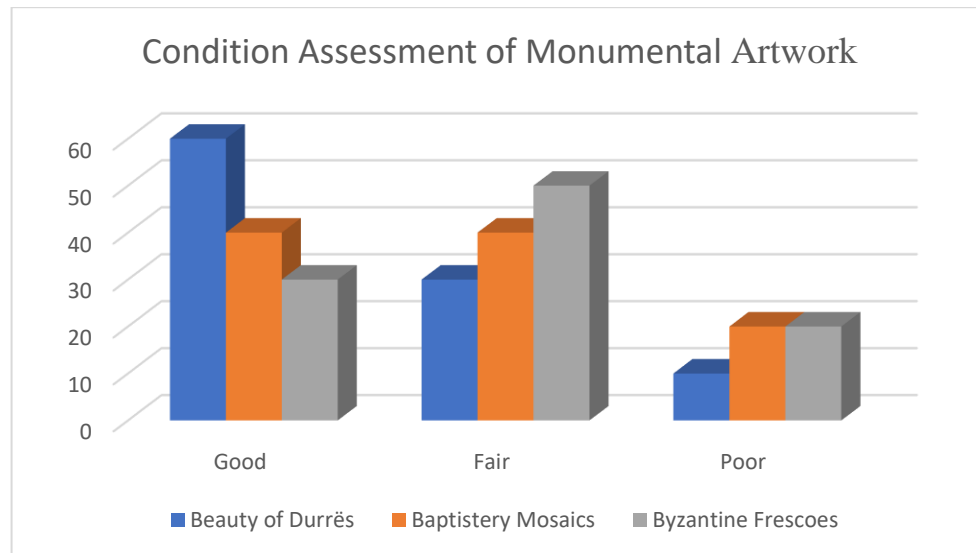


Figure 2. Condition Assessment of Monumental Artwork

The preservation status of three major monumental artworks in Durrës, Beauty of Durrës, the Baptistry Mosaics, and the Byzantine Frescoes, shows different levels of preservation. The Beauty of Durrës mosaic stands as the most well-preserved artwork since 65% of its structure remains in good condition and 33% is fair, while only 12% is in poor condition. The Baptistry Mosaics show an even distribution of assessment results because 45% are good and 45% are fair, while 10% are poor. The mosaics remain mostly intact yet require immediate maintenance to stop their deterioration from progressing. The Byzantine Frescoes demonstrate the greatest vulnerability because good condition ratings reach only 35% while fair condition ratings exceed 50%, and poor condition ratings amount to about 20%. The assessment results demonstrate an immediate requirement for focused conservation interventions because the frescoes face the most severe threats from environmental deterioration and structural breakdown. The analysis demonstrates the necessity of individualized preservation approaches which address the unique requirements and threats that each artwork faces.

#### Perceived Threats to Monumental Paintings

Survey participants who included heritage experts together with local authorities identified monumental painting threats as follows:

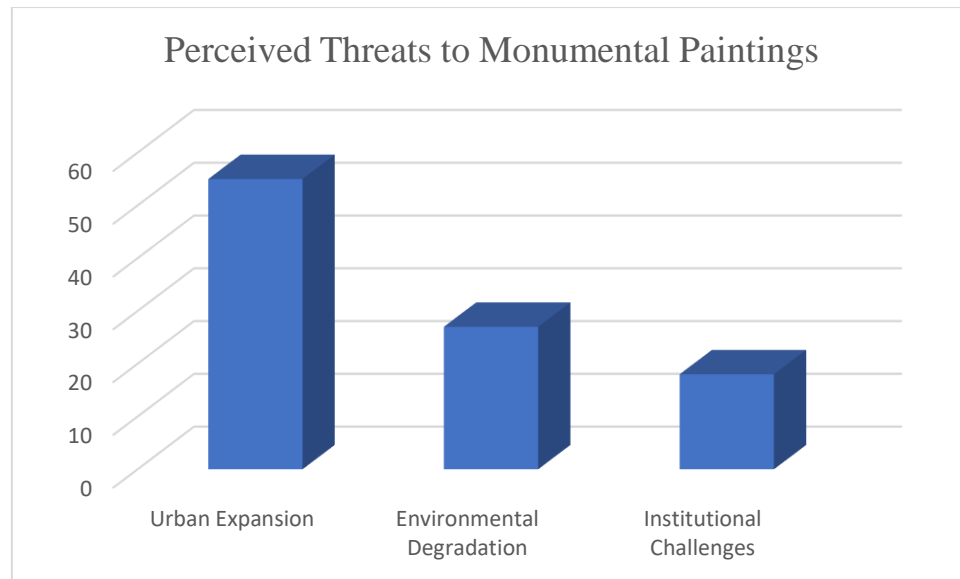


Figure 3. Perceived Threats to Monumental Paintings

The survey data reveals the primary threats against monumental paintings in Durrës based on survey participant responses. Three categories of threats are presented: urban expansion, environmental degradation, and institutional challenges. The survey participants identified urban expansion as the primary threat because it received 65% of the responses regarding construction activities and unregulated urban development near heritage sites. Cultural preservation suffers losses because post-earthquake reconstruction activities and modernization projects progress by destroying cultural heritage. Environmental degradation ranks second, accounting for 35% of the responses. The deterioration of wall paintings, mosaics and frescoes becomes faster because of humidity and air pollution and seismic activity. The third perceived threat, institutional challenges, was noted by around 25% of participants. The category encompasses three main problems which include insufficient conservation funding and insufficient professional expertise and weak heritage protection law enforcement. The chart shows that uncontrolled urban growth poses the most significant danger to Durrës' monumental paintings even though natural and administrative concerns exist.

#### Role of Monumental Paintings in Cultural Tourism

The survey of Durrës tourists showed that monumental sites held the following importance for their travel experience.

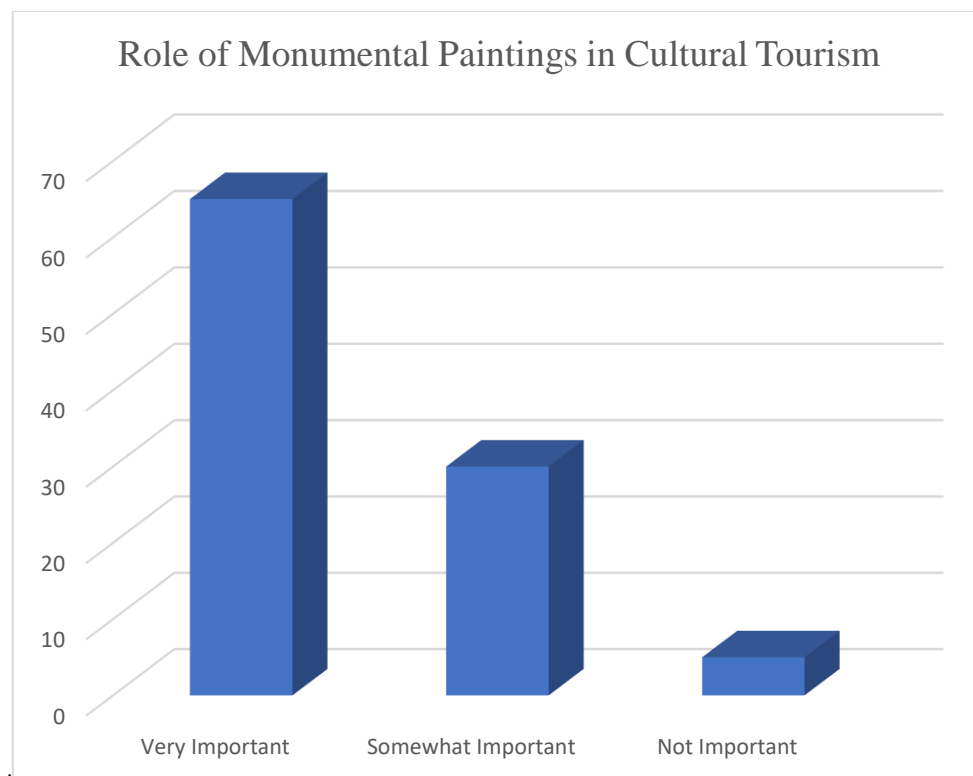


Figure 4. Role of Monumental Paintings in Cultural Tourism

The bar chart shows how people view monumental paintings as cultural tourism promoters in Durrës. The survey data shows three levels of importance, which are Very Important, Somewhat Important, and Not Important. The majority of respondents—approximately 70%—consider monumental paintings to be very important to the development and attraction of cultural tourism. The results show that people strongly understand how these artworks contribute to the cultural identity and international appeal of the city. About 30% of respondents stated that monumental paintings hold some importance for tourism promotion, but they do not consider them essential. The minority group, consisting of 5–10% of respondents, did not consider monumental paintings to be important for cultural tourism. The minority perspective likely arises from insufficient knowledge about the historical and artistic importance of these works.

### Community Involvement in Heritage Preservation

Regarding community involvement, the survey shows: see figure 5.

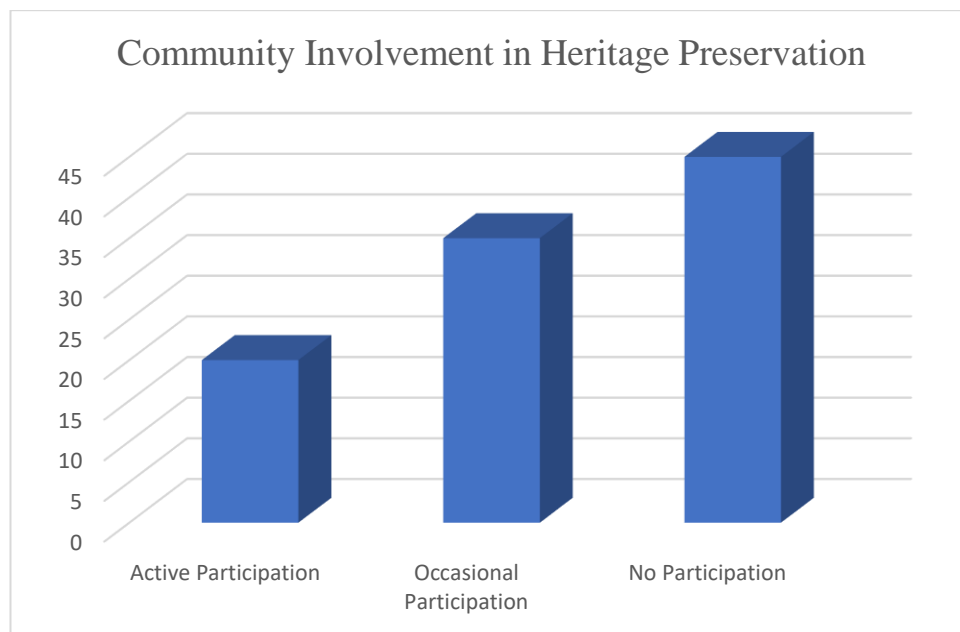


Figure 5. Community Involvement in Heritage Preservation

The survey demonstrates the extent of community involvement in Durrës for protecting monumental paintings. The survey data is divided into three distinct categories, which consist of Active Participation and Occasional Participation, and No Participation. The survey reveals that heritage-related activities such as volunteering and preservation events, and public awareness campaigns receive active participation from only 25% of respondents. 35% of respondents who showed occasional participation engaged with specific events or initiatives at irregular intervals. The survey results indicate that 45% of respondents remained completely uninvolved. The high number of uninvolved citizens reveals a significant public engagement issue because it demonstrates widespread disinterest in cultural heritage protection. The study findings confirm the need for better community outreach programs and educational initiatives, and inclusive engagement approaches to build local citizen participation in protecting Durrës' monumental paintings and historic identity.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The research demonstrates that monumental paintings situated near ancient monuments in Durrës function as fundamental representations of the city's intricate historical and religious and civic heritage. The artistic analysis of the Beauty of Durrës mosaic and early Christian baptistery decorations and Byzantine frescoes demonstrated these artworks function as enduring cultural narratives that unite different generations. The research identified multiple critical threats to cultural assets which include urban expansion and environmental deterioration and institutional problems. The monument's physical and symbolic integrity faces rising threats based on both field observations and secondary data. The artworks receive admiration from tourists and particular local population segments yet the general public does not understand heritage values sufficiently. The research supports developing a unified cultural heritage management system through the integration of governmental policies with community participation and academic research and international collaboration. The proposed approach will protect Durrës monuments while enhancing cultural tourism appeal and developing local identity and safeguarding Balkan and Mediterranean heritage. The protection of monumental paintings in Durrës serves more than art conservation because it safeguards our collective memory and national pride and enables intercultural dialogue for future generations.

## 5.2 Recommendations

The research analysis generated the following set of recommendations:

1. The existing legal framework protecting cultural heritage needs modernization to create stronger penalties for unauthorized construction activities and neglect. The government must create dedicated financial resources to fund monumental artwork restoration and preservation initiatives.
2. Educational programs must be implemented to teach people about the cultural significance of monumental paintings. The city needs heritage stewardship programs that unite schools with community groups to welcome volunteers for participation.
3. Educational institutions should incorporate Durrës' monumental heritage into both national and local educational curricula. Educational institutions need to establish practical learning experiences for students through their partnership with museums.
4. The city should develop guided heritage trails and digital applications that enable public access to Durrës' monumental paintings. Tourism development needs to maintain conservation priorities while providing support to these initiatives.
5. The city needs UNESCO and ICCROM and ICOMOS organizations to deliver technical support along with financial backing and training opportunities.

The city must become a member of international heritage conservation networks to access best practices and innovative approaches through complete participation. The implemented strategies will protect monumental paintings in Durrës while preserving dynamic cultural heritage for both Albanians and the international community.

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