



Research Article

Filigree as Kosovo's cultural heritage: Craft, art, and communication in the museum context

Bekim Xhemili¹

Ethnological Museum of Kosovo, Prishtina, Kosovo.

Article Info

Received: 26 July 2025
Accepted: 12 September 2025
Online: 30 September 2025

Keywords

Exhibitions
Filigree
Filigree masters
Kosovo cultural heritage
Kosovo museums

3062-3847/ © 2025 the JKMC.
Published by Genc Bilge (Young Wise)
Pub. Ltd. This is an open access article
under the CC BY-NC-ND license



Abstract

This paper will address the artistic works of silver metal, which belongs to the group of precious metals, as well as the activities organized within the projects of the Ethnological Museum that aimed to foster communication between the museum and visitors, and to promote the fine art of the jewelry craft and the filigree technique both inside and outside Kosovo. Among other things, the paper seeks to highlight and present, even if modestly, the Albanian ethno-cultural and artistic values preserved within the museum collections. Particular attention will also be given to the current state of filigree in our country today. In Kosovo, the historical and ongoing center of filigree has been the ancient and beautiful city of Prizren. However, jewelers from Prishtina, Peja (notably with the granulation technique), and Gjakova (primarily the savat technique) have also been engaged in this craft. Filigree works, which mainly include women's jewelry but also men's ornaments, reflect the specific skill of using and combining fine threads, the extraordinary precision, the applied artistry, the talent, as well as the high artistic qualities of the filigree masters.

To cite this article

Xhemili, B. (2025). Filigree as Kosovo's cultural heritage: Craft, art, and communication in the museum context. *Journal of Kosovo Music and Culture*, 1(2), 63-71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17366916>

Introduction

The National Museum of Kosovo preserves a substantial and diverse collection of cultural heritage objects and exhibits. This collection encompasses archaeological, ethnological, historical, and natural artifacts, as well as artistic works, documents, and photographs. These holdings represent a wide chronological spectrum, ranging from the Neolithic period to the modern era, and are crafted from a variety of materials such as stone, clay, wood, textiles, and metals.

Within this study, particular attention is devoted to artistic silverwork, classified among the noble metals, alongside the activities organized within the framework of the Ethnological Museum's projects. These initiatives have sought to enhance communication between the museum and its visitors, and to promote both the aesthetic and technical dimensions of jewelry-making and the filigree tradition in Kosovo and beyond. The research also aims to shed light on the ethno-cultural and artistic values embedded in the museum's collection, while considering the present-day condition of filigree in Kosovo.

Silver has historically been regarded as a precious resource, extracted from mines and refined for the production of a wide array of objects, ranging from everyday items to highly artistic creations such as jewelry, vessels, ornaments, and coins. Although a number of scholarly works—authored both locally and internationally—have addressed the craft of silversmithing, they remain relatively limited in scope. Among the most notable contributions are Aleksandër Stipčević's *The Illyrians* (2002), Llambirini Mitrushi's *The Development of the Jewelry Craft in Albania* (1976), Zagorka Markovic's

¹ Ethnologist – Curator, Ethnological Museum of Kosovo, Prishtina, Kosovo.

The Craft of Kujunxhije in Prizren (1964), Drita Halimi-Statovci's *The Historical Development of Craftsmanship and Its Contemporary Importance for the Socio-Economic Structure of the Autonomous Socialist Province of Kosovo* (1982), and Zija Shkodra's *Albanian Guilds* (1973). References to silverwork, and particularly filigree, can also be found in Riza Drishti's *The Crafting of Firearms by Albanians in the 17th–19th Centuries* and Viktor Gashi's *Ethnographic Treasures* (2012).

The practice of silver craftsmanship in the territory of present-day Kosovo has deep historical roots. During the Illyrian period, especially in the southern regions, silversmithing was highly developed even prior to the arrival of the Celts. The city of Damastion emerged as a prominent center for silver production and minting during the 4th–3rd centuries BC (Stipčević, 2002). In subsequent centuries, Kosovo's mines—most notably those of Novo Brdo and Trepça—gained wide renown for their silver resources. The silver artifacts preserved in the National Museum of Kosovo reflect this long continuity, ranging from antiquity to more recent times. Excavations in the Illyrian necropolis at the Peja spa, for instance, have revealed a wealth of silver objects, including omega-shaped fibulae, buttons, brooches, belt buckles, rings, pins, bracelets, and snake-headed bracelets. *Figure 1*. These ornaments, dating to the 6th–5th centuries BC, illustrate the artistic refinement and technical mastery of Illyrian silversmiths. Some examples feature geometric decoration, while the snake-headed bracelets, in particular, stand out as exceptional works of craftsmanship created by skilled artisans with a pronounced artistic sensibility (Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo, 2006).

Figure 2.

Meanwhile, in several ancient settlements of Kosovo, such as Ulpiana, Vindenis-Gllamnik in Podujeva, and others, the Illyrian-Dardanians also made use of silver ornaments and artifacts, including fibulae of various forms, rings, and similar objects.



Figure 1. Silver ornaments from the Peja Spa, 6th–5th century BC



Figure 2. Silver bracelet with snake heads, 6th–5th century BC

Following the silver artifacts of Late Antiquity, we now turn to the exhibits of the Early Middle Ages, a period in which silverwork continued to flourish. Rings, earrings, and pendants represent the silver ornaments discovered in various necropolises. Some of these pieces were crafted using the well-known filigree technique, particularly rings and earrings. As an illustration, we present a silver ring from the Early Medieval period, discovered in a necropolis at Matiçan near Prishtina, which is combined with the filigree technique (Catalogue, 1998). *Figure 3*.



Figure 3. Silver ring

The extent to which the craft of silversmithing was known and practiced among the Albanian people is evidenced by data, documents, travelogues of foreign authors, and, most importantly, by the objects themselves—various works and ornaments.

The oldest known register (codex) of guilds in Albania, as well as in the Balkans, is that of the silversmiths' guild of the city of Elbasan (1662–1900) (Shkodra, 1973:186). In the silversmithing craft, Albanian masters employed different techniques for producing a wide range of objects. The best known were the techniques of carving, hammering, casting, and filigree (Mitrushi, 1977:373). The most renowned silversmithing technique, not only in Albanian territories but also throughout the Balkans and beyond, was filigree, which reached its peak of development in the 19th century. It was used not only for crafting body ornaments but also for decorating weapons, vessels, and household items. Filigree (which older masters in Northern Albania call *telish me kokrra*—granulated filigree—or applied filigree mounted on a plate dominated by granules, and *telish kafazeli*—openwork filigree with little or no granules) represents a distinct branch of metalworking with fine wires requiring skill, talent, and patience. With this technique, Albanian masters, especially those from Shkodra, Prizren, Tirana, and Elbasan, produced refined and diverse works to such an extent that openwork filigree became recognized as an Albanian specialty in the Balkans (Mitrushi, 1977:380).

In Kosovo, the historic and beautiful city of Prizren has been and continues to be the main center of filigree. However, silversmiths from Prishtina, Peja (noted for the granulation technique), and Gjakova (known for *savat*, niello technique) also engaged in this craft. Despite the numerous circumstances, conditions, and difficulties, the filigree masters of Prizren, Peja, and Gjakova never ceased their work, striving to maintain the centuries-old tradition of this highly esteemed craft both among Albanians and beyond. Among the most notable families engaged in silversmithing in Prizren, Gjakova, and Peja are: Shahta, Shiroka, Bashota, Shahini, Laçi, Bisaki, Bytyqi, Oroshi, Lleshdedaj, Nikolov, Spaqi, Gashi, Pali, Kërveshi, Qivlaku, Domniku, Perolli, Simoni, and many others.

Since this study concerns filigree and the museum, it is important to note that since 1986, around 2,000 silversmithing artifacts have become part of the rich treasury of the collections of the National Museum of Kosovo. These objects previously belonged to the family of the renowned craftsman and collector of silver works, Viktor Gashi from Peja (Gashi, 2012).

The ethnological exhibits of the museum that belong to the group of metal ornaments are primarily made of silver, though some are combined with other metals such as copper and brass. Among the silver artifacts (some crafted with the filigree technique) are earrings, rings, necklaces, bracelets, belt buckles, chains, various chest ornaments, head ornaments, pendants and different brooches, watch chains, collars, cigarette cases, purses, decorative pins, and triangular-shaped amulets. *Figure 4.*



Figure 4. Silver ornaments from the National Museum of Kosovo

In a number of head ornaments and other pieces, silver and the filigree technique are present alongside other materials such as brass, copper, silk, cloth, cotton, beads, amber, and various stones. The filigree works, which primarily include women's jewelry but also men's, represent the specific craft of using and combining fine wires, the extraordinary precision, applied artistry, talent, and the high artistic qualities of the filigree masters. Floral motifs such as flowers and leaves, as well as geometric designs, have been applied to the precious silver ornaments in the collections of the Ethnological Museum – part of the National Museum of Kosovo. However, a large portion of this diverse collection of jewelry, perhaps the finest pieces, mainly from the silversmithing craft, are still unjustly kept in Belgrade, after being borrowed during 1997 and 1999 from the National Museum of Kosovo.

The Ethnological Museum, as part of the National Museum of Kosovo, opened its doors to visitors on September 11, 2006, and in nearly 19 years of activity, it has managed to organize a variety of events, presentations, and exhibitions. These aimed to promote a new way of communication between the museum—as an institution that, beyond exhibiting, also has the mission of educating younger generations, particularly future filigree masters through demonstrations of the craft and its inherited history—and the visitors, who constitute the core of the museum's interactive work, without whom the museum would lose its meaning.

According to Charlie Seemann, a former folklorist and museum advisor in the United States, live performances and demonstrations not only enrich the educational offering of the museum but also support the museum's mission as an institution (Seemann, 1987:59). Based on this perspective, the Ethnological Museum, in the years 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, organized the "Crafts Week," during which more than 120 artisans participated across the four editions, demonstrating their crafts in various materials such as woodcarving, metalwork, pottery, textiles, handicrafts, and others. Among these crafts, the demonstration of filigree held a central place due to its materials, tools, artistry, precision, and applied motifs. *Figure 5.* Filigree masters from Prizren, Peja, and Prishtina were part of these activities, and for the first time, alongside the men who traditionally dominated this craft, women also participated, demonstrating how filigree is made. Experiencing filigree production up close not only promoted the artistic values this craft carries but also aimed to educate younger generations, ensuring the continuation of silversmithing traditions from one generation to the next, preventing its disappearance—something that threatens many crafts today due to lack of state support and the limited interest of younger generations.



Figure 5. Filigree masters from Prizren demonstrating filigree work at the Ethnological Museum. Photo: Bekim Xhemili

The importance of the museum's role in the communication between filigree and visitors is further demonstrated by the ongoing project in which, for the first time in the entire history of museology in Kosovo, the Ethnological Museum of Kosovo in Prishtina was twinned with the Cambridge Folk Museum in England in November 2012. As part of this project, there was also a demonstration of the art of filigree and silversmithing at the Cambridge Museum in England *Figure 6*.

The significance of presenting filigree work in England was multifaceted, as visitors, students, and researchers had the opportunity to learn about Kosovo directly through its culture and art—specifically filigree as part of its intangible heritage—and not merely through the lens of war, as some Cambridge Museum visitors noted.



Figure 6. Filigree master from Prizren, Bashkim Tejeci, working in front of visitors at the Cambridge Folk Museum, England. Photo: Bekim Xhemili

The exhibition “*Silver Thread: From Kosovo to Istria*”, opened in 2015 at the Archaeological Park – Lapidarium of the National Museum of Kosovo, was the result of collaboration between the Ethnological Museum of Kosovo and the Ethnographic Museum of Istria, Croatia. The same exhibition had first been presented to the public in December 2014 in Croatia, curated by the custodians of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria.

The exhibition highlighted the rich symbolism of filigree in the public space of Istria, as a consequence of the first economic migration of Albanians from Kosovo to Croatia during the 1950s and 1960s. According to the curators, filigree in Istria dates back to trade relations with Byzantium, but the form of filigree known today in Istria was introduced in the mid-20th century by craftsmen from Kosovo (*Catalogue, 2015*).

This migration was intense and lasted until the late 1970s, largely due to the rapid development of tourism in the region. Through the exhibition, the journey of many families from Kosovo—such as the Shahta, Shahini, Laçi, Bisaki, Bytyqi, Oroshi, Lleshdedaj, and Nikolov families—from Prizren and Gjakova was showcased. Upon arriving in Croatia in the second half of the 20th century, these families opened shops and workshops, continuing the silversmithing tradition, particularly the filigree technique, and creating beautiful works from precious metals, especially silver (*Catalogue, 2015*). *Figure 7*

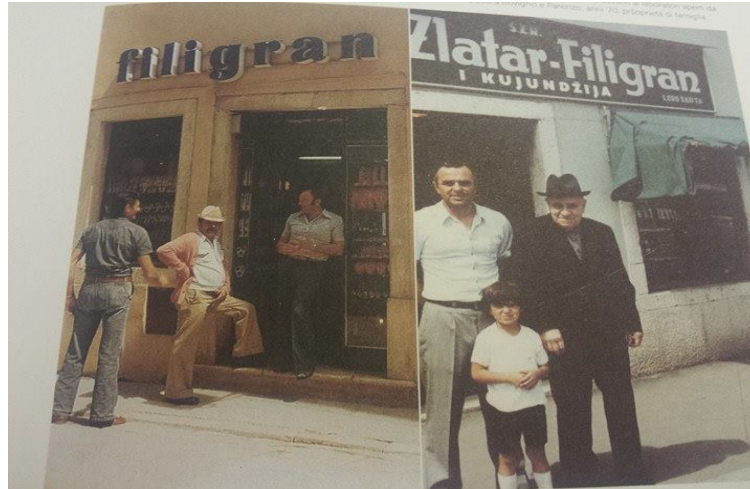


Figure 7. The Lleshdedaj and Shahta families in front of their shops in Rovinj and Poreč, during the 1970s (*Catalogue, 2015*)

The exhibition included around 30 artifacts crafted by the skilled hands of Albanian masters using the filigree technique. All the exhibits were loaned by Albanian families specifically for the opening of the exhibition. Among the items on display were rings, earrings, necklaces, watch chains, chests, figurines, and miniature musical instruments made of silver, such as a ship, motorcycle, piano, violin, as well as a silver-crafted model of the city of Rovinj, which was considered a remarkable masterpiece. *Figure 8*



Figure 8. A filigree violin crafted by Albert Oroshi – Rovinj. Photo: Bekim Xhemili

One of the most striking exhibits was a red *dollama* (traditional robe) from 1850, embroidered with silver threads and worn by Kata Shahta exactly 165 years ago. With the migration of the Shahta family to Croatia, the robe was taken along with them. *Figure 9*



Figure 9. Red robe embroidered with silver thread – Shahta family. Photo: Bekim Xhemili

The exhibition “*The Silver Thread from Kosovo to Istria*” conveyed a threefold history through its exhibits: the tradition of silversmithing and filigree, the migration of Albanians from Kosovo to Croatia, and the preservation of these works for such a long period of time. This event was highly valued by visitors for its content, the history it communicated, and the message that the filigree technique must be preserved further.

Unlike in the previous century, the state of filigree, namely the silversmith’s craft, today is not in good condition. While in the 1980s over 100 filigree artisans were part of the cooperative in Prizren, today in one of the only workshops established in Prizren after the 1999 war, there are just 8 artisans. Among them is the master Bashkim Tejeki, who continues to work at the same pace, producing highly artistic pieces from silver threads. Together with him, seven other men and women are engaged in crafting silver objects. According to Tejeki, there is still interest in filigree today, both from local citizens and foreigners, who order items ranging from the simplest jewelry to larger works (vases, ships, etc.), as well as from national institutions (Interview: Tejeki, n.d.).

However, the main problem faced by this group of artisans, as well as others working privately in their shops or homes, is the unwillingness of local and central institutions to integrate the filigree craft into vocational schools, where future generations could be trained. Artisans have stated they would gladly teach filigree voluntarily, without compensation, as they fear that if this does not happen soon, combined with the country’s poor economic situation, slow tourism development, lack of state support for finding markets (selling works), and competition from gold and silver imports, the craft risks disappearing.

Some artisans, still practicing today, have received attractive offers from abroad to transfer their skills but refused, believing that this heritage must be preserved and passed on within Kosovo. A similar view is held by one of the only filigree artisans in Pristina, Vilson Tomrecaj, 58 years old, originally from Prizren, who has lived and worked in Pristina since 1977–1978 (Figure 10). Coming from a family of artisans—his father Zef and five brothers and two sisters were all engaged in silversmithing—Tomrecaj learned the craft in his childhood. Recalling the past, he mentions times when artisans were even persecuted for filigree work in their homes under the communist regime, the establishment of the cooperative in Prizren, his move to Pristina, and his career of over 50 years. He is not satisfied with today’s situation, citing low purchasing power, with only occasional small sales, mainly gifts bought by younger people or foreigners living in Kosovo. Prices, he notes, are low compared to the extremely delicate work required to complete such items. As an example of this difficulty, he points to a silver model of the famous ship *Santa Maria*, made of thousands of filigree parts, which took three months of intensive work to complete.

Another major challenge is the lack of space in his small shop, which prevents him from teaching the craft to young people—though there is no shortage of those interested (Interview: Tomrecaj, 2016, November). A similar problem is

faced by the only female filigree artisan in Pristina, Krenare Rakovica, 34 years old, who has a small shop in the city center, also serving as her workshop (Figure 11). She inherited the craft from both of her parents, who were silversmiths, but she also learned many filigree details from other artisans. In 2012, she demonstrated the filigree technique to visitors of the Ethnological Museum, which she described as a valuable experience—highlighting filigree as a fine art, the museum as an institution preserving material and spiritual culture, and the opportunity for direct communication with visitors. As one of the youngest artisans, through her many contacts she observes that interest in filigree remains, especially among young women, but purchases are mostly made by foreigners (Interview: Rakovica, 2016, November).



Figure 10. Filigree artisans from Prizren in their workshop



Figure 11. Vilson Tomrecaj – Filigree artisan



Figure 12. Krenare Rakovica – Filigree artisan

The continuous promotion and demonstration of filigree in the Ethnological Museum and other museums across Kosovo, the participation in handicraft fairs both inside and outside the country, the promotion of filigree art by artists, local designers, and various festivals through their works, designs, and creations—even symbolically—, the increasing presence and mention of filigree in local and international media, the plan to establish a handicraft museum in the future, and the inclusion of filigree on the list of Kosovo's protected cultural heritage as part of its intangible heritage, all spark hope that despite the many challenges faced by filigree artisans, filigree will survive. This survival will be ensured thanks

to passion, hard work, talent, artistic ability, and the desire, along with the commitment to pass down the craftsmanship from generation to generation, so that future generations, like those before them, may pour their ideas and tastes into artistic silver works.

Biodata of Author



Curator – ethnologist **Bekim Xhemili** was born in Mitrovica on August 8, 1983. He completed his undergraduate and postgraduate studies in ethnology at the Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Pristina. He pursued further studies at the Institute of European Ethnology as a scholarship holder of the University of Vienna (2008–2009), and later at the University of Turku in Finland, in the Department of European Ethnology during 2010. Since 2006, he has been working at the Ethnological Museum of Kosovo as a curator – ethnologist.

References

- Drishti, R. (n.d.). *Punimi i armëve të zjarrit nga shqiptarët në shekujt XVII–XIX (The crafting of firearms by Albanians in the 17th–19th centuries)*.
- Gashi, V. (2012). *Thesare etnografike (Ethnographic treasures)*. Pejë, Kosovo.
- Halimi–Statovci, D. (1982). *Zhvillimi historik i zejtarisë dhe rëndësia e saj bashkëkohore për strukturën ekonomiko-shoqërore të KSA të Kosovës (The historical development of craftsmanship and its contemporary importance for the socio-economic structure of the Autonomous Socialist Province of Kosovo)*. Prishtina.
- Katalogu. (1998). *Thesaret arkeologjike të Kosovës dhe Metohisë nga Neoliti deri në mesjetën e hershme (Archaeological treasures of Kosovo and Metohija from the Neolithic to the early Middle Ages)*. Belgrade: Museum of Kosovo.
- Katalogu. (2015). *Filigran: Srebna nit of Kosova do Istre (Filigree: The silver thread from Kosovo to Istria)*. A. Lesdedaj, T. Nikolic Djerić, & I. Orlic (Authors). Ethnographic Museum of Istria.
- Markovic, Z. (1964). *Zeja e kujunxhive në Prizren (The craft of kujunxhije in Prizren)*.
- Mitrushi, L. (1977). *Zhvillimi i mjeshtërisë së argjendarisë në Shqipëri (The development of the jewelry craft in Albania)*. In *Konferenca kombëtare e studimeve etnografike (National Conference of Ethnographic Studies)*. Tirana.
- Seemann, C. (1987). Presenting the live folk artist in the museum. In P. Hall & C. Seemann (Eds.), *Folklife and museums: Selected readings* (pp. 59–66). Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History.
- Shkodra, Z. (1973). *Esnafet shqiptare XV–XX (Albanian guilds 15th–20th centuries)*. Tirana.
- Stipčević, A. (2002). Ilirët (The Illyrians). Tiranë: [Publisher]. p. 156.
- Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo. (2006). *Harta Arkeologjike e Kosovës I (Archaeological Map of Kosovo I)*. Prishtina: Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo.

Interviews

- Tejci, B. (n.d.). Personal interview (*Intervistë personale*).
- Tomrecaj, V. (2016, November). Personal interview (*Intervistë personale*).
- Rakovica, K. (2016, November). Personal interview (*Intervistë personale*).

Photographs

- National Museum of Kosovo. (n.d.). Archive of the National Museum of Kosovo [Photos 1–4] (*Arkivi i Muzeut Kombëtar të Kosovës*).
- Xhemili, B. (n.d.). Photographs [Photos 5–6, 8–12].
- Lesdedaj, A., Nikolic Djerić, T., & Orlic, I. (2015). *Filigran: Srebna nit of Kosova do Istre (Filigree: The silver thread from Kosovo to Istria)* [Photo 7]. Ethnographic Museum of Istria.

