

REVIEW

On the competition for acquiring the academic position of professor at the Institute of Art Studies – BAS in professional field 8.1, Art Theory (Bulgarian National Revival Church Art) for the needs of the Fine Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS announced in the State Gazette, Issue No. 44/May 14, 2026, with candidate Assoc. Prof. DSc Alexander Kuyumdjiev

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Associate Professor Alexander Kuyumdjiev, DSc is the sole candidate in the competition for the position of professor announced by the Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. To participate in the competition, he submitted a habilitation thesis—the monograph “*The Icon Painters Ioan Popraikov of Elena and Ioan Popnikolov of Gabrovo*” (Sofia, Institute of Art Studies—BAS, 2025, 169 pp., 237 ills.), as well as eighteen articles and studies published after he earned his “Doctor of Science” degree in 2021. Accompanying the habilitation thesis are his two previous monographs, published on the basis of his defended dissertation theses: *The Murals in the Catholicon of Rila Monastery* (2015) and *Works by Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850)* (2021).

The candidate meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the regulations of the Institute of Art Studies—Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for this type of competition.

As a philologist, I take the liberty in this review of focusing on those aspects of the work that are closest to my professional expertise—working with sources, critical analysis of the existing literature, epigraphic and paleographic argumentation, and the historical-cultural context. I leave the assessment of specific stylistic and iconographic issues to my colleagues, the art historians, on the academic jury.

Alexander Kuyumdjiev (b. 1969, Ruse) is a graduate of the National Academy of Arts, where he majored in “Art History” and, in 1994, defended his thesis under the supervision of Corresponding Member Prof. Elka Bakalova, DSc. in Fine Arts. Even as a doctoral student, he turned his attention to the Rila Monastery: under the academic supervision of Corresponding Member Prof. Ivanka Gergova, DSc., in 1998, he defended her dissertation, “*Peculiarities in the Iconographic Program of the Murals in the Catholicon of Rila Monastery*,” and that same year joined the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, where he continues to work today. Since 2010, he has been an associate professor at the institute, and in 2021 he defended his dissertation for the degree of “Doctor of Science” on the topic *Works by Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850)*. For a brief period

(1998-2002), he also served as a curator at the National Gallery (then the Museum of Christian Art).

The candidate's academic career has unfolded within a single academic institution, the Institute of Art Studies, and within a narrowly defined field of research: 18th- and 19th-century ecclesiastical monumental and icon painting. This focus, combined with slow and measured progress through the stages of his academic development (12 years between associate professorship and his doctoral degree, plus another 5 years of preparation for the present habilitation thesis), lends weight to his scholarly career built not on breadth but in depth.

Alexander Kuyumdzhiev's three monographs explore complex issues for which the author boldly seeks solutions. The first of these—*The Murals in the Catholicon of the Rila Monastery* (2015, 720 pp.)—is structured as a comprehensive and fundamental study of a single monument that is central to the Bulgarian National Revival. It reconstructs the entire history of the church's construction and the creation of its frescoes, reexamines established views (regarding the role of Master Pavel and the nature of the "didactic" compositions), and presents the Rila Catholicon as the "ultima ratio" of 19th-century Eastern Orthodox monumental painting. The "Pythagoras" Award and over eighty citations of this work are a clear indication of its scholarly and public recognition.

The second monograph—*Works by Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850)*" (2021, 443 pp.)—takes a different approach. From a detailed study of a single monument, Kuyumdzhiev moves on to a systematic examination of a cultural and artistic phenomenon in its entirety: the work of Mount Athos iconographers in the Bulgarian lands during the hundred years leading up to the Liberation. Here, Kuyumdzhiev formulates two theoretical propositions: one regarding the very concept of the "Mount Athos iconographer" and the other concerning its distinction from Bulgarian National Revival art.

The third monograph—the habilitation thesis submitted for the competition on the icon painters Yoan Popraikov and Yoan Popnikolov (2025)—focuses on a specific icon painter, and more precisely on distinguishing between two creative identities that scholars have long regarded as a single entity. Taken together, the three books reveal the breadth of the issues and the diversity of the research fields into which the candidate has successfully ventured, finding a convincing solution each time—ranging from a single, albeit exceptionally significant, yet independent monument, to a cultural and artistic phenomenon with a transnational scope, to the reconstruction of the creative biographies of two icon painters. Each of these tasks requires a different type of analysis. Kuyumdzhiev handles all three convincingly. In my view, this is also one of Kuyumdzhiev's most distinctive characteristics as a scholar in the field of art history: his ability to successfully shift the scope of his observations and to take on challenges that he brings to a successful conclusion.

The habilitation dissertation submitted for the competition, *The Icon Painters Yoan Popraikov of Elena and Yoan Popnikolov of Gabrovo* (Sofia, Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2025, 169 pp., 237 ill.) examines an issue in Bulgarian art history that has long gone unnoticed. In Asen Vasiliev’s classic work, “Bulgarian Renaissance Masters” (1965), the works of two different icon painters with the same name—Yoan Popraikov of Elena and Yoan Popnikolov of Gabrovo—were grouped together and attributed to a single author under the name “Yoan Popraikov (Popovich) of Elena.” From that book onward, the error has been passed on and multiplied: it has found its way into reference works, museum catalogs, encyclopedia entries, and monographic studies on individual monasteries and regions. Kuyumdjiev sets out to distinguish between the two iconographers and to reconstruct their independent creative biographies—with separate workshops and artistic identities. The central thesis, which the work defends consistently and with a series of pieces of evidence, is that the two icon painters never worked together and that no professional relationship existed between them.

Methodologically, this monograph occupies a unique position within the Bulgarian tradition of art history—it systematically examines the entire body of documentary evidence related to the two icon painters: signed and dated icons, inscriptions, donor notes, church registers, and family documents. It is precisely this work with written sources—that is, with the original epigraphic and paleographic material—that resonates most deeply with me as a philologist and that deserves explicit recognition. Kuyumdjiev reads the inscriptions as historical sources, not as decorative embellishments. It is precisely this approach that has yielded the most significant factual discoveries in the book. One such example is the decipherment of the newly discovered signed icon by Yoan Popraikov from 1847, held at the Museum Directorate in Koprivshtitsa. This shifts the date of this iconographer’s presumed death—previously accepted as 1845—and, with it, the entire chronology of his later work. For Yoan Popnikolov, the key masterpiece is the 1824 icon “The Sweet Kiss of the Virgin Mary,” commissioned by the Kasinets Monastery as a gift to Dimitraki Hadjitoshev of Vratsa—an icon whose donor inscription reveals an entire network of patrons upon which Popnikolov relied in the early years of his career. Each of the new attributions in the book is based on two levels of formal-stylistic and documentary-epigraphic. This is a significant methodological contribution to this work. Kuyumdjiev does not content himself with saying, “This hand reminds me of the other”; he demands of himself a document that would confirm or refute this impression, and when such a document does not exist, he openly acknowledges it as a hypothesis.

The results of this meticulous work are, in short, two reconstructed artistic biographies: that of Yoan Popraikov—with a more clearly defined late period and a number of newly attributed icons—and that of Yoan Popnikolov—about whom information has been lacking in the scholarly literature until now. Popnikolov now emerges before us as a master of scale and scope, who worked for patrons across a vast region in Northern Bulgaria. With this reconstruction, the study corrects an

entire layer of prevailing scholarly assumptions regarding the geography and chronology of Bulgarian ecclesiastical art from the second half of the 19th century.

In terms of structure, the monograph follows a classical approach: the first chapters “clarify” the historiography and methodology; these are followed by two main chapters devoted to each of the two iconographers individually; and the concluding chapter examines their students and collaborators, thereby expanding the reconstructed picture beyond the central figures. All of this attests to the complexity of Kuyumdjiev’s research approach.

The volume of the author’s text—138 pages—meets and exceeds the minimum requirement for a monograph (100 pages of text) set forth in Appendix 2 to the Regulations of the Institute of Art Study–Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for professorship in Field 8.1. The rich illustrative material (237 photographs, a significant portion of which are published for the first time) serves as a valuable supporting argument. Photographs are a necessary supplement to specific attributions and dating in the text. With all of this, the habilitation thesis fully meets the formal requirements for a professorship in Field 8.1.

In addition to the habilitation thesis, the candidate submits for the competition eighteen articles and studies published after earning the academic degree of “Doctor of Science” in 2021. Their number exceeds the requirement of the Regulations of the Institute of Art Studies–BAS for a minimum of ten publications following the associate professorship; their significance is further evidenced by the fact that a large portion of them have been published in peer-reviewed and indexed journals, while the remainder appear in established specialized series and collective volumes both in Bulgaria and abroad. The presentation of the research to the academic community is satisfactorily covered: a significant number of the studies were presented prior to publication at international and national forums in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia—a circumstance that attests to the author’s integration into the regional Balkan community of researchers of post-Byzantine art.

Thematically, the articles are clearly centered around several of the candidate’s long-term lines of research, which further attests to the focused nature of his work.

A number of them are monographic portraits of individual icon painters or their workshops and teams, which directly support the work culminating in the habilitation dissertation; others are devoted to specific monastic complexes—the “Holy Archangels” in the Bachkovo Monastery, the Kurilovo Monastery, the “St. George” Monastery in Pomorie, the monuments associated with the figure of Theodosius of Tarnovo, and the Kilifarevo Monastery—and constitute “micro-studies,” each of which resolves a specific documentary or attribution issue. Two more extensive studies stand out among them: one—a synthesis of the corpus of Bulgarian church murals from the first half of the 19th century, which is a natural continuation of the

collective project of the same name; and the other—on the topic of the Athonite icon painters, which continues and builds upon the second monograph.

Of particular interest is the specialized article on the hermeneutics of Zahari Petrovich—a text that adds a new methodological direction to the author's work.

These eighteen publications represent a natural continuation and expansion of the candidate's research efforts. They demonstrate his ability to work simultaneously across different genres: from detailed archival and attribution studies to synthesizing, comprehensive analyses.

In addition to the requirements regarding the number of publications and participation in conferences, the other scientometric indicators set forth in Appendix 2 to the Regulations of the Institute of Art Studies–BAS have also been met and exceeded.

As a reviewer, I feel obliged to point out those aspects of the work that raise questions.

In many places, Kuyumdjiev raises problems whose solution he himself acknowledges as impossible at this stage. If this sounds like a weakness, it is a weakness of the discipline, not of the author: where source material is lacking or fragmentary, conscientious research is compelled to leave the problem open rather than close it with a claim to a definitive answer.

As an example of such a problem, I would cite Kuyumdjiev's advice to future researchers to avoid "the tendency to confuse the iconographic characteristics of the works with their style" (p. 45). The reader might have benefited more if some of these open-ended questions at the beginning of the book had been left for the reader to answer independently in their own future publications, rather than being confronted with an accumulation of unresolved and perhaps unsolvable questions.

At times, the author seems overly scrupulous even toward himself, for example when he acknowledges "shortcomings in his research" in the Conclusion (p. 138) without specifying exactly what they are.

This meticulousness compels Kuyumdjiev to focus strictly on issues of authorship, attribution, and biography, and to refrain from delving into broader cultural and functional commentary on the icons and murals under consideration. This choice is a conscious one and deserves respect. A cultural and functional expansion would likely require a different type of source base, documents, and evidence, which are largely insufficient for the National Revival period. I will take the liberty, however, of noting that the creative biographies of Popraikov and Popnikolov reconstructed by Kuyumdjiev already establish this empirical foundation upon which such a future expansion becomes fundamentally possible—not premature, but why not continued by the author himself?

The above remarks point out directions from which research on this topic could benefit. I accept them as part of the normal scholarly dialogue that every serious monograph provokes.

Although the position at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences is not designated as a tenured faculty position, the candidate has a long-standing presence in higher education. For nearly eight academic years (2013–2021), he served as an adjunct professor at the National Academy of Arts, where he taught a number of courses in his field—including “Bulgarian Renaissance Art,” “Mount Athos Art and Bulgarian Renaissance Painting of the 18th–19th Centuries,” and “The Rila Monastery and Bulgarian Renaissance Art”; he also taught at New Bulgarian University (NBU) as early as 2005–2006. His practical supervision of thesis of students at the National Academy of Arts dates back to the same period. This experience demonstrates that the candidate is capable of translating his specialized research into pedagogical material and of working with students at various levels of preparation—a quality that is indispensable for the position of “professor,” even where teaching duties are not the primary focus.

The candidate’s project activities are outstanding, and, crucially, they are consistently linked to his leading research topics. From the very beginning of his career, he has participated in the two major corpus projects that have shaped the contemporary landscape of Bulgarian research in this field— “Corpus of Wall Paintings of the 17th Century in Bulgaria” (1997–2003, headed by B. Penkova) and “Greek Icon Painters in Bulgaria after 1453” (2001–2007, headed by E. Moutafov). Later, Kuyumdjiev was the conceptual initiator and deputy director of the project “Corpus of Church Murals from the First Half of the 19th Century in Bulgaria” (2014–2018, National Science Fund). In recent years, he has played a key role in compiling the catalog of nearly six hundred icons as part of the project on Ivan Goshev’s contribution to the Iconography Department of the National Center for Art Studies and Museum Studies (2019–2023, NSF, led by I. Vanev)—a project in which I had the opportunity to serve as a collaborator—and has participated in the project for the renovation of the exhibition halls of the National Church Historical and Archaeological Museum (NCHAM) at the Holy Synod (2023–2024, Ministry of Culture).

The candidate’s public and expert presence is notable for a scholar of his stature—he serves as a reviewer for projects funded by the Scientific Research Fund and the National Academy of Arts, is a member of juries for academic competitions at the Institute of Art Studies and the *St Cyril and St Methodius* University of Veliko Tarnovo, and served as the coordinator of an exhibition at the National Art Gallery (“The Age of Tsar Samuil in the Work of Bulgarian Artists,” 2014), editor of an issue of the journal *Art Studies Quarterly* (4/2016), and, since 2023, a member of the editorial board of *Proceedings of the Varna Museum*.

For his achievements, he has received two prestigious awards: the “Pythagoras” Award from the Ministry of Education and Science for best scholarly book (2015)

and the “Prof. Marin Drinov” Award from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for best young scholar in the humanities (2000).

The nomination of Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdjiev, DSc, for the academic position of “professor” at the Institute of Art Studies—Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in the professional field 8.1. Theory of the Arts (Bulgarian National Revival Church Art) is solidly and convincingly substantiated. The habilitation thesis—a monograph on the icon painters Yoan Popraikov and Yoan Popnikolov—is a serious, methodologically sound study with clear, verifiable results that redefines established notions in Bulgarian art history. The eighteen articles and studies published since earning the academic degree of “Doctor of Science,” the two previous monographs, his substantial contributions to several corpus projects, his teaching work at the National Academy of Arts and New Bulgarian University, and his standing as an established expert—this is a profile that meets the expectations for someone holding the position of “professor.”

The candidate fully meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its implementing regulations, the Regulations of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), and the Regulations and internal rules of the Institute for the Study of the Arts – BAS, including all minimum scientometric indicators set forth in Appendix 2 for a professorship in Field 8.1.

The critical remarks expressed above serve as guidance for possible future additions to the work begun in this thesis.

I confidently offer my positive assessment and will vote “in favor” of the appointment of Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdjiev, DSc to the academic position of “professor” at the Institute of Art Studies – BAS in professional field 8.1. Theory of the Arts (Bulgarian National Revival Church Art).

Sofia, September 23, 2026

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