

REVIEW

By Prof. Miglena Lyudmilova Prashkova PhD

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo

On the academic contributions of Al. Kuyumdzhiev in connection with his participation in the competition for acquiring the academic position of **professor** in Art Studies and Fine Arts (Bulgarian National Revival Church Art), professional field 8.1, Art Theory 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

1. Information about the competition

The competition for the academic position of “professor” has been announced for the Visual Arts Department at the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia. Only one candidate applied—**Associate Professor Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhiev, DSc.**, who has been employed under a permanent contract since 1998 at the same institute and department, in the “Medieval and National Revival” research group. Since 2010, he has held the position of “associate professor” (Higher Attestation Commission, Senior Researcher, Level II). The scientific jury was appointed by Order No. 352-RD dated June 8, 2026. According to the minutes of its first meeting, held on July 10, 2026, a chairperson and members of the scientific jury were elected to prepare reviews and opinions. No violations of the procedure were found.

The competition documentation submitted to me for review complies with the requirements of the ZRASRB, its implementing regulations, and the requirements of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS).

2. Data on the candidate

Alexander Kuyumdzhiev completed the master’s program in Art Studies at the National Academy of Arts in Sofia (1994). In 1998, the Specialized Scientific Council of the Higher Attestation Commission awarded him the academic and scientific degree of “Doctor.” The topic of his doctoral dissertation was “Features of the Iconographic Program of the Murals in the Catholicon of the Rila Monastery.” In 2021, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), Institute of Art Studies, awarded him the scientific degree of “Doctor of Sciences.” The topic of his dissertation was “Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850).” The habilitation thesis for the academic position of “associate professor” was published as the monograph “The Murals in the Church of St. Nicholas in Elena” (2010).

Alexander Kuyumdzhiev’s professional career began upon his graduation from the National Academy of Arts. For a time, he served as a curator at the Museum of

Christian Art at the National Gallery (1998–2002). He focused primarily on research, and his scholarly interests lie in the history and theory of Christian art; Bulgarian National Revival art; post-Byzantine iconography and mural painting, iconography and iconographic programs, attribution and analysis of the works of National Revival icon painters, pictorial models in 18th–19th -century art, prints, engravings, and lithographs.

The candidate's academic output since being appointed to the academic rank of "associate professor" is impressive. For the purposes of this competition, it is helpful to summarize the information presented in his scholarly biography, which details: 3 monographs; 2 collaborative monographs; 38 studies, articles, and chapters in collaborative monographs; and 9 large-scale national and international research projects. All of these address the broad and diverse range of issues related to research on the history and development of ecclesiastical art. I would like to note here that Kuyumdzhiev contributed to two collective works of particular value and significance to the field of art history— "Corpus of Wall Paintings from the First Half of the 19th Century in Bulgaria" (2018) and "Icons from the National Church Historical and Archaeological Museum" (2024). In addition, he participated in the annual Art Studies Readings, "Ancient Art" module, from 2015 to 2025; the proceedings of these readings are indexed in Web of Science. Evidence of their significance is provided by the citations of Alexander Kuyumdzhiev's publications—a total of 265, accurately listed in a separate report and attached to the competition documents. The chart detailing the fulfillment of the minimum scientometric indicators shows 10 citations in scientific publications that are peer-reviewed and indexed in world-renowned databases; 26 citations in peer-reviewed monographs and edited volumes, and 20 citations in non-peer-reviewed journals. His expert activities, including participation in examination committees, scientific juries, editorial boards, and editorial work, confirm Kuyumdzhiev's proven qualities in research, publishing, and teamwork. He served as an adjunct professor in the bachelor's and master's programs at the Department of Art Studies, National Academy of Arts (2013–2021), and at New Bulgarian University, in the bachelor's program in Byzantine art (2005–2006). He has supervised student's studies in the Department of Art History at the National Academy of Arts (2018–2020) and has a doctoral student who successfully defended their dissertation (2025). He is fluent in Russian, Serbian, and English. Further clear evidence of the value of the candidate's research is provided by the awards he received for Best Young Scholar in the Humanities from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (2000) and the "Pythagoras" Award from the Ministry of Education and Science for Best Academic Book of 2015.

The data entered in the attached form clearly shows that Alexander Kuyumdzhiev meets the minimum scientometric indicators required by the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB).

3. Description of the habilitation thesis and publications

In the competition for the position of professor, Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhiev is presenting his habilitation thesis, **“The Iconographers Yoan Popraikov of Elena and Yoan Popnikolov of Gabrovo,”** published in 2025, which is 237 pages long. It is an in-depth monographic study of the work of two Renaissance icon painters with the same first name, which effectively introduces the life and work of Yoan Popnikolov into scholarly discourse. To a large extent, it corrects the information previously known about the life and work of Yoan Popraikov, better known as Popovich.

Two monographs based on dissertations defended for the academic degrees of “Doctor” and “Doctor of Science” are also presented – **“The Murals in the Catholicon of the Rila Monastery,”** published in 2015, and **“Works by Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750–1850),”** published in 2021. The first expands and supplements the facts, history, and information related to the architecture, the murals, their iconographic program, the iconostasis, and the icons, as well as other details presenting the architectural and artistic ensemble of the catholicon at the Rila Monastery. The second is a comprehensive study based on research into the works of Mount Athos iconographers from within the present-day borders of Bulgaria.

The list is further supplemented by a total of **18 studies and articles** that expand our knowledge of a number of monuments, icon painters, and icon-painting workshops, and address historical, iconographic, and related issues in ecclesiastical art. Of these, 8 articles have been published in journals indexed in an international database. Five studies and five articles appear in specialized arts journals. The list of complete bibliographic details of these publications is accurately presented in the competition documents. The subject matter of these, as well as in the three monographic studies, primarily concerns the work of icon painters and the study of paintings created during the Renaissance period (18th–19th centuries), while one pertains to the written source known as the “Erminia” by Zachary Petrovich. Each of the titles of the studies and articles defines their contributions to art history, so I will simply list them here:

1. Works by Mount Athos iconographers at the Rila Monastery from the late 18th century;
2. Icons by the Mount Athos monk Dositej of Peć in Samokov;
3. A Missing Figure—the iconographer John of Ahtopol;
4. Icons by Macarius of Galatista in Bulgaria;
5. Two studies on the art and history of the Black Sea region in the 19th century;
6. Two icons by the iconographer Atanas Minchov of Batoshevo in the National Church and Historical-Archaeological Museum (NCHAM);

7. Who is the iconographer Konstantin, who signed an icon from the “Petko Zadgorski” in the Bulgarian Art Gallery;
8. Creative Metamorphoses: Icon Painters Yoan Popovich from Elena and Yoan Popnikolov from Gabrovo;
9. Indirect Evidence Regarding the Redating of the National Revival-Era Murals in the Nave of the Church at the Kurilovo Monastery;
10. Icons by Monk Mitrofan of Chios in Bulgaria;
11. The Mount Athos icon painters David and Jacob from the early 19th century;
12. On the “authentic” icons by Hristo Dimitrov of Samokov;
13. The Herminias of Zachary Petrovich;
14. Myths and Facts About the Kilifarevo Monastery;
15. Critical Remarks on the Hypotheses Regarding the Dating, Function, and Patronage of the Church of the Holy Archangels at the Bachkovo Monastery;
16. Routes of Entry for Works by Mount Athos Iconographers into Bulgaria;
17. An Iconography Workshop on the Southern Black Sea Coast;
18. Introduction to the Corpus of Frescoes from the First Half of the 19th Century in Bulgaria.

4. Scholarly Contributions

The monographs, studies, and articles with which Alexander Kuyumdzhiev participated in the competition for the position of professor are, by their very nature, interdisciplinary studies that address a number of different aspects of research. Their diversity and scope make it impossible to analyze them in detail individually within the scope of this review. In the “Author’s Statement on Original Scientific Contributions,” the candidate outlines the contributions of his or her research, with which I fully agree and accept. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to summarize the results of the candidate’s scholarly work, which can be divided into several main categories that define the contributory nature of the presented works and represent a significant contribution to the study of Bulgarian National Revival art.

First. New facts, assertions, or hypotheses regarding monuments of ecclesiastical art, individual works, or the oeuvre of icon painters. In the course of his research, Kuyumdzhiev takes a thorough approach, successfully revising a number of claims that have entered scholarly discourse, which he justifiably calls into question. His

research is based on a critical analysis of the information available to date, the systematic comparison of known facts with written sources, essential fieldwork, a detailed visual examination of individual works and monuments, as well as the collection of a vast amount of visual material used for comparative analysis. Undoubtedly, all the scientific innovations resulting from the candidate's research represent significant contributions to art history (I use the terms "scientific innovation" and "Author's Statement on Original Scientific Contributions," p. 5).

The main monograph on these two Renaissance masters is an eloquent example in this regard. The presented body of work by Yoan Popnikolov of Gabrovo can certainly be called a discovery for scholarship. The text provides details regarding the life and works of Yoan Popovich, as well as those of other icon painters from Elena and Gabrovo—for example, Gencho Filipov, who had previously been considered a collaborator of Yoan Popovich. Kuyumdzhiiev establishes that the creative partnership was in fact between Yoan Popnikolov and Gencho Filipov. The reevaluation of the body of work by these two iconographers with the same name from Elena and Gabrovo corrects a number of inaccuracies that had been accepted by researchers and had, until now, caused significant confusion in the field. In the course of his research, some new biographical details and dozens of previously unknown paintings were discovered, which are examined chronologically. Thus, Kuyumdzhiiev establishes that Yoan Popovich and Yoan Popnikolov never worked together and had no professional connection with one another, contrary to what had been assumed in the literature until now.

In the monograph dedicated to the main church of the Rila Monastery, the details regarding the early history of the holy monastery, the construction of the katholikon, its fresco painting, the identification of the patrons of the frescoes, and a number of other topics are equally valuable. With this comprehensive study, Kuyumdzhiiev presents the monastery as a center of creative ideas and aesthetic concepts that were adopted and disseminated throughout the Bulgarian lands during the post-Byzantine period and especially during the National Revival period.

The array of new insights into Bulgarian art history is complemented by clarifications regarding the myths and facts about the Kilifarevo Monastery, as well as hypotheses concerning the dating, function, and patronage of the Church of the Holy Archangels at the Bachkovo Monastery, the origins and function of the Pomorie Monastery, and the dating of the National Revival-era murals at the Kurilovo Monastery, as well as a wealth of new information about individual iconographers and their works. It is difficult to list here all the facts, assertions, or hypotheses new to scholarship that Kuyumdzhiiev has commented on and defended, because virtually every text he has published invariably contains what characterizes it as a significant contribution.

Second. Attribution and dating of works of ecclesiastical painting. This category of contributions is directly related to the previous one, since the identification of the

authorship of individual works, as well as their dating, in most cases form the basis for the new assertions or hypotheses put forward.

Undoubtedly significant are the clarifications in the main monograph presented here regarding the authorship of the icons by Yoan Popovich of Elena and the distinction made between a vast body of iconographic work—previously attributed to him—which Kuyumdzhiev now attributes to the work of Yoan Popnikolov of Gabrovo. The attribution of the icons to the Gabrovo iconographer and the chronological analysis of his works represent an indisputable contribution from which scholarship will continue to benefit.

A large portion of the candidate's publications is devoted to the study of individual masters, workshops, or teams who worked in the Bulgarian lands during the National Revival. Some of them are little known in the scholarly literature or are known for contradictory information, which until recently was associated with misconceptions regarding their artistic output. In a series of publications and in his monographs devoted to this subject, Kuyumdzhiev proposes new attributions and redating of icons and murals. Thus, this series of new findings is complemented by the clarified authorship and stages of creation of the murals and icons in the Rila Cathedral, the output of a icon-painting workshop from the Southern Black Sea Coast, which existed around the time of John of Ahtopol, the "certain" icons by Hristo Dimitrov, the icons by Atanas Minchov of Batoshevo, the works of the Mount Athos iconographers—Nicephorus from Karpenissi, Mitrofan of Viza, Dositheos of Peć, Hierodeacon David, and Monk Jacob, Macarius, Zacharias, and Benjamin from Galatista, and those associated with Mount Athos—Mitrofan of Chios and Constantine and Athanasios of Korca—as well as many Bulgarian iconographers working in the "Mount Athos style" and others. (I would like to note here that it is particularly important for scholarship to formulate new theoretical frameworks regarding the historical, social, and artistic significance of the two concepts "Mount Athos iconographer" and "Mount Athos style.") Furthermore, sections of the text of the well-known Erminia by Zachary Petrovich have been dated and attributed.

Third. The iconographic aspect of the research. This aspect is present in virtually all of the studies presented on individual iconographers or monuments. An indisputable example in this regard is the monograph devoted to the murals in the catholicon of the Rila Monastery, in which the majority of the text presents the iconographic program of the paintings. Linked to the purpose of the church's various functional spaces and to liturgical practice, the large-scale pictorial ensemble is analyzed in detail, including the signatures of the individual scenes and the inscriptions within them. Many of the images are rarely found in other mural monuments or are entirely absent from their iconographic programs; therefore, some of the compositions have been analyzed and studied for the first time in our literature, with efforts made to identify their analogues or the models and patterns that inspired their execution. Others are directly linked to liturgical practice or specific rituals,

such as the depiction of the miraculous Rila icon of the Holy Mother of God in the open gallery and the related compositions in the nave.

The presentation and analysis of iconographic model characteristics of the work of individual icon painters is an essential aspect of Kuyumdzhev's research. This perspective is directly linked to the contributions from the preceding categories and, in particular, to the clarification of the authorship of the icons by the icon painters under consideration.

Fourth. Significance of the scholarly works submitted. All monographs, studies, and articles submitted to the competition are of particular importance for the development of contemporary art history; they can be used not only by art historians but also by conservators, architects, artists, humanities scholars, and other specialists working in the field of cultural heritage research and preservation. All three of Kuyumdzhev's monographs are, by their very nature, fundamental studies. The collective volumes to which he has contributed texts share this same character. In addition to their scholarly innovations, the presented texts feature a wealth of visual material, much of it published for the first time—and contain a vast and diverse database. All of these are essential for future research.

4. Conclusion

In light of everything stated thus far, I strongly recommend that the distinguished academic jury award Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev, DSc., the academic rank of “professor” in the field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.1 Theory of the Arts, scientific specialty Art History and Fine Arts (Bulgarian National Revival Church Art).

August 23, 2026

Veliko Tarnovo

Prof. Miglena Prashkova, PhD.