

OPINION

on the dissertation of Ass. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhev
for acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor of Science
academic specialty Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1 THEORY OF ARTS
on the subject: **Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)**

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The dissertation presented by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhev, entitled "Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)", is dedicated to academic issues that have always attracted the interest and attention of our art historians, but so far have not been subject to a monographic study, which makes this thesis particularly suitable in view of a procedure for obtaining the academic degree of "Doctor of Science". I must also emphasize that the work tangles complex and difficult topics, requiring tedious work, which has enabled the author to fully develop and demonstrate his qualification and skills as an experienced researcher of ancient church art.

The dissertation has a total volume of 414 pages and consists of six sections (starting with an introduction), conclusion, bibliography and a description of the origin of the 796 color and black-and-white illustrations included in the text.

In the short but meaningful introduction (p. 4-5) A. Kuyumdzhev clearly and precisely stated and motivated the aims and scope of his research, namely - to find, study and systematize the works (murals and icons) of the Athonite icon painters in our country, placing the main accent on "bringing order to the attribution" of these works. It is important to note the author's clarification that by "Athonite icon painters" he means "only those who were trained on Mount Athos in the two workshops there - that of Nicephorus of Karapenissi and that of Macarius of Galatista" (p. 4). Accordingly, the chronology of the study is presented as "formally summarized", as it marks the boundaries of the period during which the two ateliers fully functioned, as the earliest dated work of an author from this circle dates back to 1773, and the latest - to 1821 (pp. 4-5). Another focus of the paper is to indicate and analyze the ways in which the works of the Athonite icon painters penetrated Bulgarian territory, with special emphasis on the activities of the travelling monks (p. 5).

Section II reviews the literature (pp. 5-40), and is organized in the form of a critical assessment of the main topics, problems and concepts regarding the existence of Athonite art in Bulgaria. First of all, revised here are the prevailing in previous literature (A. Protich, B. Filov, A. Bozhkov, N. Mavrodinov, L. Prashkov, etc.)

perception that the Athonite icons are part of the art of the Bulgarian Revival, together with the accompanying tendencies towards unfounded presentation of some Athonite icon painters as Bulgarians, emphasis on the national character of the Bulgarian founders of monasteries on Mount Athos, etc. (pp. 5-10). It is worth noting that "most of the "Bulgarian" monuments on Mount Athos were painted by Constantine and Atanas of Korca, others by the masters of Nicephorus of Carpenisi workshop, while the Hilendar monuments from the early nineteenth century are almost a priority of the masters of Galatista. That is, among the icon painters who worked in temples whose founders are Bulgarians, we do not know any that was of Bulgarian ethnic origin But unfortunately this was not well known until the beginning of the 21st century, which is the reason why literature that had been accumulated until that time, proved to be false, and which is still sometimes used in professional circles outside of art studies" (p. 8, and also p. 387).

The review of the literature continues (pp. 10-11) with the more recent publications of the last three decades, in which "Athonite art is studied far more substantially and without the methodological staggers of the older literature" (p. 10). The author further notes and criticizes "the major Balkan trend of national appropriation of artistic facts and masters, lasting more than a century" (p. 12), to move on to the question of the identity and professional status of the Athonite icon painters (pp. 13-22) based on their signatures and on donor's inscriptions. The conclusion that in the case of these painters the craft prevails over the monastic life and they should be considered as an "artistic community organized in a monastic environment and not as monks engaged in painting" (pp. 17-18) sounds convincing and surely will contribute to the clarification of such a complex and difficult to interpret phenomenon. According to A. Kuyumdzhev, these masters could be defined as "completely trivial post-Byzantine icon painters of Greek ethnic origin", who, however, differ from their fellow masters in "the place of study and style of work" (p. 19). Belonging to this community was a guarantee of high quality, enjoyed high prestige (including in the Bulgarian lands), provided many orders and higher remuneration (pp. 20-21).

Further review of the literature continues with the problem of what lies behind the concept of "Athonite style", defined in various ways by various researchers, which leads A. Kuyumdzhev to reach the idea that "the description of the" general Athonite style" is impossible to understand one-sidedly and therefore this term is totally **meaningless**" (p. 25).

I would like to make a clarification to the Serbian document from 1733, which was commented on in detail on page 30, which is not exactly defined by A. Kuyumdzhev as "a letter related to the church" St. Stefan "in Sremska Mitrovica". This is a description of a visit made this year (essentially a revision) of the temple, which was published by Dimitrije Ruvarac¹ in 1902, but – if I understand properly what was

¹ Руvaraц, Д. Српска митрополија карловачка око половине XVIII века. Сремски Карловци, 1902, с. 88.

written in the dissertation – the author had the possibility to use only the partial English translation of the text, published in an article by Sotiris Kissas, which describes icons donated to the temple by a pilgrim, with the following specification: "in the Athonite style, these icons are from Thessaloniki and are of great artistic value"². However, A. Kuyumdzhiev is absolutely right when he questions the accuracy of Kissas's translation, which we can prove by comparing it with the much simpler and not so complex original: „светогорске од Солуна, и дјело изрјадное“³.

Once he rejected even the very possibility of the existence of a unified "Athonite style", A. Kuyumdzhiev paid attention to those features ("parameters of style", pp. 35-40) that could possibly allow him to distinguish in some way the works of Athonite and "ordinary" Greek icon painters of the epoch under study, in order to reach the methodologically important conclusion that the accumulation of styles in the eighteenth century gave birth to a new "separate orthodox style" and thus reached a "stage in which we cannot distinguish the origin and the training of a post-Byzantine icon painter only through observations of his works, and we inevitably need source data or additional information"; the icon painters themselves, on the other hand, are no longer so clearly divided in style and education, but differ in the degree to which they perceive Western European influences in their works "(p. 37).). No less interesting is the summary that in this case we are dealing with "an artistic phenomenon in which the geographical location replaces the aesthetic and artistic categories, completely covers them in the minds of the people of that time and gives them a guarantee of quality", and hence naturally such features of the Athonite art as elitism, elegance and high professional performance (p. 38), which make sense to be studied and described "solely and only specifically - in relation to one or a group of works by an author, workshop, etc." (pp. 40).

Chapter III, entitled "Athonite Icon Painters after 1750" (pp. 41-212), focuses on the specific information about the icon painters trained in the workshop of Nicephorus of Karpenissi and Macarius of Galatista, established on Mount Athos in the third quarter of the 18th century. According to A. Kuyumdzhiev, in this case we are talking about "private workshops, organized almost entirely on a family basis, as is the usual icon painting practice outside Mount Athos, and the only but significant difference is the mandatory monasticism" (p. 47). The latter circumstance, according to the author, excludes the possibility that Hr. Dimitrov was trained on Mount Athos (pp. 48-49) - a thesis that deserves serious consideration in the light of the observations presented in the dissertation on the practice of Athonite painting studios during this era.

² Kissas, S. Thessalonian Painters in the Eighteenth Century: A Preliminary Study. – Balkan Studies 24 (1983), No 2, p. 477.

³ I could not reach the original publication but the part that interested me was cited by: Медаковић, Д. Манастир Хиландар у XVIII веку. – Хиландарски зборник. Т. 3. Београд, 1974, с. 28.

Further A. Kuyumdzhiev traces the presence, creativity and contacts with the Bulgarian lands of monks-icon painters in some of the monasteries of Mount Athos (for example Jacob Ivirit and Melchisedec from the Vatopedi monastery, pp. 55-58, to which we can add the commented later in the dissertation Mitrofan from Chios, who had his own students and workshop in the last quarter of the 18th century, p. 228), who are not known to have been trained in the two "real" Athonite workshops – these are all things that should be considered in the discussion about whether all allegations of a longer creative stay and training of Bulgarian icon painters on Mount Athos should be completely rejected (pp. 48-49) as inaccurate and exaggerated (although not necessarily in Karyes).

Most of section III is devoted to an overview of the works of Athonite icon painters in Bulgaria. The material collected and analyzed here is the first serious attempt to systematize the accumulated diverse observations so far, and the results of it are yet to be understood and clarified. I will allow myself to note as particularly interesting and important the case with the new attribution of four iconostasis sets from Samokov, Vratsa, Ruse and Pazardzhik, so far attributed to Hr. Dimitrov, which according to A. Kuyumdzhiev are the work of Nicephorus of Karpenissi, while some of his unsigned works, identified for the first time, are in temples in Dolno Raykovo, Haskovo, Plovdiv and in the Rozhen Monastery (pp. 66-79). Other icons attributed so far to Hr. Dimitrov, made for the old church in the village of Shipochane, are interpreted as works of the closest disciple of Nicephorus - Mitrofan of Visa (pp. 91-92). Another disciple of Nicephorus, Dositheus of Peć, is credited with the authorship of the six royal icons from the iconostasis of the church in the Convent in Samokov, hitherto attributed as works of Hr. Dimitrov, John the Icon Painter or Dim. Hristov (pp. 101-104). Valuable and important are the observations on the activities of other disciples of Nicephorus, hierodeacon David and the monk Jacob, in Elena, where they painted in 1810-1813 the church "St. Nicholas", trained local painters and made a series of icons, the new attribution of which (together with the identification of the two painters) belongs to the author of the dissertation (pp. 106-119). The essay on Macarius by Galatista is full of information: his unsigned works are identified in the Church of the Assumption at the Pchelina Convent and in the Catholicon of the Rila Monastery, in the Metropolitan Church of Samokov, NHM and HM - Koprivshtitsa (pp. 120-141). The section ends with a large-scale presentation (pp. 142-212) about the almost unknown works of Macarius' nephews - Zacharias and Benjamin of Galatista, which Al. Kuyumdzhiev identified in the Rila Monastery, Samokov, NAIM and RHM - Varna mainly on the basis of their stylistic features.

Section IV (pp. 213-271) is dedicated to the works of important icon painters related to Mount Athos, whose mostly unknown (and unsigned) works A. Kuyumdzhiev found in Bulgarian collections. In the first place he notes the brothers Constantin and Atanas from Korca, who worked on behalf of the Rila Monastery in the 50s of the 18th century, and some of their works can be found in Dupnitsa, Sofia and Plovdiv (pp. 220-227).

The other prestigious author, commented in this section, is Mitrophan of Chios (deceased in 1799), whose newly attributed works from different parts of Bulgaria are too numerous to be reflected in this brief opinion (pp. 228-271, and also with 286).

Section V (pp. 272-361) covers the works of "icon painters supposedly associated with Mount Athos." Among the well-known authors considered in the first subsection, we should mention Hr. Dimitrov, Ioan Ikonopisets and Kosta Valiov from Samokov, the "local masters" Filip, Nedko Todorovich and Alexander Popgeorgiev, as well as the icon painter and woodcarver hierodeacon Cyprian. In addition, A. Kuyumdzhev traced the creative activities of three anonymous authors, who according to him are icon painters associated with Mount Athos.

Section VI (pp. 362-378) studies the ways of penetration of works by Athonite icon painters in our country and is a synthesized summary of the specific information on this issue scattered throughout the previous text of the dissertation. The data on the presence and activity in the Bulgarian lands of travelling monks from the monasteries of Mount Athos are considered (1.), the methods for carrying out orders for icons through the Mount Athos are analyzed (2.) (based on data about the metochia of Hilendar in Samokov, Chirpan, Sliven, Zheravna, Koprivshtitsa, Etropole, Vratsa and Ruse, of Zograf - in Ruse, Etropole, Pazardzhik and Vratsa, of Vatoped - in Melnik and Mesembria, Iviron - in the Rozhen Monastery and in Varna) both before and after the appearance of the two studios in Karyes, (3.) traced is the role of private donors as contracting authorities for the Athonite icon painters. Finally, attention is paid to (4.) pilgrimages to Mount Athos, the role of which in the spread of Athonite icons in Bulgaria proved to be greatly overestimated (pp. 362-363, 372 ff.).

Kuyumdzhev rightly points out the role of the occupation of Mount Athos in 1821-1829 for the actual cessation of taxidiote activities in the Bulgarian lands, which long hindered the spread of Athonite icons there, while in the 30s - 40s of the 19th century, when the metochia were renewed, "Mount Athos has lost its indisputable sacred image, national ideas already rule in the Balkans and worship is logically redirected to local places of worship and shrines" (p. 362). Here I would note that it was the crisis of Athonite monasticism in the 1920s and the temporary disorganization of the metochia system, combined with the great wave of new construction and renovation of old temples around the mid-1930s in the Bulgarian lands, give a chance for the rise and for serious market success of the icon painting communities in Samokov, Bansko and Tryavna - something that A. Kuyumdzhev marked further from a slightly different perspective in his presentation (p. 388).

Section VII (pp. 379-388) is the conclusion to the dissertation, in which the general observations and suppositions of A. Kuyumdzhev discussed above in detail on the subject of his work are precisely presented and clarified. I would like to note only the author's cautious assumption that "the icons presented in the text hardly constitute one-fifth of the existing number of "Athonite icons" in various churches and museums in

Bulgaria" (p. 384). We can say with full confidence that the future appearance of the peer-reviewed work as a monograph will provide a solid foundation and will become a good starting point in the work of the next researchers of Athonite art in our lands.

The next two sections, which conclude the dissertation, cover a bibliography with more than 450 titles (pp. 389-412) and an index of the origin of the illustrations (pp. 412-414).

The text of the abstract accurately conveys the main content of the dissertation. Seven scientific contributions have been formulated quite correctly, with which we fully agree. Included are the titles of seven publications by A. Kuyumdzhev on the topic of the dissertation, published in the period 2011-2018, as well as a list of fifteen citations of his publications.

I believe that the competition procedure was correct, all the requirements of the law were met, and most importantly, the dissertation of A. Kuyumdzhev has extremely high scientific merits and reflects the original results of many years of purposeful work by the author on the chosen subject matter. Based on the above, I propose that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhev be awarded the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in the specialty Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1. Theory of Arts, and I hope that the other members of the esteemed scientific jury will vote in favor of this decision.

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/ Assoc. Prof. Dr. Angel Nikolov /