

REVIEW

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on the dissertation of Ass. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev PhD

Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)

for acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor of Science

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8.1 THEORY OF ARTS

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Subject of the dissertation are the works - icons and murals of the Athonite icon painters on the territory of present-day Bulgaria. The author sets before himself the task to find their works, analyze them and clarify many ambiguities, including in the scientific heritage of research on the subject.

The chronological boundaries are set correctly - from the creation of the first known work of one of the two workshops in 1773 to 1821, when the Ottoman occupation stopped the mass distribution of Athonite icons outside the monastic republic. Due to the emerging and developing processes in the two Athonite studios, the chronological boundaries of the study were extended between 1750 and 1850. In this way the author makes it possible to focus his attention on a number of unexplained and unformulated facts, circumstances, concepts and processes that develop in painting in the monasteries of Mount Athos and reflect on the works of art distributed in Bulgaria.

Alexander Kuyumdzhev's research came quite naturally after his work on the frescoes in the main church of the Rila Monastery and a number of articles dedicated to the works of Athonite icon painters in Bulgaria. It contains difficult and voluminous material such as information on a large number of icons and murals from different parts of the country and is associated with their detailed study. Kuyumdzhev sets himself the task of systematizing them, which through the analysis of the general to the specific to lead to conclusions about the place, role and extent of distribution of Athonite iconography in Bulgaria.

The research is complicated also due to the many unclear terms, the need for attributions of the works and the search and comparison of data on their origin. In order to study the works of the painters from Mount Athos on the territory of modern Bulgaria, a large amount of preliminary clarifying work was done in order to seek a new approach, thanks to which to clarify the authors and their works.

The dissertation contains five chapters and a conclusion. It has a volume of 371 standard pages, the origin of the illustrations is described, 796 numbered and 267 unnumbered illustrations in the text, 309 titles in the bibliography in Cyrillic, 56 in

Latin and 106 in Greek. The work has such a structure as to present consistently all the problems related to: the degree of research of the studied material over time, the specification of terms, the processes of dissemination of trends and the individual known works of the two ateliers. The study of the ways for the penetration of the Athonite icons in the different parts of Bulgaria has a very important place in the work.

The **review of literature in the second chapter** is a kind of introduction in the subject and formulates the key questions that are subject of examination in the rest of the work. In this section Kuyumdzhiev presents the approach and method that he will use: to make a critical analysis on the issues of "Athonite" and "national" art and to reach conclusions concerning the main characteristics of Athonite art. The critical analysis of the literature is the theoretical fabric of the research on which the instrumental apparatus is built.

One of the primary tasks is the revision of the previous research regarding the direct attribution to the *Bulgarian Revival art* of works located on the territory of Mount Athos. His view of the inadequacy of such a statement that has penetrated the attribution of works from the territory of Mount Athos to the Bulgarian Revival art is proved by all the considered works and facts in the dissertation.

The terms used in the research, such as "*Athonite*" and "*national*", the opposition "*foreign/Athonite - local/Bulgarian painter*", "*Athonite icon painter*" and "*Athonite style*", discussed in detail and critically in this theoretical part, become points of reference or the clarification of controversial and unresolved problems in the literature and in the pictorial material itself.

The search for a complex topic and its detailed study is typical for Alexander Kuyumdzhiev. In this case, it is approached very carefully in the study of the icons and murals. Many unknown ones have been used due to the insufficient study of the entire Athonite material, which shows the author's precise handling of it and his desire to create an in-depth study. The categorical conclusions and statements are supported by sources, facts and analogies. The author of the work is not enslaved to the academic structuring of the goals, methods and tasks of the topic. The methodology used is further developed and clear and is revealed in the process of developing the research subject matter.

Key elements in the study are the definitions of the terms "*Athonite icon painter*" and "*Athonite style*". Of key importance is the clarification of the concept of "*Athonite icon painter*". It applies only to icon painters who were trained on Mount Athos in the two local workshops. The first was run by **Nicephorus** between 1773 and 1890 in the "All Saints" kellion. His students are Mitrophan of Visa and the nephew of Nicephorus, Joasaph of Karpenissi, with whom he worked as a team. **Makarius of Galatia** was considered the head of the second atelier in the Nativity of the Virgin kellion between 1785-1882. Only after the definition of the term "Athonite icon painter" are the works of these authors in Bulgaria considered.

Going through a convincing analysis, the author concludes that the current concept of "*Athonite style*" is a characteristic of the place and does not refer to a specific time, monument, icon painter or workshop, because they all differ from each other. The rise and subsequent - analyzed in the study with all its mechanisms and features - elitism of this manner of painting, explains the inevitable collapse of Athonite art, because accordingly it becomes a model only for a limited circle of patrons (p. 38). The peculiarities of the purpose of the style are explained by the formation of the opinion about the Athonite art as "high", which in the dissertation is proved to be eclectic. Hence the conclusion that elitist, high and eclectic art does not tolerate the primitive.

The next step in pointing out the "*high level*" of Athonite painting is the definition of the term "*primitive*", by which the author understands not the deformations in the peculiarities of the compositions, but the insufficient skill of artistic expression. The explanation of the term "*craft*" seems to have exhausted the most complex range of terminological, aesthetic and stylistic concepts in the field of "pure" art studies. The same chapter also deals with the issues of introducing political views to the previous research, as well as the search for the Bulgarian "Revival" signs and peculiarities in the Athonite painting.

Alexander Kuyumdzhev successfully untangle the mixing of a number of trends in our native art history that entered the first half and especially between the 50s and 80s of the 20th century. They refer to the incorrect structuring of the complex and multi-layered process of formation of the Revival art and its relationship with the Athonite one, such as the process of import and export of artistic ideas from Mount Athos.

The detailed and differentiated into separate parts analysis is clear, thanks to the sources that were used in parallel with the interpretations in the literature until the 90s of the 20th century. In this way the complex paradigm of what the is Athonite style, how it is formed, who it serves, how it is perceived and why it is preferred to the work of other Greek painters is derived. Kuyumdzhev comes to the conclusion that it was representative of the period under consideration, it was desired because of the proven and established sacredness of the territory, despite the fact that there were no Bulgarian masters behind it. And so in modeling the processes of the Palaeologus Renaissance with Baroque and Rococo, passing through high art due to the demand for such works, the National-Bulgarian (Renaissance) and the divide with Greek art, somewhere there we find the place of the Athonite style, as evidenced by detailed affirmative analyzes by Alexander Kuyumdzhev.

In the end, the analyses proved the meaninglessness of the traditional terminology, because the Athonite art is not Bulgarian Revival art, and also in no case can be inscribed in Western European culture on the basis of the manifestation of Western European elements in it - a feature cited by a number of Greek authors.

It is possible that in the future the problems posed in this chapter will be discussed and each researcher will build his own concept. The important thing is that Alexander Kuyumdzhiev proves his every judgment. One of the essential issues, in my opinion, is the problem of style. In such in one way or another unspecified terminology, I would allow myself to use the definition of "eclecticism" or "diversity" for the Athonite style. For similar reasons, Kuyumdzhiev believes the term is meaningless.

In connection with the above, the next issue of key importance is the formulation of the concept of "*Athonite painting*", which Kuyumdzhiev reduces to the two local workshops in order to bring the features of the style in its "purest" form, and hence its development and distribution in Bulgaria. In the absence of specific, pronounced and definite stylistic features in the iconography, there are three points of reference for defining a work as "Athonite": the founder's inscriptions or historical information, or the discovery of an analogue at Mount Athos.

Alexander Kuyumdzhiev reaches the depths of the question of understanding and using more concepts. One of them is "*nature*" or the way of life and environment close to the thinking of the painter of the 19th century and their expression in painting defined as "nature-likeness". Thus, an important watershed has been set in the study, namely that "there is no way for Bulgarian and Greek science to speak in the same way about Athonite art and to evaluate it with the same criteria" (p. 40). Thus, the paper has won the right to analyze independently the terms "atelier" or "author" without summaries, comparisons and use of incorrect terminology, due to the risk that they will not be understood individually, nationally, stylistically or otherwise.

In chapter three "Athonite icon painters after 1850", on the basis of the previous chapter, the specific understanding of "Athonite icon painters" is formulated. These are the monks who study in two kellia in Karyes, rented by the Caracal Monastery. They are icon painters who work on the spot, are bound to each other by blood, some go there as children, or are consecrated as apprentices, which expresses the spiritual connection between them. In terms of orders executed, they work for places outside Mount Athos. With the support of the claims of "pure Athonite painting", the thesis is accepted that all other painters who have a connection with Mount Athos, but are not trained according to the described principles will be called "*external painters*".

Another group are the icon painters, who are called "*teachers*". They are secular persons, therefore they do not have monastic rank and cannot be referred to the icon painters trained on Mount Athos. There is an argument and discussion on these issues with the study of A. Bozhkov, As. Vasiliev and the artist Svetoslav Milev that everyone could go to the Athonite ateliers to become an icon painter. Kuyumdzhiev's opinion that not everyone could go and become an icon painter, and that it was therefore necessary for icon painters to be trained and become monks, is convincing. It is concluded that the small and insufficient data on the training lead to a number of free interpretations by different authors.

According to the established criteria, the two workshops are scientifically differentiated. The first group of authors are considered to be students of **Damascene from Karpenisi**, who ran the studios. One of them is **Nicephorus of Karpenissi** (in the All Saints kellion, 1773-1890 intermittently). **He worked with his disciples Mitrophan of Visa and his nephew Joasaphus of Karpenissi**. They, in turn, train students, which means that the atelier has developed over time, but few of them are known, which allows icon painters to be assigned to this atelier on the basis of attributions.

Macarius of Galatista is considered to be the founder of the second atelier (in the Nativity of the Virgin kellion, between 1785-1882). It is believed that at the beginning of his development he worked only with his nephews Zacharias and Benjamin and their student - their brother Macarius II, and after him came more students.

This chapter deals with the works of icon painters, which works the author rightly believes were created on the Athonite models. These are mostly engravings, icons and frescoes, and even probably without the icon painters themselves they had contact with Mount Athos.

In the same chapter in the part (3.3.1) about the works of the Athonite icon painters in our country, it is approached very cautiously, due to the different versions of the researchers about the authorship of the icons of the individual painters who worked on the modern territory of Bulgaria. Based on detailed style analysis and thanks to a large number of drawn parallels, new attributions of a number of icons have been made. Attributions are related not only to stylistic analysis, but also to conclusions about donors, travelling monks and worshipers – this is similar to solving a problem with many unknowns. Kuyumdzhiev is critical of his own evidence in order to draw additional facts.

Valuable for Bulgarian science are the attributions made for the icons in the Metropolitan Church in Samokov, the Church of the Assumption in Pazardzhik, churches in Vratsa, Elena and Etropole, related to the work of the icon painter Nicephorus of Karpenissi. They are contributive because specified is the authorship of icons, which for a long time and until recently have been related to the work of Hristo Dimitrov from Samokov. The attributions are related to corrections of his authorship and in addition to the direct material as a comparative analysis, works from other cities in Greece with the now clarified author **Nicephorus** are given.

Such comparisons require not only opportunities to organize a study of the research material, but also extensive and in-depth detailed knowledge of the author, the period, skills to provide direct and indirect evidence - all features related to the most complex part of the study of the works of art.

Of particular interest is the research section on **Macarius from Galatista**. Looking at the issues of his education, the earliest works created by him and the distribution of

the later ones, Kuyumdzhiev came to the conclusion that Macarius had received his initial training outside Mount Athos, that it is possible that he has painted some icons Mount Athos that are not known today. However, the workshop of the painter on the peninsula can be considered entirely Athonite because renting the kellion there can be understood as an act of establishing this place, and the subsequent production must now be considered entirely "Athonite" (p. 121). Due to the diverse styles used, it can be considered representative of the Athonite trends, according to the established criteria for them.

In Bulgaria, Macarius is famous for his connections with Mount Athos. The dissertation examines icons from the Rila Monastery, the Metropolitan Church in Samokov and Veles, and thanks to complex comparative analyzes and analogies with archival photographs the author reaches an important conclusion for Bulgarian science by raising the hypothesis that the iconostasis set for the church in the convent Pchelina is a work of Macarius of Galatista and its creation can be dated between 1787-1792. Valuable in such comparative studies and analyzes of the work of an icon painter is the material attracted on a broad territorial basis. The author of the study knows it well and thanks to this it is possible to make new statements and correct old hypotheses.

The attributions of the individual works and the method for identification of the individual works are guided by the material, but in all cases with very precise detailed stylistic analysis, with separation of attributional and non-attributional features in distinguishing the differences in determining the author. For this purpose, all the details are analyzed, which shows the good mastery of fine and precise work of this kind. The distinction in similar cases, such as the use of the same copiers by two authors or the varying work of one author, was made in the study of the icons of **Zechariah and Benjamin from Galatista**. Distinguishing between what the two have created is extremely important for their work.

The works of the painters, who only worked in Bulgaria, but can be connected with Mount Athos, are placed in another group on the basis of stylistic similarity with the works of the Athonite icon painters from the two workshops, or thanks to stylistic parallels and indirect connections such as donor inscriptions, sources and historical data showing a connection between the works and Mount Athos.

The analyzes made so as to distinguishing the work of **Hristo Dimitrov** from the works of **Zechariah the monk** and his anonymous partner, as well as from **Nicephorus of Karpenissi**, are logically sound and the analysis is convincingly constructed. It brings clarity to the complex issues of attribution, is perceived with ease, regardless of the multi-directional references of the studied material. The good handling of the empirical material and the facts from the literature makes it possible to test many hypotheses in establishing the partner-painter of Zechariah - **Benjamin**

of Galatista. Through the stylistic attributions, hypotheses and logical assumptions, the rejection of a number of frescoes by Hristo Dimitrov was reached.

Of special interest is the review of the painters who worked in our country, who have been **connected with Mount Athos (Chapter IV) and the painters supposedly connected with Mount Athos (Chapter V). Constantine and Atanas from Korca and the monk Mitrofan from Chios** are connected with Mount Athos. Some of the works of the first author have new attributions. For the second it is rightly stated that most of his icons are not attributed, and the author dwells on a sufficiently extensive perimeter of his work in the Rila Monastery and other churches, concluding that they are in these places, thanks to donor orders.

The icon painters from the second group are divided into two parts - the first examines the names of **famous icon painters** that have no works discovered on Mount Athos so far. In the second part there are "**anonymous icon painters** who have works not only in our country, but also on Mount Athos, and in addition at least one of their works in our country is dated in the period 1750-1850" (p. 291). This part includes some of the leading Bulgarian Revival masters such as the Samokov **icon painters Hristo Dimitrov, John the Icon Painter and Kosta Valyov**, along with the frescoes from the church in the village of Rila. Thanks to the comparisons, the conclusion was made, "that they are local masters, formed without the direct intervention of the Athonite art, but through contact with its manifestations in the regions where they live and work" (pp. 319-324).

In Chapter Five "Painters supposedly connected with Mount Athos", for the Bulgarian painters, who are incorrectly supposed to have been trained on Mount Athos, Al. Kuyumdzhev considers the ways of influence - the iconographic models, the possibilities and the ways for their distribution, the borrowing and the possible interpretations. In this chapter the valuable conclusion about the contribution of the Athonite examples is made. Their influence on the local icon painters in the different regions of Bulgaria, where they were distributed, repeated, copied and reproduced by the later working icon painters, is the reason why their icon-painting production is defined as "Athonite". Rightly, these icons are defined as imitating, and not directly Athonite, which is one of the mistakes in the attributions performed so far. In this way, a contribution has been made to the methods and methodology for the attribution of later iconographic works with a different affiliation and qualities to the original parental originals. The only strong point is the discovery of the prototype of an icon on Mount Athos, and more precisely in one of the two Athonite ateliers. Kuyumdzhev is also right about another of his motivated statements that until all the icons of Mount Athos from the second half of the 18th and 19th centuries are published, the clarification of the question of the influence of the Athonite icons in Bulgaria will not be completed.

Chapter Six "Roads for the penetration of works by Athonite icon painters in our country" discusses the mechanisms and principles of ordering icons in the monasteries of Mount Athos, as well as the ways of receiving orders and delivery of icons on site. All these practices have been researched in various studies, but now, for the first time, on the basis of a number of examples from the considered material, the mechanism of work of such an taxidiote institution, donation and worship is traced with arguments and evidence.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the academic study "Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750 - 1850)" is a perfect modern completed work. It is structured in such a way that it is impossible to separate the plain text from the so-called "appendices" - the catalog parts with attributions, which are basic elements of the study and without which it is unthinkable.

The work of Alexander Kuyumdzhiev is the first comprehensive study of a capital nature on Athonite icon painting on the territory of present-day Bulgaria. It also has a methodological significance for the implementation of future attributions in expanding the range of Athonite production in our country.

The research shows that the two painting workshops in Karyes, which are defined as Athonite on a number of reasons mentioned above, have a "private" character in terms of the organization of work, the conditions of admission and the affiliation of the icon painters to them. They are not schools for training of "external" icon painters. With the analyzes of a huge number of icons in Bulgaria and in the stylistic comparisons with works from Mount Athos, the clarification of the order mechanism for the Athonite icons from a remote region, such as the Bulgarian lands for that time, has been achieved. Another very important conclusion is the imitative influence of the Athonite icon painting for a number of Revival icon painters, who for years were wrongly known to have been in direct contact with Mount Athos. The role of the travelling monks network of the monasteries of Mount Athos has also been clarified.

It should be noted that the dissertation is the first attempt to introduce a new understanding of the framework of Athonite art, the boundaries of style and its spread in modern Bulgaria. It has revised a number of established in art history notions and shows and proves that they are already obsolete. It is also concluded that the icons and frescoes in the monasteries "St. George the Zograph" and "Hilendar" were not created by ethnic Bulgarian icon painters and should not be included in the Bulgarian Revival art. After the occupation of "Mount Athos" and more precisely after 1830, when the tendencies in painting on the peninsula could not be restored, the icon painting craft came to life on the territory of modern Bulgaria.

The style, the time, the icon painters, their monastic affiliation, the family relations, the taxidiote institution, the patronage and the documentary source data are the elements and the categories of the creation and distribution of the Athonite icons in our country.

Particularly contributing are the annotated and illustrated catalogue data, which present the updated basic information for the considered works. This increases the applicability of the performed attributions. A huge number of attributions have been made on the basis of the parallels in the studied works, and a large number of hypotheses have been proposed. All this is done with arguments, with the presentation of sufficient evidence, which gives grounds for evaluating the work as accurate and offering for the moment and stage of development of our native art a high scientific level.

The dissertation presents the main contributions, the list of publications on the topic and citations. I find the described contributions justified. The author's publications are seven, the citations are fifteen. All of them comply with the requirements set out in the Regulations on the Terms and Conditions for Obtaining the Scientific Degrees and for Occupying Academic Positions at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS. The abstract corresponds to the dissertation.

Recommendations: the publication of this major work would be extremely useful for Bulgarian art history, as it contains all the mandatory parameters of the text with justifications and catalogue data. An index, a list abbreviations and a summary in a foreign language should be made.

Conclusion: I highly evaluate the fundamental and scientific-applied contribution of the presented dissertation and I propose to the jury to award the scientific degree of Doctor of Science to Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhev.

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