

REVIEW

on the dissertation of Ass. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev PhD, Institute of Art Studies, BAS

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

By Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Moutafov, Institute of Art Studies at BAS

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhev was enrolled as doctoral student on individual training and was dismissed with the right to defend the academic degree "Doctor of Science", depositing the necessary declaration of originality and authenticity of the proposed study, abstract and declaration of publications (7) and citations (15) related to the topic of the dissertation on 16.11.2020 as well as other relevant documents. In other words, the procedure was carried out according to all the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), and the documentation was perfect. The dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Dr. A. Kuyumdzhev, entitled *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)*, consists of 414 pages with about 800 illustrations. The thesis was discussed for enrollment and preliminary defense by the RG "Medieval and National Revival" at the IAS-BAS, recommendations were made by the participants in the meeting, which were taken into consideration in the final version of the text; the SC of the Institute elected the AJ and the procedure was conducted without objections. From a formal point of view, the text meets the minimum national requirements for such work, as well as the requirements of the Regulations of IAS-BAS, according to which the text of the doctoral dissertation should not be less than 150 standard pages, and the topic and content of the thesis must repeat the topic and content of the dissertation with which the doctoral student was awarded the educational and academic degree Doctor.

Alexander Kuyumdzhev defended his PhD thesis, entitled „*Iconographic programme of the Mural Paintings in the Main Church of the Rila Monastery*” in 1998. Two years later he was awarded Best young researcher in the humanities by BAS. He received his habilitation with a study on the Athonite icon masters, which becomes in turn a monograph *The Church of St. Nicholas in the Town of Elena*. S., 2011, 154 p. The contribution of Assoc. Prof. Kuyumdzhev in the research of iconography and the attribution of monuments can be traced in his key participation in collective works such as *Greek Icon Painters in Bulgaria after 1453* (2008) and the *Corpus of Murals from the 17th century in Bulgaria* (2012). However, with his inherent determination and concentration, the colleague did not abandon his dissertation, prepared it as a monograph and published it in 2015. Its 720 pages and impressive layout have turned

the book into one of the most prestigious publications of IAS-BAS. He was nominated for it and received the *Pythagoras Award* in Best Monograph category of the Ministry of Education and Science for 2015. And when everyone in the guild thought that the "bar" could not be raised anymore, the spectacular project *Corpus of Murals from the first half of the Nineteenth Century in Bulgaria* appeared, where A. Kuyumdzhev had the role of an ideologue, organizer and main author. This brought to life the eponymous opus, published in 2018. Thus, the colleague became a representative of the "heavy" genre in the guild.

I tried to outline the current path of Assoc. Prof. Kuyumdzhev in science only to emphasize his consistency, faithfulness to the period he has chosen, as well as preference for voluminous and in-depth research of pre-modern art on the Balkans and in particular in Bulgaria. In this regard, the submitted dissertation *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)* of 414 pages and 800 illustrations was not a surprise.

The text of the dissertation contains an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. Analyzing in depth the many angles for the perception of the term Athonite, Assoc. Prof. Kuyumdzhev concludes that it is wrong to "nationalize" the Athonite in unison with the trends of our science from the socialist period, and must seek the inner artistic essence of the works created on Mount Athos or by masters who received their schooling on Mount Athos. This is the source of one of the methodologically important achievements for the work and somewhat facilitating for the researchers, namely to define three main categories of "Athonite" artists: trained on Mount Athos in the period 1750-1850; icon painters associated with Mount Athos; anonymous icon painters. The introduction outlines well the historical and social framework of the functioning of spiritual life during the period, i.e. the context of the artistic processes is also set out with an emphasis on what is happening on Mount Athos. Data from monuments, signatures of icon painters, etc. are attracted, with which the author goes beyond the traditional boundaries of art history research.

And after the terminology, history and criteria were specified, Kuyumdzhev begins to deal with the two leading workshops from the second half of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century or namely with the icon painters Nicephorus of Karpenissi and Macarius of Galatista, also presenting information on what was known about their disciples, their production, but also adding many new attributes. Of course, the period pointed out in the title, 1750-1850, does not presuppose the work of Dionysius of Fournas, who was certainly deceased at the starting date of the study, and even for his Greek colleagues it is not clear whether his atelier was established on Mount Athos or on his return to his native Agrafa. On the other hand, some of the works attributed to him on present-day Bulgarian territory are examined in Kuyumdzhev's text.

The chapter about how Athonite art penetrated the Bulgarian lands is valuable for outlining the mechanisms of the taxidiote institution, for clarifying the essence of the functioning of the metochia as intermediaries in pilgrimage, but also in the exchange

of ideas, patronage and individual orders which becomes a contribution to the cultural history of the Balkans during the Ottoman period. The latter again is not inherent in most art historical works here. In this regard, the critical historiographical review preceding the actual part is also contributive, since looking at the place of Mount Athos in the epoch of the so-called Bulgarian Revival, breaks many stereotypes of our 20th century academic research. Therefore, the methodological contribution of Kuyumdzhiev's critical reading of what has been written so far about the "national" will still have its effect on the research of younger colleagues.

Undoubtedly, the presence of Athonite masters' works on the Bulgarian lands during the pre-modern era is a matter of paramount importance for the history of culture and art in our country. It has not been the subject of specific research in the past because: 1. The primary task of researchers was to show the national character of art in our lands, as well as its uniqueness and possibly secular character; 2. The mechanisms for attribution of unsigned works were not that well developed as they are now; 3. Comparative material accumulated from personal observations during expeditions abroad and on the basis of foreign publications was scarce; 4. There were no options for working with digital technologies for comparison, changing the contrast and enlarging the images. The Athonite icon painters rarely or by accident signed their works, which made it difficult to attribute their work to our lands until recently. In this respect A. Kuyumdzhiev is a well-known expert, his numerous attributions and submissions can be trusted, as they are based on a serious and personal methodology, acquired and tested during the years in which he worked in direct contact with icons in the crypt of "St. Alexander Nevsky", as well as during numerous expeditions to churches and monasteries. A definite achievement in this direction, for example, is the attribution of the royal icons from the altar partition of the Metropolitan Church in Samokov to the works of Nicephorus of Karpenissi, which until recently, were considered to be the work of Hristo Dimitrov. The dissertation of A. Kuyumdzhiev marks the end of a period in our profession life, which romantically defined each more skillfully crafted icon as the work of the mythical Hristo Dimitrov from Samokov. Speaking about the founder of the Samokov School of Painting, the colleague came to the bold but well-argued thesis that in fact Neophyte Rilski has exaggerated the Athonite schooling of the master. As another achievement of the work I can point out, for example, the "introduction into circulation" of the works of Dositheus of Pécs in our country through the attributions of six royal icons from the iconostasis of the church in the Convent in Samokov. According to A. Kuyumdzhiev, these icons are incorrectly attributed to Hristo Dimitrov, John the Icon Painter or Dimitar Hristov, and belonged to the old church in the convent, built in 1818. It is also especially important for me that the author took a new look at the so-called "Bulgarian" monuments of Mount Athos and specifically the frescoes in the monasteries Zografos and Hilandar, and in doing this he removed them from the circle of works of our Revival art, because they are made entirely by Athonite icon painters of Greek origin. This discredits another nationalist myth and that leads to more serious objectivity.

The text, somewhat modestly entitled *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)*, is far from an "inventory list" of icons, because for example the nature of training in Athonite workshops is specified and the identity and professional status of Athonite icon painters, family and closed nature of their organization, etc. In other words, the dissertation itself goes far beyond what is stated in its title and makes a number of theoretical conclusions that are yet to be used.

Quite outstanding is the author's conclusion that in the 19th century a large number of prints were transferred from Mount Athos to our present-day territories, icons were ordered from there and icon painters were invited, and in the opposite direction individual works appeared by chance, either by pilgrimage or through the Athonite metochia. This brings us to the conclusion that *these single examples, however, are interpreted speculatively in our older literature, giving the impression that there were conscious and active two-way artistic connections.*

The vast amount of publications in Greek that A. Kuyumdzhiev studied in order to prepare his research is worthy of admiration, and as a Greekist I can assure the other members of the Academic Jury that I have no objections to the text. Here, and in connection with the above thought, is the place for the usual standard critical remarks, which are disguised as "recommendations for future publication", always when I read reviews shocks me, especially when after these critical remarks people "convincingly vote" for "the awarding of a certain degree or title... To me it seems that the critical remarks look extremely unethical from colleagues who participated in all phases of the discussion of a given paper, and did not make them before the review and/or opinion in the AJ, which they voluntarily joined, agreeing by definition with the merits of a particular candidacy. When I do not accept the qualities of a candidate and the contribution of his work, I refuse to participate in the selection procedure. I also do not want to impose my vision on certain issues, as everyone is free to express them, as long as they argue them adequately. Otherwise this looks like a kind of censorship, malice or simple self-promotion. After this summary of my observations on some procedures in recent years at the Institute of Art Studies, I would like to clarify: I have no critical remarks on *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)*, because if I had such, I would write a similar study in a better way, but did not. I have not checked how often the author quotes me, because this is his right and in no way determines the quality of his work.

Based on all that I have stated above, I state that the dissertation *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)* by Alexander Kuyumdzhiev is a voluminous, significant, contributive, innovative and promising in terms of its academic convertibility work that will change many of the stereotypes of thinking about the Bulgarian Revival. The author has collected, analyzed and systematized the works of Athonite icon painters on the territory of present-day Bulgaria for the first time - a work that currently only he can perform, for which he deserves all of our respect. Such a project requires special talent for summarizing a huge amount of information, for

finding benchmarks for its organization and for interpreting which very few have. It requires perseverance, self-denial and hard work, which are also not inherent in everyone.

The abstract included in the set of documents corresponds to the content and structure of the dissertation and presents correctly its contributions. A declaration of publications (7) and citations (15) related to the topic of the dissertation dated 16.11.2020 is not relevant to the procedure, but will be used for the registration of the candidate in NACID as a "Doctor of Science".

I recommend to the other members of the academic jury to award Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhev the academic degree "Doctor of Art Studies" in the specialty "Art Studies and Fine Arts", 8.1, Theory of Arts, for which I will vote with firm conviction and pleasure.

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Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Moutafov