

# R E V I E W

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On the dissertation of Alexander Kuyumdzhev on the topic

## **WORKS OF ATHONITE ICON PAINTERS IN BULGARIA (1750-1850)**

For acquiring the academic degree Doctor of Sciences, specialty Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1, Theory of Arts,

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Without any doubt we have before us a very unique work.

Naturally, it is right to analyze its original nature - and the work is contributing, in its entirety and in its details. I will dwell on them further. Now, however, I will try to clarify what makes it so unique.

The topic? In itself it is not new, on the contrary - the theme of Mount Athos and its influence on the iconography (16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century) and style (18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century) on the Orthodox Church art on the Balkans and in particular in Bulgarian painting is the leitmotif of all studies published in the last 6-7 decades; I can't think of an art critic that has not been tempted by it. With regard to the Revival heritage, the vast volume of accumulated different information and interpretations, originating from family legends about the ancestors of icon-painting families, necessarily educated in the monasteries of Mount Athos, traces the direction of scientific pursuits and for a long time reduces them to stylistic comparisons (to a large extent subjective by their very nature), underlying hypotheses multiplied trustingly and inertly. In Alexander Kuyumdzhev's research, the need for a radical revision of obscure concepts such as "Athonite icon painters" and "Athonite style" is extensively argued in **Chapter II - Review Literature**.

There he edits. With precision and uncompromisingly.

Here I will add that Kuyumdzhev has an amazing experience as an editor (proven in a number of the institute's collective projects, all elements of which passed through his hands and mind, were reformatted, corrected, synthesized and the scientific element extracted from them, thanks to his inhuman efforts to get the perfect architectonics.) The last example is the *Corpus of Mural Paintings from the First Half of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgaria*, which is in fact a collective elaboration of an excellent individual academic work of Kuyumdzhev himself - of course, he was the engine behind it from beginning to end in the realization of this large-scale endeavor. (In this and other similar cases, a rare quality for a researcher stands out, especially with such a bright individuality - the modest hiding "behind the scenes", where the round-the-clock individual work is not advertised in the name of common teamwork).

I briefly outline these qualities not without connection with the presented dissertation - because they partly explain the unique research approach of Alexander Kuyumdzhiev.

This approach was perfected in his previous monographs - first in that about the church "St. Nikola" in the town of Elena, then in the major work on the frescoes from the catholicon of the Rila Monastery - both directly related to the art of Athonite art, respectively the subject of many years of contradictory interpretations in literature. Let me make myself more clear - with a review of publications on the problem begins any research; unique here is not the presence of such introductory chapters, but the approach to scientific heritage - each statement of the predecessors is filtered through a sieve of skepticism, referred to the objective information collected personally by the author in the field and based on evidence such as documents, sources, archival materials and intensive direct contact with the artifacts. Quite few of the established theses survive after such a revision, and as a result - the attributions of each object of study undergo surprising transformations: not only the names of the icon painters turn out to be different, sometimes some of them mysteriously disappear after the appearance of new, hitherto unknown icon painters, a mystification turns out to be the authorship of entire ensembles, traditionally attributed to someone's brush. Naturally, this revisionist approach is applied not only to basic issues, but everywhere, with equal attention paid both to the generally accepted opinions and to the smallest footnote, thrown in passing and remaining invisible to generations of art critics.

In the dissertation, the scope of the topic of the "Athonite connection" is maximally expanded in order to identify not only the artists engaged in the decoration of a parish church such as "St. Nikola" in Elena or the Catholicon of the Rila Monastery – but of all icon painters in Bulgaria (and not only), who have so far been charged with a direct or indirect connection with the artistic practices of Mount Athos. And since their number is huge, the role of the temporal classifier is the time during which the two Athonite ateliers operate - actually between 1773 and 1821, as in the study the scope is expanded to cover the period 1750-1850, as *"before and after those years there are processes and facts that are part of the formation, development and final stage in their existence"* (Abstract, p.5). Thus, in **Chapter II**, specifying the basic working concepts, in section **3.2. Identity of Athonite icon painters and professional status** Kuyumdzhiev raises the question of the pragmatic self-perception of artists on the basis of dozens of their signatures collected by him (rejecting idealized notions of "national self-consciousness" and the like) - and brilliantly argues a completely new thesis for their identity, connected with their work in the two Mount Athos ateliers.

In the beginning of the next **chapter III, Athonite icon painters after 1750**, the author specifies how work was organized (on generic basis) in the two ateliers operating in the kellia "All Saints" and "Nativity of the Virgin" in Karya, led by the

students of Damaskinos from Karpenisi: respectively Nicephorus of Karpenisi and Macarius of Galatia, noting their timid nature, the method of teaching, and the activity of their students. In this way an objective basis is set - an exceptional contribution of the author - against which the icon painters who worked on Bulgarian territory during the period will be logically re-classified. The conclusions are simple and striking: The Athonite masters from the two ateliers are ethnic Greeks, monks or additionally consecrated icon painters, bound mainly by family line, external students were not allowed; in addition, the popular nickname "teacher" in our country has a secular character and automatically eliminates the possibility of monasticism and training at Mount Athos of a number of icon painters (drastically shortening their popular biographies).

The next parts of this section (3.1.-3.7.) present all the works of the Athonite icon painters found by the author on the territory of Bulgaria - their identification, dating and re-dating, the introduction of new, unknown material and the widespread corrections in the attributions of famous works in – all this creates a solid foundation on which to built in the future the Bulgarian - and in general Balkan - science of the Revival art. In general, the author has searched for and classified a huge amount of material, linking each artifact with original hypotheses. It is possible that some of them will undergo corrections over time (most likely by Kuyumdzhiev himself); the important thing is that with his dissertation he radically shifts the layers and causes a powerful movement (in places - a tsunami) among our swampy ideas about the Revival art.

Further on, the icon painters are clearly situated in relation to the general classifier (the icon painters from the Mount Athos ateliers) in the next two chapters - **IV. Icon Painters associated with Mount Athos** (brothers from Korca, monk Mitrophan of Chios) and **V. Icon Painters presumably associated with Mount Athos**. Before proceeding to the question of the personality and works of the icon painters, Kuyumdzhiev again puts the problem on a methodological basis. He argues in detail with the widespread use of common graphic models to find striking similarities in the style of works by different authors, which in turn leads to wrong attribution. He reached the important conclusions *that "stylistic features are a relative concept", that "the first factor categorizing a work as "Athonite" remains the finding of its parallel from Mount Athos itself"* (pp. 281-282), *that "Athonite affiliation does not necessarily guarantee a donor the affiliation of the icon painter with the monastic republic"* (p. 283); that *"the donor's order to a monk originating from Mount Athos does not automatically guarantee that the work itself will be made on the spot in the monastic republic"* (p. 286) – with which he achieves a general breakthrough in the established methodology for attribution of works. Applying his own principles in practice, Kuyumdzhiev relates a huge number of examples (each comparison is meticulously illustrated with photographs) and radically reformats the

general panorama of Revival art - in itself a colossal work, leading to astonishing revelations (a reassessment of Hristo Dimitrov's work is essential to science, but by no means the only example).

The catalog arrangement of a number of unidentified works with similar stylistic, iconographic and paleographic characteristics, which after convincing motivation, Alexander Kuyumdzhiev refers to the legacy of three anonymous icon painters, also represents a serious contribution. And this is not the only one.

So far, analyzing the mechanisms of creation of works of Athonite art in the Balkans, the author has already defined the meaning of the *"huge taxidiotic network of Mount Athos monasteries"* (pp. 310-315) which will be the focus of the next chapter: **VI.**

**Ways in which the works of Athonite icon painters made their way in our country.** Here clearly defined are the processes by which works of monks from Mount Athos spread throughout all parts of the empire, without necessarily the authors to have left their workshops. At the expense of the hitherto overestimated importance of pilgrimage, Kuyumdzhiev brilliantly proved the leading role of the taxidiotic institution (respectively the network of monastic meteochia throughout the peninsula) in ordering and delivering the Athonite works. Analyzing the role of private donors, he registered the presence of many mixed forms between private donor orders of icons, subsequently delivered through the taxidiotic network. As a result - the idea of Mount Athos as an art center during the period is filled with new content.

Here the second general contribution of the dissertation stands out. In fact, throughout the work, the dozens of original hypotheses related to the personality of the icon painters and the attribution of their works logically derive from the two basic theses of the author, that clarify: 1. The organization of creative activity in the two monastic kellia in Karya; 2. The organization of the distribution of the Athonite icon-painting production through the taxidiotic institution. And they reformatted on a new, completely objective and stable basis the whole methodology of the science of church art in our country during the period, greatly facilitating the efforts of its future researchers.

Finally - in view of the requirements for a competition for acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor of Art Studies" – I should share the following findings:

The dissertation fully meets the high criteria for awarding the academic degree. It is original, entirely contributing and radically puts on new foundations the notions of the so-called "Athonite art", its representatives, their work and the mechanisms by which the system of donorship and distribution of Athonite icon paintings in the Balkans operates. One can foresee that its publication will cause a strong response in the professional circles both in our country and in other Orthodox countries in the

Balkans; such work appears once every decade to push forward the development of the humanities in new directions.

As for the required parameters, the competition was conducted in accordance with the legal requirements; the abstract correctly and accurately synthesizes the structure and content of the text; the list of contributions summarizes the most significant scientific achievements in the dissertation; publications on the topic are quite sufficient, and - as can be seen from the list of citations (far incomplete, by the way) - some of the author's theses are already circulating in the academic spheres, stimulating the research of the Bulgarian and international colleagues.

In view of all this, I strongly recommend to the esteemed scientific jury to award Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhev the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences".

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