

OPINION

On the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhiev PhD

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

For awarding the academic degree Doctor of Sciences

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The dissertation work presented for examination contains 414 pages in a PDF format, which means that actually the number of standard pages is much greater. The subject of the dissertation is of exceptional interest and it is important for understanding better our past. But I will allow myself the liberty to state that the title does not fully reflect the richness of the work. Thus formulated, it sounds like a presentation of the works of a certain circle of artists (in this case icon painters), and not a complete rethinking of the culture of an era or at least one element of its artistic presentation. I believe that this is one of the essential achievements of the study proposed for discussion. The dissertation covers six chapters, including a brief introduction and conclusion. A long list of references and instructions for the origin of the illustrations, which are located in the text itself.

I am not an art studies expert and in this opinion I will limit myself to highlight a few elements of the dissertation that impressed me and about which I feel a little more competent to express my opinion. Before that I would like to say that I think that in the dissertation two directions of search can be distinguished, which, however, are not always visibly differentiated and specified in the text, but are discussed in different parts and on different occasions. One is related to the characteristic features of the culture of the period under consideration, I would say its identity and the location of the various works or icon painters in this framework, as well as the problems of historiographical understanding of this culture; the other is related to the specific study of individual icon painters and their works. Let's try to follow them in the exposition of the dissertation!

As I noted, the **introduction** is very short and does not represent an introduction to the study, but rather specifies in advance some of its parameters: time range, types of works on which the dissertation is based, etc. Of greatest importance for the perception of the text is the preliminary definition of the terms used such as "Athonite icon painters" (those who received their education on Mount Athos) and "external icon painters" (who are related or have worked on Mount Athos without belonging to one of the workshops there). This of course is understood from the text itself, but the preliminary clarification

only helps and does not bore the presentation. The other important element outlined in the introduction is the indication of the importance for the study of the roads along which the art of the Athonite ateliers spreads in today's Bulgarian lands.

The **second chapter** is an overview of research on the topic, which is systemized thematically. Usually the historiographical parts of such large works are a marginal part of them, if - of course - the study itself is not historiographical in nature. Here I will not dwell on the fact that usually in other cases they show mostly the author's acquaintance with the previous literature and are an expression of a special kind of correctness. The case of A. Kuyumdzhiev's dissertation proposed for defense is not like that, or at least for a reader like me it is not like that. As far as I personally perceive the work not only as collected and processed material, but as a revision of many "established" stereotypes about the character of a whole epoch, the presentation of historiography acquires special significance and it is embodied in the text of the chapter. In fact, this is explained by the author himself at the beginning. Without attempting to exhaustively trace the literature on art coming from or in connection with Mount Athos, the author of the dissertation presents the different views in the older art literature on the history of art studies and those in the newer one, defining the boundary between them in the 1990s. In the first period, the emphasis is obviously on the "national" and "national character" of both the patron's work and the works themselves, and their evaluation is based on processes, some of which were not actually started at the time and which have nothing in common with the values of the age, but rather are related to our age when the respective authors write. The second period is associated with a certain liberation of thought and creative pursuits, but it brings a new opposition between "our/local" and "foreign". In connection with what has been said is also the tendency for "Bulgarianization" of Athonite icon painters on the basis of "arguments" such as patronage, place of works and others. In this context, the author offers an important clarification of the identity of the "Athonite icon painter" in several aspects.

I would say that the study of the "Athonite ateliers style", to which a separate part of the first chapter is devoted, is integrally connected with the part about identity and in general with shaping the view of the art of Mount Athos in opposition or at least distinguishing it from what is connected with the territory outside the monastic republic. I must admit that this matter is not that familiar to me, but it is undoubtedly quite impressive that the author diligently follows the terms and concepts used, which - being heterogeneous and used differently by individual authors - do not facilitate, but rather make the problem difficult.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters represent the true body of the dissertation, where the various icon painters are considered – their creative work as well as their authorship, real or possible connections in one way or another with Mount Athos. The first of these three chapters is devoted to the icon painters of Mount Athos after 1750. Defining the icon painters as such requires the presence of several parameters related

to the formation and life of the person himself. These are the training in one of the Athonite workshops, the fact that these are monks belonging to the main monasteries or other communities and to monastic ranks, that they live on Mount Athos, although they might travel to fulfill orders or for other reasons, etc. Chapter four presents the icon painters associated with Mount Athos without having been formed there and without belonging to the two ateliers there. And chapter five looks at the known or anonymous painters associated with Mount Athos. The workshops themselves, the different icon painters and their works and other problems related to them are considered. This study is undoubtedly one of the key contributing elements of the dissertation, and if I give it relatively less space in my opinion here, it is because I have nothing to add to the presentation, much less what to criticize. It strikes me, however, that here too we find manifestations of some of the shortcomings in the study of the period and of this subject in general, which the author points out in his historiographical review. Some of his contributions are related to the new attribution of various works, which in turn is a response to previous erroneous or deliberate attributions of them to icon painters, who are or were easier to declare "Bulgarian".

Chapter six traces the ways of penetration of the works of the masters of Mount Athos in today's Bulgarian lands. The significance of the travelling Orthodox monks, the metochions of the monasteries of Mount Athos in the Bulgarian lands, the ktetor's orders and the pilgrimage icons are presented separately. Of course, this is not an annex to the work, but an integral part of it, without which our understanding of the previous presentation would be incomplete.

I believe that the significance of a scientific work is determined not only by its value as a specific or generalizing study, but also by the perspectives it provides for further research on the topic or related issues. In my opinion, A. Kuyumdzhiev's dissertation has exactly such qualities. Unfortunately, I will point out here these points, mainly related to the research proposed in the second chapter, and not for anything else, but because I do not feel competent enough to discuss these topics in specific studies for individual ateliers and icon painters. Our historical science (I include here not only specifically "history", but also the historical parts of art studies, philological sciences, philosophy, etc.) should have grown up to overcome some approaches, positions and to comprehend the social significance of academic research that is more inherent in the nineteenth century and the problems facing the then emerging nations. The phenomenon called "Renaissance" is one of them - both its dating and its meaning. The work of A. Kuyumdzhiev, which is a specific study, provides an opportunity to take a different look at the era, as well as the formation of the nation in general. Undoubtedly, art, literature and education are related to this. The rationalization of the phenomenon of Mount Athos, or at least of the art created there, suggests some other problems related to the period, such as the nature of Ottoman rule, the "Phanariots" (who, like the monastic republic, have a legacy from previous eras), the role of the Church and

church struggles, etc. I believe that the proposed research methodology with correct understanding and study of historical phenomena in various fields of culture, which we find in the dissertation, can serve as a model and example.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the attached documents and information give a complete picture of the author's work and his scientific development and meet the requirements of the law. Based on them, it can be concluded that the required procedures have been followed. Considering all this, together with the views already expressed above in this opinion on the quality of the dissertation, give me reason to vote for awarding Dr. Alexander Stoyanov Kuyumdzhev the scientific degree "Doctor of Arts", as well as to allow myself to call others members of the scientific jury to also give their positive vote.

Sofia,

January 6th, 2021

SIGNATURE:

/Ivan Al. Biliarski/