

OPINION

On the dissertation for awarding the academic degree Doctor of Sciences,

Professional direction *Art Studies and Fine Arts*, 8.1, *Art Theory*

Doctoral candidate: Alexander Kuyumdzhev, Institute of Art Studies

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

By: Corresponding Member of BAS, Prof. Ivanka Gergova

A. Kuyumdzhev's dissertation has a volume of 414 pages which includes also the illustrations, numbering about 800. The structure of the text includes an introduction, six chapters, conclusion and a bibliography.

Undoubtedly the subject of the thesis is very important for the history of Orthodox art on the Bulgarian lands and so far has not been the subject of special scientific interest in this volume. The reasons why in the past the works of Athonite icon painters in our country have not been specially studied are clear. These icon painters very rarely signed, their works, on Mount Athos itself were unknown, unpublished, or the publications were inaccessible to Bulgarian researchers. During the last few decades the picture has been changed drastically - a huge number of mural ensembles, icons, documentary sources from the monastic republic have been published and these publications are available. By the way, the vast amount of available material is not enough to attract research interest, nor is it a guarantee of success, but rather a challenge that A. Kuyumdzhev has accepted. It should be noted that he has been dealing for years with the work of individual Athonite icon painters in our country, and has a series of publications, including a monograph - on the frescoes in the church "St. Nikola" in the town of Elena.

Although there is no special study on Athonite art in Bulgarian literature, there are many and often contradictory opinions published about the authorship of individual works, as well as some generalizations about the nature of Athonite art. The dissertation's first goal is to look into the existing opinions not only in our, but also in foreign literature about the nature of the Athonite art and its perception. These ideas have been very carefully, in detail and comprehensively reviewed, compared and critically analyzed. A number of erroneous opinions about the Bulgarian origin of some of the icon painters from Mount Athos have been rejected with arguments. A. Kuyumdzhev's starting point is very original: for Athonite icon painters (in the selected period from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 19th century) can be accepted only those trained in the two studios of Mount Athos: those headed by Macarius of Galatia and Nicephorus of Carpenisi, where the students are necessarily monks or become monks. In addition to these true Athonite icon painters, he distinguishes between those who come to Mount Athos from various Balkan

territories to work, calling them "tied with Mount Athos" and those who are supposed to be associated with it. This "hierarchical system" built by Kuyumdzhiev could be considered too meticulous, but it is adequate to his intentions. And they are to find on Bulgarian territory works by icon painters that worked on Mount Athos, to attribute them and finally to make summaries of the way in which these works came and of their perception and significance.

A very important contribution of the dissertation is the discovery and attribution of a really huge number of works from all over Bulgaria, some of which are either lost today or have not been published so far. The work of attributing works of Orthodox painting is difficult and often risky, due to the similarity in the style of icon painters working together, the changes in the style of the same icon painter over time, and the use of low-quality photographs as comparative material. Kuyumdzhiev has made also corrections to some of his earlier attempts in this regard. But many of his new attributes are compelling, and they are sure to remain authoritative for quite a long time to come. I will mention some of them: the royal icons on the iconostasis in the Metropolitan Church in Samokov, attributed to the painter Nicephorus; the frescoes in the Rila Monastery temples from the end of the 18th century and a large number of iconostasis sets from the monastery from the same time and many others. For the first time in the Bulgarian art literature the name of the little-known icon painter Dositej from Pecs was introduced, as well as of some other lesser-known painters who worked on Mount Athos.

Of fundamental significance is the last chapter of the work, which analyzes the importance of travelling monks for the distribution of Athonite art in our lands, as well as some Mount Athos monasteries as intermediaries between guarantors/ktetors and icon painters.

I believe that the dissertation of A. Kuyumdzhiev is innovative as a topic, original as approach, very rich in facts and entirely contributing. I recommend that the paper be published. In view only of the future improvement of the text, I would like to formulate some questions and remarks. It is not clear to me why the workshop of Dionysius of Fournas is excluded from the chronological framework and the author's concept of the Athonite icon painting, moreover, that his and his students' icons are already found on our territory. Hermeneia of Dionysius gives valuable information not only about the methods of teaching in the Athos atelier, but also about an explicitly exposed aesthetics, on which the Athonite art is based at the beginning of the 18th century.

Minor remarks can be made regarding the facts. For example, when it is said that icons by painters from Mount Athos originate from the Vidin church "St. Petka" because one of them is in the church today, it should be borne in mind that Osman Pazvantoglu turned the church into a smithy and this put an end to its functioning as a temple for a very long time and certainly its earlier icons were removed. I will not

dwell on other similar small inaccuracies. I would only recommend avoiding the Greekism "Vrefokratusa" in relation to the Mother of God.

I disagree more seriously about the definition of the icon painter Hristo Dimitrov as a master of local significance and the categorical opinion that it was not possible for him to have studied at Mount Athos. The opinion that Neofit Rilski, defining him as a master trained at Mount Athos, is a kind of falsification is not convincing. Of course, the personality of Hristo Dimitrov is not in the center of attention in the dissertation, but he is important for the history of Bulgarian art from the Renaissance and deserves further efforts to analyze his work and to explain the striking similarities with the style of some icon painters from Mount Athos.

Finally, I will repeat that I consider the dissertation of A. Kuyumdzhev "Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)" as a comprehensive and contribution study of an important topic in art history, rich in facts, correcting a series of old misconceptions, statements and attributions. At the same time, the dissertation reflects the achievements of modern science, tracing, using and critically considered publications, even from the most recent period, related to the Athonite art from the discussed period. I recommend to the esteemed members of the scientific jury to award Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in the specialty "Art Studies and Fine Arts", 8.1, Theory of Arts, for which I will vote with confidence.

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