

OPINION

On the dissertation for acquiring the academic degree Doctor of Science

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

Author of the dissertation: Ass. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhiev PhD

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Ass. Prof. A. Kuyumdzhiev has presented a fully individual and original work, entitled *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)* for acquiring the academic degree "Doctor of Art Studies" in the professional direction 8.1 THEORY OF ARTS, SPECIALTY ART STUDIES AND FINE ARTS (414 pages, including the references and illustration). The candidate has the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" and meets the minimum national requirements in the field. He has a total of 7 publications that fully correspond to the topic of the dissertation, all published. Based on them, he has been cited 15 times. These facts allow the focus to be turned to the dissertation itself with its theoretical and practical contributions.

To acquire this scientific degree, the dissertation is required to have clearly stated theoretical contributions. The author has set out such in the aims, tasks and methodology of work. It consists of 6 chapters, a conclusion, a bibliographic apparatus and numerous illustrations. An important theoretical contribution of Kuyumdzhiev is the clarification of the scope and meaning of the operational key term, set out in the very title – *Athonite Icon Painters*, and the resulting concept of *Athonite style*. Given the great importance of Mount Athos for all aspects of Bulgarian spiritual life during the Middle Ages, the Pre-Renaissance and the Renaissance, he seeks to define the name in an analytical statement, which criticizes some ideologically colored opinions from the recent past and some inaccurate statements of the present. As a result of a wide exposition of the many aspects of perception of the term Athonite the author concludes that it is wrong to "nationalize" Athonite intentionally, but it is necessary to reveal the inner artistic essence of works created on Mount Athos or by people trained in Athos. In this regard, he specifies the possible relations of the painters with Mount Athos in three key categories: trained on Mount Athos in the specified period; painters associated with Mount Athos; anonymous painters. I believe that such specification has enabled the author to be factually accurate and methodologically comprehensive, since Mount Athos is seen not just as a geographical locus, but as a certain stage in the history of art on the Balkans. I consider the broad historical-social macro-framework in which the

problem is considered to be a particular contribution of the author. The Athonite school of fine arts in the chosen chronological section functions depending on processes in social history, such as church donation, which is an expression of personal rather than national prestige; it is influenced by the pilgrimage and the sacred status of the monasteries of Mount Athos, etc. In short, the terms reflect the history of Mount Athos as a sacred place, inspiring literature and arts of the Balkans, and not only. At first glance, it seems somewhat wasteful to explain the national biases (and this for a period of incomplete nation-building) of Bulgarian science; by the way, they are such not only in terms of art, but also in everything related to spirituality. But for the author this is a methodical statement of paramount importance, the theory behind his exposition. I cannot disagree with him from my experience as a philologist that ethnic and national biases interfere with the objectivity of scientific pursuits and are far from corresponding to the value system of historical epochs where religious paradigm dominates. And the frescoes and icons - the specific objects of study in the work, are the result of church art, ergo, are the result of this same Christian spiritual paradigm. Therefore, the search for the parameters of the *Athonite style* as an artistic essence, and not which ethnic group or whose national tradition is served, is a clear and impartial scientific task. The only thing that I personally felt lacking in these initial methodological statements is a brief overview with an emphasis on the period itself - what was happening outside Mount Athos in the Bulgarian spiritual space then, the main, general trends in spiritual life. This, of course, is only a shared subjective opinion.

Secondly, I believe that the theoretical underpinnings of the work find good practical coverage in additional source data: for example, from the painter's beadroll, in some of which the impressive array of several thousand donor names gives an idea of social stratification; from the signatures of the painters - a reliable guide in clarifying the terminology, etc. Explaining why it is difficult to define the term *Athonite icon painter*, the author practically creates a database based on reliable criteria. Thus, as a result of "cleaning" the problem fields in the analysis, Kuyumdzhiev achieves a clear definition of the period indicated in the title. He focuses on the two leading ateliers of the last quarter of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century - Nicephorus of Karpenisi and Macarius of Galatia, providing as complete information as possible about their students and their works. In the actual exposition, in a relatively uniform way and with the aim of maximum completeness, separate studies on each icon painter have been introduced. Vast amount of information has been collected. The facts in the current state of research and unresolved issues are highlighted everywhere. For example, the monk Mitrophan of Chios, who worked for the Rila Monastery, Vidin, Samokov and Zheravna, is the alleged author of the icon of Christ from Zheravna, which raises problems about its dating (p. 248, where a possible philological question of mixing the two i is commented, the so-called octal and decimal). The analysis of each icon painter is complex - from historical facts to

specifics in detail. In practice, these are independent sketches on each icon painter and his production, which create the impression of integral and structural stability of the work.

I would like to specifically mention the chapter related to the ways of penetration of works by Mount Athos icon painters into the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule (I prefer this expression to "in our country"). It is valuable in elucidating the mechanisms of taxidote and pilgrimage, patronage and individual procurement, and is a contribution to the overall cultural history of the period. It seems to me not by chance that most of the families involved in this case are derived from Hadji (Hadji Valcho from Bansko, Hadjitsenovi from Vidin, etc.). In many places, the author fills in the gaps in the knowledge of an icon, especially in the absence of a signature, date or name of the ktetor.

The final result of the work is the opportunity through the many specific details and studies on individual painters and works to reveal the scale of the influence of Athonite ateliers and the following of the old Orthodox Christian tradition. I will give the final word to the specialists, but since the phenomenon of Mount Athos is cultural generally speaking, I believe that the work of A. Kuyumdzhiev is a contemporary, analytical and critically meaningful contribution to the role of Mount Athos in the Bulgarian fine arts of the Pre-Renaissance and Renaissance. It can and would be useful for a number of interdisciplinary research.

For me, this thesis has a few more positive features. First, the combinability and extraction of information from different types of sources, which becomes clear from the list of references, where there are cited historians, philologists, art critics, archivists, general encyclopedic data. Second, with the abundance of illustrations placed in the right place, it practically looks like a book. I highly recommend publishing it, having in mind this high degree of print readiness. I especially want to highlight the professional ethics of the candidate, manifested in the correct citation of all persons who have provided him with images or information.

The abstract corresponds to the content and structure of the work and in a synthesized way presents its main contributions.

As a result of all that I have stated above, I believe that based on the theoretical and practical contributions of the evaluated dissertation *Works of Athonite Icon Painters in Bulgaria (1750-1850)* its author **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhiev** can be awarded the degree of "Doctor of Science". I will confidently vote for this.

Date: 04.01.2021

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