

## REVIEW

For the dissertation of NONA KRASTEVA PETKOVA on the subject  
**REPOUSSE COVERS OF THE BOOK OF GOSPELS FROM THE  
BULGARIAN LANDS (16<sup>th</sup> - first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century)**

For awarding the educational and academic degree "**DOCTOR**" academic specialty  
*Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1 Art Theory*

Academic advisor: Prof. Dr. Biserka Penkova, Sofia, 2020

**Reviewer: Associate Member of BAS, Prof. Elka Georgieva Bakalova, DSc**

1. The first indisputable scientific contribution of Nona Petkova's dissertation, with a total volume of 332 pages, is the choice of the **object of research**. The material selected is particularly valuable because it has captured significant aspects of the development of national consciousness of Bulgarians during the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, while being little studied. When we think and talk about this historical period in Southeastern Europe, we have to bear in mind that religion and language are the basic components of an emerging national identity according to the corresponding concept of German Romanticism. That is why religious realities and related issues are the focus of research interest throughout the Balkan region - in Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece - and are currently of intense research in all these countries. Any topic of cultural and religious affiliation that is inextricably linked is proving extremely relevant. In this line of thought, I would like to point out that Nona Petkova chose the most appropriate research approach to the repoussé covers of Gospels, considering them as a projection and function of Christian ideology in their natural and possibly most complete dogmatic-liturgical and historical-cultural context.

This **task** is undoubtedly ambitious and difficult, but it fully complies with current trends and standards in art studies. In the repoussé covers of the book of gospels from the sixteenth to the first half of the eighteenth century, essential information about the specifics of the religious life and art of the Bulgarians was "encoded", and so far it has not been the subject of a systematic, generalizing study. In fact, there are a considerable number of individual studies that create a sufficiently attractive picture of the iconographic and artistic merits of these cult objects and are an absolute pillar for modern researchers. Here I will highlight as an example only some of the

studies of Assoc. Member of BAS Prof. Mila Santova, published in the early 1980s, as: *24 Repoussé of Gospels*<sup>1</sup> and her study of the *Chiprovtsi Discos*<sup>2</sup>.

As I have already noted, in the dissertation of Nona Petkova, the repoussé of the gospel are first examined as a projection and function of Christian ideology, i.e. in the dogmatic-liturgical context. This approach predetermines the theological character of the introduction, which gives a clear idea of the symbolism and role of the gospel in general in the liturgical ritual, and hence of the functions and meaning of its decoration. Here's what the author writes: "The liturgical and dogmatic meaning of the gospel book dictates the practice of shrouding both its covers, and their decoration in earlier centuries may include a central cross with a rich floral ornament, as well as images of Christ Pantocrator and of the praying Holy Virgin in full height. Later, the arrangements of the precious covers also include the compositions of Deesis, the Crucifixion of Christ and Descent into Hell, which in a further stage are already surrounded by frames with images of evangelists." (Introduction, page 5). The summary study itself is combined with a detailed examination of the individual iconographic variants of the images by types. The conclusions are based on the analysis of important monuments, on which the concepts and hypotheses of the author are built, accompanied by precisely selected visual documentation. In addition, Nona Petkova not only knows and critically uses all the publications and research so far, but also in many cases, as if by the way, but in fact categorically, reinterprets a number of data and even introduces new sources in academic circulation.

2. **The structure** of the dissertation work fully corresponds to the set goals, and is consistent with the material found on our lands. The chronological scope of the work is determined by the preserved metalwork covers. According to the research of the doctoral student, "the earliest monument that has reached us from the territory of Bulgaria is the metalwork cover of the Krupnick Gospel of the goldsmith Matthew from 1577"<sup>3</sup>, and the latest precisely dated monument is the precious cover of the Etropole Gospel of 1758<sup>4</sup>.

Nona Petkova has done serious research work to present a significant number of repoussé covers of gospels and - as far as possible - various data on both the historical context in which these cult objects were created and their decoration. All this information is systematized in the catalog (p.243-288), which is a very important part of the thesis. It contains 59 articles, each of which presents a single

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<sup>1</sup> Сантова, М. *24 обкови на евангелия*. Издателство „Български художник“, София 1984

<sup>2</sup> Сантова, М. *Чипровският дискос*. АИ „М.Дринов“, София 1997. See also Бакалова, Е. Чипровският дискос (За книгата на М. Сантова „Чипровският дискос“, Изд. „М. Дринов“, С.1997) – *Списание на БАН*, кн.1-2/1998, 98-100

<sup>3</sup> Petkova, N. **REPOUSSE COVERS OF THE BOOK OF GOSPELS FROM THE BULGARIAN LANDS (16<sup>th</sup> - first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century**, dissertation), 243-246.

<sup>4</sup> Petkova, N., *Ibid*, 287-288.

specimen with data about its size, the material from which it was made, its origin and its location. Where possible, the author indicates the available literature and comments on the dating given therein. A careful review of the catalog of monuments, which includes 25 metalwork covers, reveals that special publications (prior to Nona Petkova's work) are devoted to only 4 of the repoussé covers. There are no separate publications for the other 21 covers, and they are viewed in varying degrees of detail in more general or specialized studies of the goldsmith tradition to which they are related.

The precious gospel covers included in the study are presented in collections - in fact, according to their relation to the respective goldsmith's school functioning in the period from the sixteenth to the first half of the eighteenth century, in each of them the objects are arranged chronologically. First, precisely dated monuments are presented, followed by those that are dated according to their stylistic features within broader chronological limits. Where appropriate, description, literature, archival sources and photographs are presented. The author uses all kinds of data to date the undated hitherto precious gospel covers, including iconography and technical methods for framing. In many cases, she corrects the dating of some monuments with the presentation of new arguments. And one of the repoussé covers - No. 10 in the Catalog - the so-called Second Krušedol repoussé, which is the precious gospel cover from the Monastery of Krušedol in Serbia dated 1656, was first published by Nona Petkova.

As the dissertation student quite rightly points out, "the precious covers of gospels that have reached us must be considered not only as an artistic phenomenon, but also in a historical and cultural context. They are a product of the environment in which they were created and are part of the processes that took place in society at that time. " (p.197).

It should mention that Petkova considers it her duty to present a description of the important goldsmiths' centers, and I would particularly emphasize the brilliant characteristic that she makes, for example, of Sofia as a mixed-population goldsmith's center, including using Ottoman-Turkish documents (see. 49-58).

Of particular importance is the documented visual material, which is optimally presented in the illustrative application. I consider it a very successful decision of the researcher to focus only on those precious gospel covers, which can be defined as local production or have proven to have functioned on the Bulgarian lands, without considering the objects brought from abroad after the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Nona Petkova's published articles and studies on the topic of her dissertation - 7 in number - are in renowned collections and periodicals and give a sufficiently clear idea of the problematics and contributions of her work.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to underline the following:

The presented work deals with interesting, mostly unexplored or poorly researched material related to our Christian cultural heritage. The problems raised have been fully and comprehensively addressed. It is important to note that there is no publication of Nona Petkova that does not bring new information both in fact and in interpretation. The material collected, analyzed, systematized and published by the author is a sure and gracious basis for the work of every specialist in the field of Christian culture. In other words, her research is extremely valuable to the humanitarian studies in general.

Nona Petkova has conducted a particularly in-depth study to collect and systematize various data on all known so far, or found by her, precious Gospel covers of the chosen period. The dissertation student makes a serious attempt - as far as possible - to reconstruct the historical context in which the monuments under study were created. This rich information is reflected in the extremely carefully crafted catalog.

It is evident that the author knows very well the presented monuments and the existing literature about them. She has appropriately mastered and applied the theoretical statements and methodology corresponding to the material under consideration. From a documentary point of view, last but not least, I would like to reiterate the importance of the provided illustration material.

I strongly recommend that **this work be published as a monograph as soon as possible**. With the new visual material included in academic circulation, with the relevance of the problems related to the history not only of the Bulgarian mentality and culture, but of the whole Orthodox Christian culture, this book will be a serious contribution to science. It will have a stimulating effect, it will serve, I am convinced, as a starting point for further research, both in the history of Bulgarian art and in related scientific disciplines. And this is important not least because of the disturbing tendency of frequent thefts of sacred vessels from our churches.

All this gives me reason to suggest to the honorable members of the Academic Jury to award Nona Krasteva Petkova the educational and academic degree "*Doctor*", for which I will vote with conviction.

Reviewer:

Assoc. Member of BAS, Prof. DSc Elka Bakalova

Sofia, February 18, 2020