

REVIEW

On the dissertation of Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva on the subject:

Paintings in the Temples Built after the Liberation till 1941 on the Territory of Present-day City of Sofia

For receiving the educational and scientific degree **DOCTOR** in the *specialty Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1. Theory of Arts*

Scientific advisor: Prof. Dr. Emmanuel Moutafov

The dissertation work of Veselina Yoncheva covers a total volume of 501 pages, including an introduction, five chapters, conclusion and a bibliography of 241 titles. The four articles on the subject of the dissertation have been published in renowned collection in our country and in periodicals abroad. They give a clear enough idea of the issue and the contributions of the work of the doctoral student. The abstract accurately reflects the text of the dissertation. I believe that, in general, the materials presented by the PhD student fully meet all the requirements for the procedure.

The choice of the topic is very appropriate, as it is too poorly researched and studied so far. Regardless of the existence of separate publications, mostly for representative monuments such as the temple-monument "St. Alexander Nevsky", most of the churches presented in the dissertation are in fact partially studied or completely unknown, and their history and interior decoration remain unpublished. Undoubtedly, the goal of collecting, processing and analyzing all these temples is ambitious and to some extent goes beyond the usual doctoral thesis, but Veselina Yoncheva has done an excellent job with this complex task.

Limiting the territorial scope of the studied monuments is logical and justified, since Orthodox art in Bulgaria after the Liberation has not been well studied, and generalizing researches are missing or are irrevocably obsolete. Therefore, any extension of the geographical scope of the topic would lead to the presence of too many monuments unknown to science, which would lead to the defocusing of the text, as it could not fully cover them.

With extreme hard work and precision, Veselina Yoncheva has conducted an in-depth study in order to collect, systematize and summarize the material presented in the dissertation. Serious field work has been carried out, many monuments, often difficult to access, have been studied in detail on site. Especially important is the effort to attract a variety of archival documentation, which allows her to present detailed information showing the nature of state cultural policy during the period and tracing the competition mechanisms in awarding contracts for construction and decoration of temples in post-

Liberation Sofia. Thanks to the archival materials, a number of issues related to the participation of various creative teams in the overall decoration of churches, the style and contribution of individual authors, and even their aesthetic views, which turn out to be almost mandatory part of state policy in the field of culture during that period have been uncovered. Against the general background stands out the definition of the role of "foreign" artists, mostly Russian, whose participation in church painting is actually part of a much larger creative presence in various spheres of artistic life in our country.

The structure of the dissertation is impressive and shows the doctoral student's ability to present the facts in the context of their historical and artistic significance. After the usual introductory parts, examining the state of the research on the topic so far and the research methods, all the monuments have been subjected to a detailed analysis from different angles. The historical context is enriched with an overview of the ancient Christian significance of the city, the sources related to it, the presence of relics of saints and its general cultural and religious character. This is followed by a look at the artistic production related to church construction during the period under consideration, and then special attention is paid to architecture. As a result of all this, a summary review of church life in Sofia from the Liberation to World War II has been made, and in a rich historical context, all ending with a new additional detailed section on church painting, presented through the prism of individual artists and teams, that have worked during that period. Thus, the topic is considered from different points of view - historical, artistic and biographical (prosopographical) and this allows us to draw much more accurate and complete conclusions, as each studied aspect brings an additional idea of church construction and painting from the period in our country. As a result of this approach, the PhD student not only provides the first systematic study of temple architecture and painting in Sofia from 1878 to 1941, but also brings out the leading artists, studios and teams that worked in church painting during the period. In this sense, some new attributions of works made by Veselina Yoncheva become especially important. Together with the presentation of unpublished and hitherto unknown to science Sofia churches, they already acquire an underlined art contribution, which makes the dissertation a rare example of successfully implemented, and not just stated, interdisciplinary study.

Last but not least, some theoretical problems presented in the text of the dissertation should be mentioned. The most important among them is undoubtedly the filling with meaning of the clichéd definition that the period following the Liberation is characterized by the replacement of the Revival icon painters with academically educated artists, who became leading figures in the performance of church decorations. Backed up by numerous examples, facts and works, this statement acquires real value precisely through V. Yoncheva's dissertation, clearly contrasting the capital's church art with the provincial one, which is not subject to such strict state control and

obligations. This, in turn, will give us a chance in the future to develop topics related to the institutionalization of artistic life in our country in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, which is the main reason for the changes in church art during the period, although cultural policy for painting of temples to be officially regulated only after 1925.

A catalog of the monuments that have been examined is also included in the doctorate. It is extremely important, not only because of its volume, but also because it is an integral part of the scientific contribution of the dissertation. It presents 55 churches, forming the basis on which the whole study has been based. All churches are described in articles of different volumes, and in a sense this is a second dissertation, placed within the main doctorate. The inevitable duplication of information in these articles is minimized, which further makes the "catalog" part significant in itself.

The illustration material that has been included is not less important than the dissertation itself. The illustrative appendix to the text contains 261 photos, through which all the monuments are optimally presented, as well as their art decoration.

In conclusion, it should also be stated that the text of the dissertation is well written, in a professional but also accessible language, which facilitates the understanding of the topic. The literature is cited correctly, the bibliography is clear and concise. After some stylistic editing, the work would be ready even for publication as a monograph, as the relevance of this issue, together with the included rich illustration material will be an undoubted contribution to the study of church history of Sofia and will be the first attempt to present it in its entirety. Such a book will be of interest to a wide audience and will have a stimulating "scientific" significance as a starting point for further research both in general on the subject and in detail on each of the little-known churches. The encyclopedic character of some parts of the text is also important, which will further contribute to a more detailed acquaintance with the cultural and historical heritage of Sofia.

All this gives me reason to propose to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to award Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", for which I will vote with conviction.

Sofia 21.01.2021

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Kuyumdzhiev