

OPINION

From Assoc. Prof. D.Sc. Blagovesta Ivanova Ivanova

on the dissertation of Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva

PAINTINGS IN THE TEMPLES BUILT AFTER THE LIBERATION TILL 1941 ON THE TERRITORY OF PRESENT-DAY CITY OF SOFIA

for acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor, academic specialty

Art Studies and Fine Arts

8.1 THEORY OF ARTS

Institute of Art Studies, BAS

The subject of the dissertation is dedicated to the study of painting in the temples in the modern city of Sofia, which were built from the Liberation till 1941. Until now it has not been the subject of independent research interest. The period is essential for the development of Bulgarian culture and since it is long enough in the dissertation it is properly divided into three stages, according to the accepted general chronology.

The study has a text volume of 125 pages and a catalogue of 357 pages with 55 churches included. Looking at the catalogue it becomes clear that it is the basis of the study, so I would like to examine it first. It is presented chronologically and thematically as the thematic side - the painting is leading in the arrangement. The sites are accompanied by descriptions of the planning schemes, their reconstructions and the materials used; iconostasis; iconostasis icons and murals. In the different parts the temples are arranged according to the pictorial material: first of all, those from the period under consideration, together with the painting in them, as they constitute the main core of the research. Then follow: "Temples built before the Liberation, which after 1878 acquired icons made in the period under consideration", "Temples built in the period 1878-1941 and were destroyed during the Second World War, after which were rebuilt and there are icons from the original temples", "Temples that were built in the period 1878-1941 the icons and frescoes of which are not preserved, there is no information about them". The catalog also includes the building materials used and the statutes of the churches, but they are not covered by the study and do not contribute to it. I accept them only for information and as additional data for specialists dealing with the preservation of architectural heritage, as they go beyond the scope of the topic and I believe that the status does not define a temple as valuable or not for science, as indicated on p. 7. It is essential for the catalog that data have been extracted from the archives of NIICH, from CCA, from the Archives of the Sofia Diocese and from the publications. Formal descriptions have been made, which is essentially the creation of primary documentation of data with architectural graphics and new photo

documentation. Structuring and collecting the material is useful for the future work of the dissertation student, as well as for the Institute of Art Studies. The catalog is valuable because in the future its data could be used for temples, which have the status of valuable cultural heritage under the LCH for the period from the Liberation to the Second World War.

It is undoubtedly valuable to gather in one study information about church architecture and painting from the Liberation to the pre-war period and to trace the changes, starting from the late Revival tendencies after the Liberation to the next stage - eclecticism in architecture and academic realism in painting and further, national romanticism and secession. So far, painting in the cult architecture in Greater Sofia (I understand here the churches from the old villages, which gradually became neighborhoods of the capital and are included in the study) has not been considered. The introduction to the aims and objectives of the dissertation states that the work is: "an attempt to extensively study the main problems affecting church painting and architecture(s) in the period from 1878 to 1941 in Sofia." (p. 5) and "an attempt for independent study of church painting and architecture(s) in the Sofia temples" (p. 7).

Thus set, the goals and tasks refer to the synthesis between architecture and arts in all possible variants of construction and reconstruction of churches in Sofia, their frescoes and icons, including the introduction of old icons in newly built or rebuilt temples. And without all the options listed by the dissertation, the analysis of synthesis is one of the most complex tasks in architecture. A future study with an extension of the topic in terms of preserving the synthesis or its disruption in the construction and reconstruction of churches would be useful for art history and the preservation of architectural heritage.

In this concrete study, architecture is analyzed in itself in terms of its development. This was also done for painting, although it was rightly noted that in the ideological platform of the *Contemporary Art Society* the goals for heritage and synthesis were set, as M. Kirov has been rightly quoted.

The interdisciplinary approach was correctly chosen for the set goal, and the NIICH documentation was used as a method. It represents the basis on which the dissertation student approaches analytically in connection with architecture and mural decoration and conducts her own field research.

The theme is multi-dimensional, that is why it develops from the general to the specific and includes artistic circles and ateliers, as well as creative portraits and analyzes of the works of art of the artists who worked in the churches.

The first two chapters are a kind of introduction to architecture and painting and provide an overview of the general artistic context and artistic life in Sofia from the Liberation to the beginning of the Second World War. They are necessary for situating the material, contain general information about the population, artists, styles, genres,

prominent Revival authors, their place in the new artistic life, the formation of the first institutions, etc. Due to their general nature, I will not consider them.

In Chapter 3 Architecture, "Russian (foreign)" stylistics in architecture is shown on the example of the construction of the cathedral "Alexander Nevsky", the reconstruction of the church "St. Sofia", also defined as neo-Byzantine, but the style of the Russian Church is also considered, which is indicated as an expression of the Moscow church architecture of the 17th century. The Bulgarian national romanticism is considered through the concept of Anton Tornyov, and as realization – the church of the Theological Seminary of Friedrich Grünanger and "St. Nikola Sofiyski Novi" church by Tornyov, then follow the ideas and realizations of the typical projects of Alexi Nachev, etc. I accept such a follow-up of the leading styles as an overview, based on what is known in the literature. Complementing the development of architectural types and artistic trends with the small ones that follow the "traditional" (late Revival line) and showing their overcoming – churches from the Sofia quarters, contributes for the formation of an overall view in the creation of church architecture in Sofia from the 80s of the 19th century to the end of the century. It complements the general picture of Sofia's church architecture with sites in which the opposition "old city - "new city", "suburban" and "capital" trend can be traced. Vesselina Yoncheva could deepen her future research in this direction.

During the next period before and after the wars of the first decades of the 20th century the works of Alexi Nachev are considered. For the third period - the time after the wars, key moments in the development of church architecture were traced. The church "St. Paraskeva" by Tornyov is rightly noted as the new spatial core, as well as the factor of the earthquakes of the 1920s as an occasion for the creation of the standard projects of Pantaley Tsvetkov in view of the faster and cheaper church construction.

In the chapter dedicated to painting 1878-1941 (Chapter 5) the similar compositional scheme is followed. The change of trends over time is traced with the academic aspect following the founding of the State School of Painting and the important role of key figures such as Ivan Mrkvička and Anton Mitov in the creation of the national idea in icon painting. N. Asparuhova's thesis about icon painting as a factor for the transfer of the national idea is presented. Yoncheva builds her own thesis about the connection of church painting with the old Bulgarian tradition on the basis of reflections on the spirituality and material nature of images, as well as the conflict between Christian suggestion of spirituality and academic realism in the 19th, which is essentially resolved and does not need comment. The analyzes of the synthesis between architecture and painting in the aspect of the iconographic program at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and the fair conclusion about its official role with the depiction of Bulgarian saints are useful.

In the second generation of painters the synthesis in the search for the national tradition, its expression in and through the ornamentation and the inscription of the Art Nouveau

and Old Bulgarian style as a mural decoration in the architecture is emphasized, which is shown on the examples of the chapel in the Royal Palace and the church "St Seven Saints".

The same chapter deals with the problems of church painting in connection with the work of groups of masters and craft and art ateliers. The individual and team works of all leading authors from the period are traced: Ivan Mrkvička, Anton Mitov, Apostol Hristov Makriev Frachkovski, Ivan Dimitrov, Stefan Ivanov, Stefan Badzhov, Haralampi Tachev, Gospodin Zhelyazkov, Dimitar Gudzhenov, Dechko Mandov, Nikolay Rostov. Their work has been reviewed and analyzed, and frescoes and icons have been included, which have so far not attracted the interest of researchers.

The collective work of the "St. Luka" atelier has an important place in the implementation of projects and interior design in connection with the aesthetic vision of the spatial environment. In research from previous decades, church painting of the twentieth century had an isolated role, and the joint work of masters of various mastership remained underestimated as artisan. I find the reason for such an understanding in the underestimation of the work of local and "late" icon painters in the second half of the 19th century, whose successors are some of the masters working as performers and craftsmen, who stay away from the leading trends but find their place in small or peripheral orders. Therefore, this part of the study for me has the greatest application for art history. The church orders fulfilled by the authors for the temples in the capital for the period 1878-1941 are systematized and the principles of the organization of labor are traced, which gives an opportunity for future deepening of the research in this direction.

The dissertation is the first attempt to structure such an extensive material and address issues that have not so far attracted the interest of researchers. My remark is that in the scrupulous citation of the literature the opinion of the dissertation student is at times difficult to distinguish. There are also some ambiguities or unspecified concepts in the work, for example: discrepancy of names such as Dechko and Decho (Mandov), incorrectly spelled names; false dome - it is not explained why; it would be good to suppose which icon may be located above the royal doors in the iconostasis of the palace chapel; blindly quoted and unexplained statements of other authors ("The medieval manuscript decoration detail was developed and enriched - about the chapel in the royal palace, p. 493). Some of the buildings and works are analyzed only according to the descriptions of other authors, to whom Yoncheva relies, which leads to omissions in the analyzes. For example, the decoration of the apse of the chapel in the royal palace is incorrectly described (p. 493), which leads to incorrect information and its purpose is indicated in the National Gallery from 20 years ago. Most of the illustrations in the catalog do not mention the authors, although they are discussed in the text, but the catalog part, when illustrated, requires this data, as it is about attributions. Research on individual temples has not been studied in recent years, although this part has been described in great detail. Only the date is marked, without

the year of birth of Nikolay Rostovtsev, there are also omissions in the arrangement of the bibliography.

Conclusions: Extensive architectural and pictorial material has been searched for, collected and systematized for the research. Realizing the complexity of the work in processing detailed data and compiling detailed descriptions for a large number of objects, I justify the above omissions and believe that they will be taken into account and corrected in future research. The strengths of the research are the tracking of the concept of the place and role of church painting by compiling the creative portraits of the authors, the derivation of the status of the local master builders on the one hand and of the artists on the other.

The abstract corresponds to the dissertation. I accept the contributions indicated in it. A total of 4 publications were presented, two of which are in print. Their number meets the minimum requirements for the criteria of BAS and corresponds to the additional requirements for candidates for receiving doctoral degree (Appendix № 2 of the Institute of Art Studies). The abstract corresponds to the dissertation.

Recommendations: I think that Veselina Yoncheva has the potential to work on the problems of synthesis in her future research. Directing her work to the more detailed tracking of the iconographic programs with a view on the organization of the space in the various types of temples between the First and Second World Wars would be useful for art history. I recommend her to express her author's opinion more boldly in future research.

In conclusion: I propose to the esteemed jury to award Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Arts.

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