

OPINION

on the dissertation for acquiring the educational and academic degree Doctor on the topic: *Paintings in the Temples Built after the Liberation till 1941 on the Territory of Present-day City of Sofia* by Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva

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The presented dissertation *Paintings in the Temples Built after the Liberation till 1941 on the Territory of Present-day City of Sofia* has a well formulated subject.

The topic of the dissertation *Paintings in the Temples Built after the Liberation till 1941 on the Territory of Present-day City of Sofia* presented for defense is very well formulated and has not been studied in this scope. The thesis contains a main text with a volume of 125 pages and appendixes, consisting of: archival sources and bibliography (241 titles) and a catalog of the temples in the city of Sofia with a total of 261 illustrations. The structure of the work and the ratio of its parts, the largest of which is the catalog, express the initial intention of the PhD student to document today's knowledge for each of the temples with an emphasis on paintings - murals and icons. Therefore, I accept the catalog part as the main one, and not as an appendix to the dissertation.

In the **introduction** (pp. 5-12) V. Yoncheva presents the purpose and tasks of the research, the methodology, the state of the research and a review of literature. Despite some not that clear phraseology, for example: "The main method of work is by documenting the temples in question, analyzing the architecture and decoration in each of them." (p. 8), the attentive readers understand that the purpose of the study is to specify and summarize the knowledge about the temples from the period on the territory of the modern city of Sofia, with the help of archival and bibliographic sources, as well as work "in the field"/visiting and photographing the churches.

The **first and second chapters** are entitled *Historical Context* (pp. 13-22) and *Artistic Life in Sofia* (pp. 23-33), respectively, with the subtitle *Cultural Policy for Painting the Temples of the Period*. The two parts that could be merged into one - *Historical Context* (with several subchapters), present some very important moments from the Christian church history of the city from its very beginning and from the artistic life in Sofia after it was chosen as capital of the country.

Specifically, for the topic of the dissertation, the pages dedicated to the cultural policy on temples' painting in Bulgaria are especially important. V. Yoncheva notes the importance of the *Society of Icon Painters and Carvers*, established in 1925,

referring to previous research she has accomplished. In the Central State Archives, she studied the Regulations for the Construction, Painting and Decoration of the Orthodox Churches in the Kingdom in its original version and in the revised one from 1935.

Quite new is the fact that “Only artists who have received a certificate from the Holy Synod have the right to participate in the painting of churches and individual icons. Such a certificate can be obtained by the graduates of the State Academy of Arts (painting and decoration departments), who apply and successfully pass the established exam in church painting.” (p. 31). We understand that the regulation for the creating paintings in Christian churches in our country became stricter than the professional training of artists, especially after 1935. This regulation is decisive for the context of painting in the churches in the capital city.

In **chapter three** (pp. 34-56) the author presents church architecture in Sofia: briefly - the churches before the Liberation, referring to the existing literature (pp. 34-38) and in detail - those from the Liberation till 1941, summarizing the knowledge from publications on the history of architecture (pp. 38-56). The doctoral student accepts the division into three sub-periods, discusses the architectural and stylistic features of the newly built churches, confirms as most significant the trend of secession, assimilated locally with neo-romantic and neo-Byzantine characteristics, points out the realization of "traditional constructions built by folk masters", along with representative temples, designed by academically educated architects (p. 56). This architectural panorama of the Sofia churches from the Liberation to 1941 is a prerequisite for the study of painting in them.

The title of **chapter four** *Church Painting 1878 - 1941 in the City of Sofia* (pp. 57-84) essentially repeats the title of the dissertation. The presentation is organized chronologically and according to the generations of artists. There are two directions: official and ethnic-primitive, in accordance with the classification of Prof. Vera Dinova-Ruseva. Avoided could be some repetitions - for example, the paragraph on the artistic life after the Liberation (the founding of the State School of Painting and the *Society for the Preservation of Art in Bulgaria*, the role of foreign artists, etc. on pp. 59-60) - these circumstances are discussed in the second chapter *Artistic Life in Sofia* (p. 27).

Ivan Mrkvička and Anton Mitov from the first generation of church painters are commented in detail. The cathedral "St. Alexander Nevsky" and its decoration are discussed in a separate subchapter.

From the second generation, entering the artistic life and church painting after 1900, V. Yoncheva pays special attention to Stefan Badzhov, Stefan Ivanov, Haralampi Tachev and Gospodin Zhelyazkov. She discusses the artistic attitudes and ideas in the *Society of Contemporary Art*, the adoption and understanding in a new way of Art

Nouveau, as well as the competition between this society and the older *Society of Artists in Bulgaria* in terms of commissions and formal and stylistic solutions of church painting.

The third and final subchapter is denoted as *1918-1941*. We understand that this is not about the next "generation", but about church murals and icons from this period. The author could formulate a subtitle to facilitate and guide the readers. Observations and analyzes of the formal and stylistic features of painting are developed here. The author also presents influential figures in the debate on church painting from the time between the wars, such as those of Sirak Skitnik, Nikola Mavrodinov, Dechko Uzunov.

In subchapter *1918-1941* there is a separate part *The National-Primitive Direction*, which marks the activity of the painting families from the old Revival schools during the period. The author finds a specific example on the topic of the dissertation in the book by Asen Vasiliev *Bulgarian Revival Masters* (1965) - this is Alexo Vassilev, a native of Galichnik, who painted icons for churches in Gorna Banya and Dragalevtsi, as well as frescoes in the dome of the church "St. Spas" in Sofia. V. Yoncheva makes a summary of the diversity and contradictory tendencies in church painting on the territory of the modern city of Sofia during the considered period.

In **chapter five** *Artists and Teams* (pp. 85-116) the topic of the dissertation is presented through the prism of orders realized by the most prominent artists. Special attention is paid to the art atelier "St. Luka" and the *Society of Icon Painters and Carvers*.

The **conclusion** (pp. 117-125) presents a summary of the content of the chapters. A very brief comparison is made with church painting during the same period in Serbia (p. 125).

The **Catalog of Temples** - a total of 55 (pp. 144-501) is the most significant part in terms of volume and the most important contribution of the work. The catalog form allows the author to organize and systematize the collected facts. In the chronological systematization she encounters the difficulty of the differences between architecture (planning and realization), frescoes (sometimes from different periods) and icons (from different times). Therefore, after the catalog arrangement of *Temples Built in 1878 - 1941, Icons/Frescoes Made in the Period* (pp. 144-433), follow *Temples Built Before the Liberation, which after 1878 Acquired Icons Made in in the Period Under Consideration* (pp. 434-467), *Temples Built in 1878-1941 which Were Destroyed During the Second World War, and then they were Rebuilt and there are Icons from the Original Temple* (p. 468 -495) and *Temples that were Built in the period 1878-1941, their icons and frescoes are not preserved, there is no information about them* (pp. 496-501). The catalog description of each church contains the sections history, architecture, icons, frescoes, status regarding the classification as a cultural

monument, archival sources and a bibliography, which refers to the general one at the end of the main text. The V. Yoncheva has made all of the photographs from the present day.

The dissertation student knows well the literature on the subject.

The author's reference for the contributions correctly reflects the merits of the dissertation. The abstract gives an accurate idea of the content of the work.

V. Yoncheva has four publications on the topic of the dissertation, two of which - in foreign publications; three participations in scientific forums - one in Sofia and two in Paris and participation in a collective project.

Recommendations:

A further development of the researcher would benefit if the author more clearly keeps an analytical distance from the expressed assessments and views and orients the readers more clearly for her point of views on the subject. For the specific topic, it would be appropriate to make more detailed comparisons with neighboring countries in the main chapters of the dissertation.

Conclusion:

The dissertation for the first time outlines a complete picture of church painting in Sofia from the period. Huge material of various nature (publications, archives, visual documents) has been researched and organized, which is presented from different aspects: chronologically, by authors and teams, by temples. The catalog of 55 temples, part of which unpublished so far, is a significant contribution of the study. V. Yoncheva's work will undoubtedly be useful for future research, as well as for activities related to the conservation and restoration of Sofia's churches.

All the above gives grounds for awarding the educational and academic degree "Doctor" to Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva.

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