

REVIEW

By Prof. DSc Svilen Stefanov on the dissertation of the doctoral student Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva – *Paintings in the Temples Built after the Liberation till 1941 on the Territory of Present-day City of Sofia*

Veselina Yoncheva is a doctoral student at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS. Academic guidance has been provided by Prof. Emmanuel Moutafov. The Dissertation has a total volume of 499 pages – an introduction, five chapters, conclusion and a bibliography of 225 titles. A total of 261 illustrations are included. The dissertation was discussed and directed for public defense at an extended meeting of the Research Group *Medieval and National Revival*. The doctoral student has made the necessary publications on the topic of the academic work.

The author Veselina Yoncheva quite rightly begins her academic thesis with a general description of the dissertation, gradually clarifying the relevance of the study and the state of academic research on the topic. The goals and tasks are clearly formulated, as well as the object of research. The aim of the dissertation is to make an attempt to study church painting and architecture in Sofia temples in the period from the Liberation to 1941. The scope of the topic is formulated in such a way so that to examine the different ways in which church painting and architecture develops in large cities and small towns. I completely agree with the statement that so far there is no comprehensive study on the subject.

The methods of research are also specified. Material has been collected and systematized, which was later used as a basis for the analytical part. An interdisciplinary approach was chosen for it, including archiving, field and bibliographic research, attribution techniques, stylistic analysis, etc. The main method of work goes through the documentation of the temples in question, analysis of the architecture and decorations in each of them.

Chronologically, the study is limited to a period of approximately six decades. It starts with time of the Liberation of Bulgaria, which caused a rapid rise in all areas of public life. The upper limit of the studied period is when Bulgaria enters the Second World War in 1941.

The first chapter aims to introduce the reader to the general historical context in which the temples in Sofia are built and painted. The ancient history of the city is briefly considered, as related to important events for Christianity, the construction of churches on the territory of the city is traced.

The second chapter looks at the origins of artistic life in Sofia after the Liberation. Around 1878 there was almost no artistic life in the city and the author quite correctly

clarifies that gradually, especially after the unification of Eastern Rumelia with the Principality of Bulgaria, the capital began to function not only as a political but also as a spiritual center of the state. Veselina Yoncheva points out the three most significant changes in artistic life, which largely characterize the period. First, it is the fact that the icon painters from the Revival period were replaced by icon painters with academic training as leading figures in artistic life. Along with its stylistic and artistic vision, Bulgarian art also changed its plot-thematic issues. Thirdly, this is the institutionalization of artistic life with the establishment of societies, organized exhibitions, periodicals and the establishment of the State School of Painting. This chapter also discusses the cultural policy for painting the temples of the period, which was regulated only after 1925. In order to unite specialists in the field of traditional religious arts and to protect their professional interests in 1925 in Sofia was established the Society of Icon Painters and Carvers. Regulations for the construction, painting and decoration of the Orthodox churches in the Kingdom have been created, which clarified the procedure for painting the temples and obtaining the rights of the artists to perform these tasks.

Chapter three examines the architecture of the period. The doctoral student rightly points out that after the Liberation the church construction developed between the official state order and the traditional Revival architecture. At the end of the 19th century, churches of various types were built throughout the country. In terms of the official/academic line of development, the processes that church architecture goes through are differentiated during the three periods of development. The first period is from the Liberation to the beginning of the 20th century. During this first period there is a conscious policy to break the Revival architectural tradition, which is supported by the legislation by restricting the activities of masters without any official diplomas.

Thus, until the first generation of Bulgarian architects, educated abroad appeared, church architecture was entrusted to foreigners. Of greatest importance for the official trend was the architecture and artistic design of the most representative monument in Sofia, built after the Liberation – the cathedral "St. Alexander Nevsky". The second period is from the beginning of the 20th century till 1918. Church architecture passed into the hands of the first academic generation of architects. Although foreign specialists continue to work in the country, the main trends were brought out by Bulgarians, who re-evaluate what was built by foreigners and made a new attempt to understand our rich church tradition. It is characterized by the application of standard projects in the construction of Orthodox churches, and this practice continues to be relevant after 1918. The third period of development of Bulgarian church architecture and painting specified by Veselina Yoncheva is after the end of the First World War, when a new rise in the construction and painting of new temples could be seen and it lasted until 1941. During this period, it became a

typical practice for the construction to be assigned by competitions, which greatly increased the creative stimulus, and the achieved results were subjected to a wide professional and public evaluation. As representative for the period the doctoral student points out the church "St. Paraskeva", designed by architect Anton Tornyov, the church "St. Nedelya", restored according to a project by the architects Ivan Vasilyov and Dimitar Tsolov, the temple "The Intercession of the Theotokos", the work of architects Petar Markovski and Boris Bobchev.

Chapter four is dedicated to the church painting in Sofia from the period. Examined here are the main trends in church painting. Two directions of development are clarified, predetermined by the clash between the old Revival tradition and the pursuit of academic representation. According to Yoncheva, academic religious painting also goes through three periods of development. Again, the first period is from the Liberation to the beginning of the 20th century. It is known that authors such as Anton Mitov, Ivan Mrkvička and their students from the State School of Painting have an important role in the institutionalization of artistic life in Bulgaria and they impose their opinion to entrust church painting only to academically trained artists. They are the initiators of creating national art through academic visual language. According to the doctoral student, the second stage of development can be defined during the period from the beginning of the 19th century to the end of the First World War. At that time the second post-liberation generation of artists appeared. Of particular importance for painting for the period from the beginning of the century to the end of the First World War is the establishment in 1904 of the *Society of Contemporary Art*. It is quite true that one of the program goals of the *Society of Contemporary Art* is to realize a synthesis between the fine arts and architecture. This idea is reflected in the renewal of church architecture and painting in the field of facade decoration and the role of ornament in mural decoration in the interior of temples. Of particular importance for these renovations is the plastic language of secession, mainly through the work of Haralampi Tachev and Stefan Badzhov. The third period is from 1918 to 1941. Art Nouveau-decorative tendencies are observed in a significant part of icon painting in the 1920s and 1930s. The role of the stylized line is enhanced. In the 1920s, interest in Byzantine art was revived in the Balkans. Nevertheless, religious art continues to exist in its mass version as academic painting.

Chapter Five is called "Artists and Teams" and it lists chronologically the most prominent church artists, ateliers and associations that worked in Sofia after the Liberation. For the purpose of the study, the church ordinances performed by the authors for the temples in the capital for the period 1878-1941 are systematized. In detail are studied the role of artists, such as Ivan Mrkvička, Anton Mitov, Apostol Hristov Frachkovski, Ivan Dimitrov, Stefan Ivanov, Stefan Badzhov, Haralampi Tachev, Gospodin Zhelyazkov, Dimitar Gudzhenov, Dechko Mandov, Georgy Bogdanov, Nikolay Rostovtsev. The importance of the art atelier "St. Luke", under

the leadership of Apostol Hristov and Gospodin Zhelyazkov is pointed out. As well as the *Society of Icon Painters and Carvers*, founded in 1925.

In conclusion, the doctoral student summarizes everything developed in the individual chapters of the dissertation. The analysis of church construction and icon painting in Sofia in the considered period presents an opportunity to clarify how the history of the city developed after the Liberation. From the collected material and its analysis, the leading processes in the development of church painting and architecture are derived, an attempt is made for periodization. The doctoral student rightly notes that in the Balkan context, the development that Bulgarian church art goes through is not something unique compared to other neighboring countries. This paper for the first time attempts to outline the picture of church painting in Sofia from the period, by accumulating mainly facts from the creative biography of artists, to outline the main interactions with secular art in the context of the socio-political situation in the country.

In conclusion, it can be said that the doctoral student Veselina Yoncheva has presented a dissertation, which will certainly be very useful in the study of church architecture and monumental painting from the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The collected and analyzed information is important for the development of art studies of the period.

For all the above reasons, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award Veselina Kirilova Yoncheva the scientific and educational degree "Doctor".

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