

**INSTITUTE OF ART STUDIES, BAS**



**Vesselina Kirilova Yontcheva**

**PAINTINGS IN THE TEMPLES BUILT FROM THE LIBERATION OF BULGARIA TO  
1941 ON THE TERRITORY OF CONTEMPORARY SOFIA**

**AUTHOR'S SUMMARY**

**OF A DISSERTATION FOR AWARDDING THE EDUCATIONAL AND  
SCIENTIFIC DEGREE PHD (DOCTOR)**

**SOFIA 2021**

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FINE ARTS*; 8.1. THEORY OF ARTS

Scientific Advisor: Prof. Emmanuel Moutafov, PhD

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The doctoral thesis was discussed and directed for public defence at an extended meeting of the Research Group on *Medieval and National Revival* held on 17.09.2020.

The thesis consists of 501 pages, introduction, five chapters, conclusion and a bibliography with 241 references. A catalogue of the considered temples of 357 pages is also included. A total of 261 illustrations are presented.

The public defence of the thesis shall take place on 12.03.2021 at 11:00 o'clock at a meeting of a Scientific Examination Board with members: Prof. Irina Genova, PhD, Institute of Art Studies, BAS; Prof. Svilen Stefanov, DSc, National Art Academy; Prof. Peter Tsanev, DSc, National Art Academy; Assoc. Prof. Blagovesta Ivanova, DSc, higher construction school *Lyben Karavelov*; Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhev, PhD, Institute of Art Studies, BAS; Prof. Elena Popova, DSc, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, substitute member; Assoc. Prof. Rostislava Todorova, PhD, Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, substitute member.

The materials related to the defence are available to all interested persons at the *Administrative Service* Department of the Institute of Art Studies, 21 *Krakra* Str., Sofia.

## Contents

I.	GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS .....	5
1.	Relevance of the topic and state of research .....	5
2.	Object, subject and scope.....	7
3.	Aim, tasks and expected results .....	8
II.	STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE THESIS.....	9
1.	Chapter One: Historical Context.....	9
2.	Chapter Two: The Artistic Life in Sofia .....	12
3.	Chapter Three: Architecture.....	13
4.	Chapter Four: Church Painting in the City of Sofia, 1878-1941 .....	15
5.	Chapter Five. Painters and Teams.....	19
6.	CONCLUSION .....	24
III.	CATALOGUE .....	26
IV.	MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS.....	27
V.	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS .....	27

# **PAINTINGS IN THE TEMPLES BUILT FROM THE LIBERATION OF BULGARIA TO 1941 ON THE TERRITORY OF CONTEMPORARY SOFIA**

## **I. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

### **1. Relevance of the topic and state of research**

There are no scientific studies that cover completely the topical, chronological and territorial scope of the doctoral thesis. The bibliography concerning the problems of icon painting and monumental painting in temples built from the Liberation of Bulgaria until 1941 is quite limited. The relevant literature is mostly dedicated to the larger and more representative churches in the capital. The church studied most extensively and in great detail is the memorial temple of St Alexander Nevski. Even before the temple was finished the periodical press presented many publications following the progress in its building and artwork. In 1921 Asen Kermekchiev published a brochure covering some stages of the temple's construction. In the year of its consecration Nikola Nachov published a brochure with facts about its building; an anniversary issue of Hristiyanka magazine dedicated to the memorial temple was published. In 1925 Georgi Traychev prepared a bilingual album providing a short description of the monument. In 1957 Lyuben Karavelov assembled a 'Reference Book on the Paintings in the Patriarchal Cathedral Stauropegial Memorial Church St Alexander Nevski', followed by 'History of the Paintings in Memorial Temple St Alexander Nevski'. Two years later Lyuben Karavelov finished a two-volume monograph dedicated to the memorial temple; the book remained unpublished. The first volume is a documental reference book, while the second is an appendix with documents. The manuscripts were submitted to the Church History Institute and the Bulgarian Patriarchate and registered under Ref. No. 1527 a, b. In 1970 Lyuben Karavelov published a scientific communication on the birth of the idea to build the temple and the first stages of its construction. In the next years several articles tracing the history of the church were published. Several more recent studies and publications describe thoroughly the history of the memorial temple, its architecture and artistic design. There are also articles offering superficial observations of the monument in the field of popular science. The architecture and decoration of the temple are also evaluated in general works on the history of Bulgarian architecture and painting, but these reference materials do not offer an in-depth consideration of the matters. In

this respect, the research of Nikola Mavrodinov, Nikolay Trufeshev, Georgi Labov, Petar Yokimov and Margarita Koeva, among others, deserves particular attention.

There are separate monographs and publications dedicated to the larger, more representative churches in the capital: the churches of St Nicholas the New of Sofia, Sts Cyril and Methodius, Sts Heptarithmoi (Seven Saints, disciples of Sts Cyril and Methodius), the Russian church St Nikolay, the temple of St Paraskeve, the Holy Spirit temple in Nadezhda district, and the king's chapel Sts Peter and Paul. These works trace the history of the churches' construction and provide information on the architects and the artists who have worked on the icons and the murals.

The topic of church painting is discussed, although quite generally and sparingly, in a number of works that cover particular aspects of the development of painting after the Liberation.

Two works dedicated to the State School of Painting provide information on the education in icon painting after the Liberation: the monograph of Atanas Bozhkov from 1962 and an issue on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Academy of Art.

Monographs and publications on particular painters who worked in this period also consider, although in brief, their artwork in churches. Such are the studies of S. Badzhov, A. Belkovski, S. Markov, A. Fileva, M. Miteva and L. Galabova, among others.

There are two important art studies relevant to the topic of the thesis: the monograph of Nikolay Trufeshev titled "Monumental Arts and Architecture in Bulgaria" published in 1968, where the problems of synthesis are presented from the perspective of the art expert, and the book of Prof. Nikola Mavrodinov titled *The Links between Bulgarian and Russian Art*.

Some publications from the past decades have shown a change in the attitude of researchers towards the topic. Attempts have been made to perform a more detailed analysis of the specifics of church painting during the period with a view on the change in style and concepts in the context of historical events. Such are the studies of N. Asparuhova, G. Linkov, R. Marinska and A. Fileva.

The most thoroughly, although not fully researched aspect of the temples built after the Liberation is their architecture. A number of publications consider temple construction as an important part of the new post-Liberation architecture. The relevant section of the book *Short History of Bulgarian Architecture* published in 1965 is limited to an analysis of large-scale memorial temple buildings. In Margarita Koeva's study 'Tradition and New Moments in Bulgarian Architecture after the Liberation' published in 1976 in the collection 'History of Fine Art' the section on church architecture is focused on the analysed factual material. The problems of temple architecture are considered superficially in the voluminous study of Prof. Borislav Stoyanov titled 'Contemporary Architecture' in the context of the overall development of Bulgarian architecture.

The book '1000 Years of Christianity. Orthodox Temples on the Territory of Bulgaria' includes a systematic review of the church buildings, including those constructed after the Liberation. Nikolay Tuleshkov's work 'Architectural Heritage of the Old Bulgarians – Vol. 4: National Revival' traces the development of Bulgarian architecture from the Liberation to the Balkan War. It studies mainly the diverse works of national masters who, after 1878, continued to erect temples in the Principality of Bulgaria, Eastern Rumelia and the unliberated territories remaining under Ottoman rule. Undoubtedly the most significant contribution is the work of Petar Yokimov 'Architecture of the Temple Buildings in Bulgaria' which, although unpublished, represents a first attempt to study in depth the main problems in religious construction from the Liberation to 1989.

The review of the literature, directly or indirectly relevant to church painting and architecture from the Liberation of Bulgaria to 1941, shows that the topic has not been sufficiently studied.

## 2. Object, subject and scope

The present work is an attempt to study thoroughly the main problems of church painting and architecture from 1878 to 1941 in the capital of Sofia. The churches on the territory of the city built during this period are 51. Additionally, the research covers temples constructed before the Liberation that, after 1878, have acquired icons (for example, the basilica of St Sophia) and churches built from 1878 to 1941 that have been destroyed during World War II, then reconstructed, keeping icons from the original temples (for example, the church of St

Apostle Andrew the First-Called on Opalchenska Str. and the temple of Holy Transfiguration in Lozenets district) and churches built during the period 1878-1941 where none of the original icons and murals remain (for example the temple of St Menas in Moderno Predgradie district). A total of 55 churches are considered. The artworks in the studied temples gives information on the leading trends in church painting in the capital during the period, as well as on the artists who worked in this field.

Chronologically the study covers a period of approximately six decades. The lower boundary is the Liberation of Bulgaria that led to an impetuous revival in all fields of social life. The changes in the cultural traditions, lifestyle and public structures naturally reflected on church architecture and painting. After 1878, the intensive temple building created great possibilities for development in this field. Two trends can be traced out in church construction and icon painting. The first one was official or academic, involving exclusively specialists with academic education working on official assignments. The second was national-primitive or traditional. The most representative new temples in the capital are great artistic achievements. Meanwhile, in smaller settlements national craftsmen built and painted hundreds of more modest churches.

The upper boundary of the studied period marks the involvement of Bulgaria in World War II in 1941. The country was burdened with expenses for new arms delivered from abroad, maintenance of the army that was significantly increased with reserve officers and troops, and building of air defence shelters and border fortifications. The building of these defences used much of the available construction materials (concrete and steel), while many builders were mobilized. All public constructions funded by the state, excluding military projects, were put on hold. The war inevitably held back the national economy. The activities connected to church construction stopped. The bombing of Sofia was a great challenge to the citizens and caused much destruction in the centre of the city. It should be noted though that by the beginning of World War II the system of religious buildings, covering both the capital and the whole territorial network of Bulgaria, was almost completed.

### 3. Aim, tasks and expected results

The main aim of the present thesis is to attempt an independent study on church paintings and architecture of the temples in Sofia built from the Liberation to 1941. The scope of the thesis is formulated to consider the two different paths of development of church painting and

architecture in big cities and small towns. Thus, the sites representative of both the academic and the traditional line in the development of icon painting, church monumental painting and architecture can be covered. The thesis provides this opportunity, as the boundaries of contemporary Sofia include former villages such as Chelopechene, Knyazhevo, Botunets, Vladaya, etc.

The research required systematic collection of the available material which is used mainly as a basis for the analytical part. The analysis follows an interdisciplinary approach: it is informed by different branches of science relevant to the considered problems, such as archive management, field and bibliographical studies, prosopography, attribution techniques, stylistic analysis, etc. The main method of work includes documentation of the considered temples and analysis of the architecture and artistic decoration of each of them. The collected material is used to outline the characteristics of the historical period reflected in the formation of church painting; the development of temple architecture and church painting is traced in the context of the general artistic processes in the period, including all their characteristics such as plastic language, themes and concepts. The thesis attempts to derive portraits of the most prominent church painters who worked in Sofia after the Liberation. The information on the ateliers, teams and individually working painters practicing icon painting in the capital was found mainly in the archives: Central State Archives of Bulgaria and Sofia Archive.

## II. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE THESIS

### 1. Chapter One: Historical Context

The first chapter aims to present the general context in which the temples in Sofia were built and painted after 1878. It includes a brief history of the city highlighting events important to Christianity. The temple building on the territory of the city is presented as indicative of the importance of religion for the local population.

In Roman times Serdica was one of the most important cities in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula. The acceptance of Christianity as an official and equal religion, and later as a dominant religion in the Roman Empire reflected on the development of the city until it fell under Ottoman rule. During this early Christian era the basilica of St Sofia and the rotunda of St George were built in Serdica.

Reports on Serdica from the period of the Byzantine rule are given by the life story of St John of Rila written by George Skilitza. At the initiative of emperor Roman IV Diogenes the relics of the saint were transferred from the Rila Monastery to Sredets. They remained in the city for almost two centuries. This is where the cult of St John of Rila emerged, probably in the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, although it became official as late as the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The stay of the saint's remains in Serdica is connected to three temples. First the relics were laid in the metropolitan church of St Sofia, then in the wooden church of St Luke and, finally, in the church of St John of Rila built specifically for this purpose.

After the Bulgarian state regained its autonomy in 1185, Sredets established itself as an important centre of the Bulgarian spiritual culture recognized as Sredets Literary Centre. During the period of the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396) many historical monuments that had survived the Byzantine rule were restored. Meanwhile, a number of new monasteries were built. Presumably at that time the group of fourteen monasteries known as the Sofia Holy Mountain was formed. Many of these monasteries opened schools for young monks, grammarians, scholars and calligraphers; art ateliers for decoration of handwritten books and mural painting in village and monastery churches were established.

At that time the city monastery of St John of Rila, at whose church the relics of the saint had been kept for more than two centuries, was widely recognized. In 1195, at the order of Ivan Asen I, they were transferred to the new capital of Tarnovo. Two monasteries from the Sofia Holy Mountain were of particular importance for the Bulgarian literature: the stauropigial Dragalevtzi Monastery of the Holy Mother of God and the monastery of St Nicholas and St Panteleimon in Boyana village.

In 1382, after a three-month siege, Sredets fell under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. According to some researchers this event put an end to the rich cultural life in the literary centre of Sredets.

During the centuries of Ottoman rule the city became a centre of martyrdom of Christians who were later canonized by the Church as saints. Their sacrifice aimed to strengthen the spirit and faith of the local people. The new martyrs of Sofia represent a phenomenon of special significance for the spiritual life of Christians both in the city and throughout the Ottoman Empire.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century Sofia once again saw development of literary activity. The Turkish authorities appreciated the geostrategic importance of the city and declared it as the capital

of the Eyalet of Rumelia controlling most of the Balkan Peninsula. The citizens of Sofia enjoyed an active religious life corroborated by the churches in the city, the connections with the monasteries of Rila and Mount Athos, and the unyielding protection of the Christian faith by the new martyrs connected to the city. Some of the most important literary works written locally are: 'The Life and Service of St. George of Sofia the New' by priest Peyo, 'The Life of St Nicholas the New of Sofia' by Matthew the Grammarian, 'The Service of Nicholas the New of Sofia' by monk Andrew and a lecture (eulogy) devoted to the three 16<sup>th</sup> century martyrs of Sofia: St George The New of Sofia, St George the Newest and St Nicholas the New of Sofia.

In 1578 Stephan Gerlach visited Sofia and counted 12 churches: the cathedral church of St Marina, three churches of St Nicholas, two churches of St Paraskeve, and the churches of St Kyriaki (Nedelya), St Archangels, Holy Ascension, All Saints, St John the Forerunner of Christ, and St Luke. This information makes it clear that for four centuries the number of churches in the city has increased four-fold.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were ten orthodox churches in Sofia: St Marina, St Nedelya, St Archangel / St Incorporeal, St Spas, St Nicholas the Greater Church, St. Nicholas the Lesser Church, St Nicholas on Nishka street, Presentation of the Virgin Mary / St Immaculate, St Paraskeve and St Paraskeve of the Saddlers. The medieval churches of St Luke and St John of Rila had been destroyed.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Konstantin Jireček gave an account of the state of the temples in Sofia. The metropolitan church of St Marina, once located on the campus of the metropolitan residence, had been destroyed by an earthquake and at the time of Jireček's visit its foundations were barely visible. There were three churches dedicated to St Nicholas. The first one, St Nicholas the Greater, was located on the southern end of the Jewish district. The second church, St. Nicholas the Lesser, was located in the street between the arcade hall and the big Jewish synagogue, which had already been destroyed at the time of Jireček's visit. According to anecdotal evidence, the third church of St Nicholas was located near the road to Nish. St Paraskeve of the Saddlers was located east of the big synagogue. The small church of St Paraskeve was located between the Gül Mosque and the metropolitan residence. St Nedelya (Kyriaki) was a small and narrow half-wooden church. It was demolished in 1865 and in its place the large metropolitan church of St Nedelya or St King was erected. The church of St Archangels was located to the north, next to the new metropolitan church. Its roof was almost at the level of the floor of St King. The

church of St Spas was located to the west of the latter and during the visit of Jireček it was fully renovated. The Presentation of Virgin Mary on the western side of the big synagogue was demolished in 1899. At the time of Jireček's visit the temples of St John of Rila and St Luke had already been destroyed.

## 2. Chapter Two: The Artistic Life in Sofia

The second chapter traces the emergence of artistic life in the newly liberated capital of Bulgaria. In the first years after 1878 Sofia was more reminiscent of a large village of the oriental type than of a European city. By the time Sofia became the country's capital its artistic life had all but vanished. The city had not formed a local national revival intellectual circle to keep the artistic traditions of the National Revival in the minds of the Bulgarians. The active cultural figures were concentrated in the centre of Eastern Rumelia, Plovdiv. Gradually, particularly after the unification of Eastern Rumelia and the Principality of Bulgaria, the capital started to function not only as a political, but also as a spiritual centre of the newly liberated country. Sofia became the biggest and wealthiest city attracting the most prominent cultural figures on the whole ethnic territory of the Bulgarians.

The period after the Liberation is best characterized by three significant changes in the artistic life of the capital. First, icon painters of the National Revival were replaced by artists with academic education and leading roles in the country's artistic life. Along with its stylistic outlook, Bulgarian art also changed its narrative and thematic scope. Church art that had a leading role before the Liberation was pushed to the background. Last but not least, artistic life was institutionalized by the establishment of societies, organization of exhibitions, publishing of periodicals, and the creation of the State Drawing School.

The chapter also considers the cultural policy for painting of the temples built during the studied period. This activity became regulated after 1925. The Association of Icon Painters and Carvers was established in Sofia in 1925 with the aim to unite the specialists in the field of traditional religious arts and to protect their professional interests. It had a specialized commission issuing "permits" for work on orders for temple decoration that guaranteed the quality of the paintings and their compliance with the canon. A rule book on building, painting and decoration of orthodox churches in the Kingdom was prepared in order to clarify the procedures for temple painting and authorization for practice.

### 3. Chapter Three: Architecture

Post-Liberation religious painting is directly dependent on church architecture, of which it is an inevitable function. After the Liberation church building developed between academism / official government procurement and traditional, national architecture.

As a consequence of the National Revival, at the end of the 19 century, churches of all types were built all over the country. Within the boundaries of the contemporary city this ‘traditional’ tendency for development of church architecture can be observed in the periphery, in the small villages around the newly liberated capital. Temples representative of this tendency were erected mainly from the 1880’s until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them are pseudobasilicas of modest size. The only crossed-dome (cross-in-square) temple is the church of The Holy Mother of God in Poduene district.

As regards the official/academic line of development, the processes characteristic of both church architecture and painting allow the differentiation of three specific periods of development, also substantiated by particular historical events. The first period is from the Liberation to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, there was a conscious policy towards putting an end to the architectural tradition of the National Revival. The policy was underpinned by the regulations of the newly liberated country limiting the activity of national masters without formal education evidenced by a diploma. For this reason, until the arrival of the first generation of Bulgarian architects educated abroad, church architecture was entrusted to foreigners. The official line of Bulgarian architecture in the capital from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to build larger representative temples, procured officially and designed by foreign or Bulgarian architects who had received their academic education abroad. The crossed-dome plan was the preferred architectural form. The facades of the churches were decorated with forms characteristic of the national romantic movement with elements of secession that was gaining popularity at the time.

Initially older temples were renovated. This was the case with the churches of Sts Heptarithmoi (1899-1901) and St Nedelya (1885-1886). After the Liberation a new temple was built on the foundations of the church of St Spas and consecrated in 1883. The first newly-built representative temples in the capital were erected at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the church of St Elijah the Prophet in Knyazhevo district (1893), the church of St

Nicholas the New of Sofia (1894-1898) and the church of St John of Rila at the Theological Seminary (1904).

The architecture and artistic decoration of the most prominent and representative monument in Sofia built after the liberation – Memorial Temple St. Alexander Nevski – had the greatest importance for the official tendency. Even though it was actually erected later, between 1904 and 1912, the idea of its building was conveyed at the constituent assembly and the project reflected the best achievements of Eastern Orthodox church art and architecture.

The second period is from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1918 and includes 8 years of war during which all building activities virtually ceased. Church architecture was transferred fully to the hands of the first academically prepared generation of architects. Although international specialists were continuing to work in the country, the main trends were established by the Bulgarians who reassessed what had been built by the foreigners and made a new attempt to interpret the rich national church tradition, characterized by the implementation of model projects in building orthodox temples. This approach remained popular after 1918. Some churches representative of this period are: Sts Cyril and Methodius on George Washington Str. (1909), St George on Patriarch Evtimiy Blvd. (1918), The Dormition of the Virgin in Busmantsi district (1925-1929), The Nativity of the Virgin in Filipovtsi district (1926), The Holy Ascension of Jesus in Chelopechene district (1908-1910), etc. It must be noted that, regarding architecture, the first and the second period partially overlap, because even after 1900 foreign architects continued their work in the capital, although at that time the leading trends were established by Bulgarians who had completed their education abroad and had returned to their home country.

The third period of the development of Bulgarian church architecture and painting begins after the end of World War I - a time of revival in building and painting new churches – and continues until 1941. In terms of church architecture, this period is characterized by bold spatial decisions. Among them, the greatest achievements are the central hall type of dome church and the spacious elongated cross-domed temple type. During this period, it was commonplace to decide the form of the buildings through competitions that increased significantly the artistic stimulus, while the achieved results were subject to assessment by a large circle of professionals and the general public. The following three temples are representative of the period: St Paraskeve designed by architect Anton Torniov, St Nedelya

restored by design of architects Ivan Vasilyov and Dimitar Tsolov, and the Church of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God designed by architects Petar Markovski and Boris Bobchev.

#### 4. Chapter Four: Church Painting in the City of Sofia, 1878-1941

This chapter of the doctoral thesis presents the main tendencies in church painting during the period from the Liberation to 1941 in the city of Sofia. Similar to architecture, church painting developed along two main lines predetermined by the clash between the old tradition of the National Revival and the ambition to achieve representability and to identify with leading countries. The first line of development, formally called ‘traditional’, was the continuation of the late national revival’s practice. The second line, termed ‘official’ or ‘academic’, was reserved for academically prepared architects and painters.

The traditional line was followed by the last representatives of the old art schools of the National Revival, including Vasil Popradoykov, Evgeni Popkuzmanov, Alekso Vasilev and Nikola Dospevski. Smaller towns and villages that remained detached from the leading cultural processes and the modern tendencies in Bulgarian architecture and painting kept the aesthetic preferences established during the National Revival for a comparatively longer time.

The temples included in the study show that even the villages near the capital started to abandon the old trends of the National Revival after the beginning of the century. Of course, there were individual cases of late temples with murals or architecture in the spirit of this old tradition.

Regarding the official/academic line, similar to church architecture, religious painting also passed through three periods of development. The first period is from the Liberation to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The limitations valid for professionals without academic education, although not yet regulated by laws, were also applied for icon painting. Painters like Anton Mitov and Ivan Markvichka, who played a decisive role in the institutionalization of the artistic life in Bulgaria, put a lot of efforts to ensure that the painting jobs in newly built temples in the capital were entrusted exclusively to artists with academic background. In the first decades after 1878 such artists were Mitov and Markvichka themselves

and their students from the Drawing School. They completed the orders for painting the icons in the temple of Sts Heptarhitmoi and the church of St John of Rila at the Theological Seminary.

The paintings in these representative temples of the capital are purely academic, completely different from the old icon schemes. The spirit of the era is represented by the search of a national identity of Bulgarian painting. The first post-Liberation painters working in churches solved the problem of creating national art through academic visual language. However, in its essence, this language did not formally embody the national ideal. In fine art, the national idea acquired a very Bulgarian appearance no earlier than in the works of the representatives of the Association Native art. In the works of the first generation of church painters this idea was still represented by an ambiguous combination of elements of different origins that were supposed to highlight the importance of the Bulgarian country and prove the equality in its relationships with advanced nations. This art did not lead to a plastic formation of a national painting style. In their search for a national appearance of Bulgarian icons the painters from the first post-liberation generation used certain iconographic techniques such as decoration of church clothing with elements of old Bulgarian tsars' costumes and depiction of saints on the background of interiors with architectural forms from the Bulgarian Middle Ages. Secular historical scenes connected both to religion and to significant events were adopted in church painting. The favourite and most frequently painted saints were indeed "the Bulgarian" ones: St Knyaz Boris, Sts Cyril and Methodius, Sts Heptarithmoi, etc. According to Anton Mitov, iconography in its essence is symbolic and historical painting.

The second stage of development is defined as the period from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the end of World War I. The painters from the second post-Liberation generation became active in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the prominent names in church painting are Stefan Badzhov, Stefan Ivanov, Haralampi Tachev and Gospodin Zhelyazkov. The establishment of the Association Contemporary Art in 1904 had particular importance for painting during the period from the beginning of the century to the end of World War I. Some of the Union's members started to actively compete with the founders of the old Association for Support of Art in Bulgaria, renamed to Association of the Artists in Bulgaria in 1893, Markvichka and Mitov.

Although the style of church painting until the period of the wars remained mainly subordinate to the academism, some painters from the second generation, including Haralampi Tachev and Stefan Badzhov began using the secession. As regards religious art, the conflict between the two societies was not solely related to acquiring a leading role in the country's art life and working on the official orders of the church, as some researchers suggest, it was also based on the new aesthetics that young painters were trying to establish in different art types and genres, including conservative ones like church painting.

One of the programme goals of the members of the Association of Contemporary Art was to practically implement a synthesis between plastic arts and architecture. This idea was reflected in the renovation of church architecture and painting particularly in the field of façade decoration and the role of ornaments in mural decoration in the temples' interior. The plastic language of the secession actively promoted by the Association of Contemporary Art, and particularly by Haralampi Tachev and Stefan Badzhov, had a significant importance for these reforms. In Bulgaria the style was embodied in a mix with the old Bulgarian style or rather with the vision of it. This symbiosis was born as an answer to the search for national identity in art at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and can be seen in the murals of Memorial Temple St Alexander Nevski painted by Haralampi Tachev in 1912, the mural decoration of the king's chapel Sts Peter and Paul painted in the same year by Stefan Badzhov and the dome of the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi painted in 1926 under the supervision of Stefan Badzhov.

The third period is from 1918 to 1941. Iconostases were supplemented with new icons showing a more decorative treatment and a revival of the principles of old Bulgarian and Byzantine icon painting. The movement of National Art had a positive influence on the development of ornaments and decorative forms and technologies. Secession decorative trends are observed in a significant part of the icons painted in the 20s and the 30s. The role of the stylized line, the decorative plain and the silhouette is enhanced. Only the depiction of the characters' faces retains the principles of plastic modelling (light and shade effects, idealization in the spirit of academism).

Some works representative of this period are the iconostasis icons at the temple of St Paraskeve painted by Stefan Ivanov, Nikola Marinov, Dimitar Gyudzhenov, Nikola Kozuharov and Stefan Sharich (1929-1930); the icons in the church of The Nativity of the Virgin in Krasno Selo district, Sofia, painted by Nikolay Rostovtsev (1935); the icons in the church of St Nicholas, Vrabnitsa district, painted by the local artist Hristo Petrov (1923); the murals in the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius painted by Dechko and Radomir Mandov (1930-1932); the icons painted by Gospodin Zhelyazkov in the temple of Holy Trinity on Konstantin Velichkov Boulevard (1928); the icons in the church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Busmantsi district (1928); the icons in the church of St Nicholas in Obradovtsi district (1936); the icons in the church of the Holy Spirit in Nadezhda district painted by Gospodin Zhelyazkov (1921), and the icons in the church of the Resurrection of Christ in Dragalevtsi district painted by Petar Dzhamdzhiev (1929).

The accumulation of results of variable quality and nature in church painting raised new questions regarding the direction of its renewal. In the 1920s, especially on the Balkan Peninsula, the interest in Byzantine art was rekindled. This phenomenon was linked to the congresses on Byzantine Studies held in Belgrade (1927) and Sofia (1934). In the mid-20s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Bulgarian painting avant-garde in the face of Sirak Skitnik, Nikola Mavrodinov and Dechko Uzunov theoretically “rehabilitated” Byzantine aesthetics.

The idea to revive the traditions of old medieval icon painting was directly influenced by particular historical events: the kindling of Balkan nationalism after the end of World War I. Although during the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these traditions were promoted quite actively by leading painters and art historians, religious art continued to exist in its mass version of academic painting. This fact has a purely sociological explanation: the lay people visiting the temples were already oriented towards the naturalistic type of imagery that was understandable and readable for them. They did not have a connection with the conventional formulas of the strict medieval canon.

During the 1930s Nikolay Rostovtsev painted in churches in the capital and purposefully used medieval painting as a prototype in his work. Still, at this early stage of his career, he did not manage to fully achieve its psychological influence. His paintings remained ‘academic’, partially influenced by Byzantine art. Other painters who worked in Sofia churches

during the 1930s, such as Georgi Bogdanov, Mihail Maletski and Hristo Apostolov, remained far from the byzantine painting traditions.

## 5. Chapter Five. Painters and Teams

Chapter Five presents chronologically the most prominent church painters, ateliers and societies, who have worked in Sofia after the Liberation. For the purpose of the study, the church orders completed by the authors for temples in the capital during the period 1878-1941 have been systematized.

The painters **Ivan Markvichka** (1856-1938) and **Anton Mitov** (1862-1930) played a key role in the institutionalization of Sofia's artistic life after the Liberation. They were also the first academically prepared artists who manifested themselves as church painters. In Sofia temples they worked together on icons for the church of St John of Rila at the Theological Seminary (1903) and icons and murals for St Alexander Nevski, where Anton Mitov was responsible for the Bulgarian participation in the artistic design of the memorial temple. In 1903 Anton Mitov, Stefan Ivanov and students from the Drawing School worked on the icons of the iconostasis of the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi. In the same year Anton Mitov finished the icons of the National Assembly's iconostasis that was destroyed by a fire in 1920s.

**Apostol Hristov Makriev Frachkovski** (1877-1947) was among the last descendants of one of the oldest families representative of the Art School of Debar, the Frachkovski family. Lacking academic education, he learned the craft from his father Hristo and his brother Epifani with whom he worked in the regions of Sliven, Veliko Tarnovo, etc. Hristov was both an icon-painter and a revolutionary, an activist of the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organization.

In 1907, together with Gospodin Zhelyazkov, he established the painting atelier St Luke. It is known that in 1909 the atelier won a contract with a bid for the painting of some of the icons for the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Sofia. In 1911-1912, in collaboration with the painters Gospodin Zhelyazkov, Stefan Ivanov, Haralampi Tachev and Nikola Petrov, Hristov participated in the painting of the temple of St Nicholas the New of Sofia.

For a period of time, during the wars, Apostol Hristov abandoned painting. In 1912, after the beginning of the Balkan War, he joined the Macedonian-Adrianople volunteer force in

the Bulgarian army. In 1924 Hristov renewed his painting activities in Sofia. Together with Haralampi Tachev, he worked on murals in the naos of the church of St. Spas. In 1925 he painted independently the icons at the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Krasno Selo district. In the same year, as a member of St Luke Atelier, Apostol Hristov participated in the painting of the Sovereign icons at the temple of St Nicholas the New of Sofia. In 1926 Hristov painted the iconostasis icons of the Sofia temple dedicated to St Andrew the First Called.

Another prominent church painter from the first post-Liberation generation is **Ivan Dimitrov** (1850-1944), son of the icon painter Dimitar Kanchev from the Tryavna art school. In 1870 Dimitrov was admitted to study in the Bucharest Academy, where he was taught by the director of the institution, T. Aman, and Prof. Tataresku. In 1881 he returned to Bulgaria, then travelled to Paris to continue his education at the School of Fine Arts with Prof. Alexandre Cabanel. In 1884 Dimitrov returned to Bulgaria.

The earliest church works of Ivan Dimitrov in the capital are the icons for the temple of St Elijah the Prophet in Knyazhevo district painted in 1894. In 1897 he modified a patron icon painted by Vasil Popradoykov for the temple of St Nicholas the New of Sofia into a print, fully conforming to the painted image. Two years later, after winning a competition, he painted icons for the central iconostasis of the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius on 47 George Washington Str. In 1930 Ivan Dimitrov painted the Sovereign icons of the iconostasis of St Nedelya, restored after the assault of 1925.

**Stefan Ivanov** (1875-1951) holds a special place among the painters from the second post-Liberation generation who worked on church paintings. He made his first achievements in religious painting as a student at the State School of Painting. One of the first orders he received was for the icon of the Virgin and the Infant Jesus for the church of St Sofia. In 1902-1903 he painted six icons for the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi. Stefan Ivanov also worked on the artistic decoration of Memorial Temple St. Alexander Nevski. In 1909, as a member of St. Luke Artistic Atelier, he participated in the painting of icons for the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius. Two years later Stefan Ivanov participated in the team that worked on the murals of the temple of St Nicholas the New of Sofia. In 1929 and 1930, in collaboration with Nikola Marinov, Dimitar Gyudzhenov and Stefan Sharich, Stefan Ivanov worked on the icons in the temple of St Paraskeve. Together with Gospodin Zhelyazkov, he painted the icons of the iconostasis of the new church of Dragalevtsi Monastery. In 1935 Ivanov painted one icon of St Nedelya from the waist up for the

church of the same name in the capital. Currently the icon is displayed on a proskynetarion in the southwestern part of the temple. There are data that the icons in the king's chapel Sts Peter and Paul were painted by Stefan Ivanov and Anton Mitov.

**Stefan Badzhov and Haralampi Tachev**, who were among the most prominent representatives of the Contemporary Art Association, made significant contributions to church decorative painting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The plastic language of secession promoted by the association and its members was of particular importance for the renewal observed in church painting and façade decoration. In Bulgaria the style existed in a symbiosis with the old Bulgarian style which is especially notable in the works of Tachev and Badzhov.

**Stefan Badzhov** completed his special secondary education at the Art and Industry School in Prague in 1906. Then, for two and a half years, he specialized in decorative drawing and painting at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM) and graduated in 1908. After that he settled in Bulgaria. In the same year he was appointed as a professor in decorative art at the State Art and Industry School (SAIS). Badzhov received his first assignments from the church while teaching at SAIS. The orders were for some of the most significant temples for the period: the wall decoration of the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi and the artistic design of the king's chapel of Sts Peter and Paul. In 1916 Badzhov painted two icons for the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi depicting St Catherine and St Barbara. Ten years later, in 1926, he authored and supervised the painting of the temple's dome.

**Haralampi Tachev** studied decorative art in the first class of the State Drawing School under the guidance of the Austrian painter Raymond Ulrich. Some of the first teachers of Tachev were Silaba, Piter, Hplekova and Travitski. Like Ulrich, they promoted the ideas of the new style of secession. In 1909 Tachev also completed the special decorative course and in the next year he began his teaching career.

In 1912 Haralampi Tachev concluded a contract for work on the murals of Memorial Temple St Alexander Nevski. His decorative motifs demonstrate a deep understanding of old Bulgarian ornamentation. At that time, in 1911-1912, Tachev participated in the painting of the temple of St. Nicholas the New of Sofia together with Gospodin Zhelyazkov, Stefan Ivanov, Nikola Petrov and Apostol Hristov.

In 1924 Haralampi Tachev worked with Apostol Hristov on the murals in the naos of the church of St Spas. In 1926, again as a member of a team, he participated in the painting of the temple of Sts Heptarithmoi.

Another prominent artist from the second post-Liberation generation who worked in the field of church decorative painting was **Gospodin Zhelyazkov**. He was in the first class that graduated the State Drawing School and later specialized in orthodox painting in Russia. After his return to Bulgaria in 1907, Zhelyazkov opened the atelier of St Luke in collaboration with Apostol Hristov. The earliest church assignment of Gospodin Zhelyazkov was at the memorial temple of St Alexander Nevski. In 1911 he worked on the Crucifix of the Holy Throne with two ripidi depicting the Virgin and John the Apostle for the temple of Sts Heptarhitmoi. During the period 1911 – 1912 Zhelyazkov participated in a team painting the murals in the church of St Nicholas the New of Sofia. In 1918 he painted icons for the iconostasis of the temple of St George in Sofia. In 1921 Zhelyazkov painted the icons for the chapel in Nadezhda district at whose location The Holy Spirit Church was later built. In 1909, as a member of St Luke Atelier, Gospodin Zhelyazkov participated in the painting of some icons of the iconostasis of the temple of Sts Cyril and Methodius on George Washington Str. The Sovereign icons in the temple of St. Nicholas the New of Sofia were painted during the period 1923-1926 by a team led by Zhelyazkov. In 1926 he participated in the painting of the dome of the temple of Sts Heptarhitmoi. In 1927 Zhelyazkov painted several icons for The Holy Trinity temple on Konstantin Velichkov Blvd. He also painted the icons in the chapel of St Catherine in the yard of the temple of St Paraskeve, Orlandovtsi district. In 1932-1933, together with Stefan Ivanov, he worked on the icons of the Sovereign tier of the iconostasis of the new church in Dragalevtsi Monastery. In 1933 Zhelyazkov painted icons for the Basilica of St Sophia. Three icons of the original iconostasis of the Holy Transfiguration Church in Lozenets district, that have survived the Anglo-American bombing of Sofia on 10 January, 1944, also belong to his brush.

**Dimitar Gyudzhenov** is a son of the icon painter Atanas Gyudzhenov. In 1915 he graduated painting at the School of Art and Industry, in the class of Prof. Tseno Todorov. During the period 1913-1914 D. Gyudzhenov completed two semesters at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris. After the end of World War I he settled in Sofia where he worked on church paintings

for four temples: icons in St Nicholas, murals in the dome of Sts Heptarhitmoi (1927), icons in St Paraskeve (1929) and murals in the synodal chapel of St Tsar Boris.

**Dechko Mandov** (1886-1969) developed an interest in art thanks to his brother, Radomir Mandov (1883-1947). In 1907 he enrolled in the State School of Art and Industry, in the class of Ivan Angelov and Ivan Markvichka. He taught students in towns all over Bulgaria, then settled in Sofia. There are data that he was a member of the Contemporary Art Association. At the end of 1919 - beginning of 1920 he became one of the 30 founders of the Association of Independent Artists. During the first three decades of the century Mandov completed numerous church assignments in the regions of Kazanlak and Sofia. In the capital, he worked on church paintings in four temples. In 1911-1912 he participated in the team working on the murals in the church of St Nicholas the New of Sofia. In the period 1923-1926, as a member of the art atelier St Luke, he painted icons in the same temple. In 1919 and 1922, in collaboration with Kiril Kanchev, Dechko Mandov painted the temple of St Elijah the Prophet in Knyazhevo. In 1924 the brothers Dechko and Radomir Mandovi painted the murals in the altar of the church of St Spas in Sofia. Six years later, in 1930, again with his brother Radomir, Dechko Mandov painted the church of Sts Cyril and Methodius in Krasno Selo district.

**Georgi Bogdanov** was active in the field of church decorative painting from 1935 to 1955. During the period 1935-1937 he worked in many churches in collaboration with Gospodin Zhelyazkov. From 1937 to 1955 Bogdanov painted either independently or with his wife Olga Zhelyazkova, daughter of Gospodin Zhelyazkov. Icons painted by him are displayed in two Sofia churches: Archangel Michael in Simeonovo district and the chapel of St Kliment Ohridski at the Faculty of Theology, Sofia University.

**Nikolay Rostovtsev** was a White Russian immigrant who made Bulgaria his second home country after the start of the civil war in Russia. In 1925 Rostovtsev was admitted at the Art Academy in Sofia. Although he was taught in the spirit of realistic academic painting, in his work he turned to medieval art. In the capital Nikolay Rostovtsev worked on murals in eight temples, none of which, however, belong to the period from 1878 to 1941. The chronological interval considered in the present thesis covers the icons he painted in 1935 for the temple of The Nativity of the Virgin in Krasno Selo district.

As already noted above, the **Art Atelier St Luke** was established in 1907 in Sofia under the leadership of Apostol Hristov and Gospodin Zhelyazkov. The members of the atelier were mostly young painters: Georgi Aleksiev, Atanas Velevev, Kiril Kanchev, Dechko Mandov, Radomir Mandov, Iliya Pefev, Metodi Yordanov, Georgi Isachev and Petar Gerasimov. One of the priority goals in the atelier's articles of association was to 'work in the field of art to support the progress of the painters' profession and increase the intellectual capacity of its members; to improve the working conditions and the wages of its members'. Apparently, this related to a union of decorators and painters who, under the leadership of an entrepreneur, could undertake all the finishing works in a temple: from its painting to its artistic decoration. The group of painters from the atelier worked in the temples of dozens of villages and towns on the territory of the whole country. It has been confirmed that in Sofia the atelier undertook assignments in two temples: in Sts Cyril and Methodius in 1909, where the members worked on some of the iconostasis icons, and St Nicholas the New of Sofia, where during the period 1923-1926 St Luke was commissioned to paint the icons.

**The Association of Icon Painters and Carvers** established in 1925 (according to some sources in 1922 or 1918) at the initiative of Prof. Stefan Ivanov and Gospodin Zhelyazkov had major importance for the development of church painting. Its aim was to unite the specialists in the field of traditional religious art, to promote the national tradition in church painting and carving in all temples and to protect the professional interests of its members, especially in front of the Holy Synod and the Church Councils as main guarantors. The Association appointed a committee that issued "permissions" for work on art assignments for temples, ensuring high quality and compliance with the canon.

The association was disbanded in 1944 and transferred to the structure of the Union of Bulgarian Artists.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of church architecture and painting in Sofia during the considered period makes it possible to trace the Christian history of the city after the Liberation. Chapter One clarifies the importance of Sofia as a centre of Christianity connected with events of significance for the orthodox religion. The review of the cultural life after Sofia became the

capital of the Principality of Bulgaria shows that after the unification of Eastern Rumelia and the Principality of Bulgaria the capital started to function not only as a political, but also as a spiritual centre of the newly liberated country. Sofia gradually attracted leading cultural figures, while art life was institutionalized. The analysis of the collected material highlights the leading processes in the development of church painting and architecture; an attempt for periodization is made.

Post-Liberation church painting developed along two main lines. The first one called 'traditional' was a continuation of the late practice of the national revival which remained popular after the Liberation mainly in small settlements around the new capital of Bulgaria. It was practiced by craftsmen and icon painters without professional education: the last representatives of the old families of the National Revival. This tendency was topical until 1900 and then lost its popularity.

The second line of development called 'official' or 'academic' was reserved for academically prepared architects and painters. It can be divided in three periods with specific features justified by particular historical events. The first period is from the Liberation to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is characterized by the building of bigger representative temples following official procurement. The temples were designed by foreigners or by Bulgarian architects who had received their academic education abroad. Church painting adopted an academic style promoted by some representatives of the first post-Liberation generation of artists.

The second period is from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1918 and includes the eight-year war period when building virtually stopped. Church architecture was fully undertaken by the representatives of the first academically prepared generation of architects. During this period, it became popular to use model projects in building orthodox temples. The plastic language of secession actively promoted by representatives of the Contemporary Art Association, mainly Haralampi Tachev and Stefan Badzhov, was of special importance for the renewal of church painting. In Bulgarian painting, secession existed in a symbiosis with the old Bulgarian style and its strongest expression was in the field of façade decoration and ornamentation in mural decoration in the temples' interiors.

The third period is situated between the two world wars, i.e. from 1918 to 1941. Church architecture was dominated by dome temples of the central hall type and spacious

elongated temples of the cross-domed type. It became common practice to decide the form of the buildings through public competitions. The period saw a revival of the interest in old medieval painting. Some painters demonstrated a more decorative treatment and even returned to the principles of old icon painting. In spite of these displays religious art continued to exist in its mass version of academic painting.

It should be noted that, in the context of the Balkans, the development of Bulgarian church art is not unique. Serbian religious painting underwent the same processes, although much earlier.

The present study is the first attempt to draw a general picture of church painting in Sofia during the mentioned period, mainly through the accumulation of facts from the work biography of the painters. The thesis aims to highlight the main interactions with secular art in the context of the social and political situation in the country, of the institutionalization of the independent Bulgarian church as a main religion in newly liberated Bulgaria, of the creation of a national spirit and patriotic culture, of the struggle between tradition and modernization.

### III. CATALOGUE

The doctoral thesis is accompanied by a catalogue presenting the collected material available for research. It includes articles on 55 churches. Each site is considered in different aspects with a brief history of its creation, when data are available, its architecture, icons and murals, if such exist, and its status of immovable cultural heritage in accordance with the Act on Cultural Heritage, as long as this provides information on the level of research of the topic and the evaluation of the site as “valuable” for science. The collected and systematized material is used as a basis for the analytical part.

This is the place to mention that the study does not include the chapel of the National Assembly due to the scarcity of available data, although it was built in the investigated period, in 1903. The iconostasis of the chapel was published by Stefan Mitov. It had three icons - St Tsar Boris, Sts Cyril and Methodius and Sts Heptarithmoi – painted in 1903 by Anton Mitov. The chapel burnt down in a fire. There are no data neither on the exact location of the chapel in the building of the Assembly, neither on its overall artistic decoration.

#### IV. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

- This is the first attempt to conduct a systematic investigation dedicated specifically to the temple architecture and painting in the city of Sofia from 1878 to 1941;
- This is the first attempt to draw conclusions about the leading and most accomplished church painters and ateliers/teams active in the considered period;
- An attempt is made to clarify the cultural policy and the procedure for painting of the temples from the period;
- An attempt is made at periodization and derivation of the leading processes in the development of church painting and architecture;
- A catalogue of all temples on the territory of the city that were accessible for research or known from the scientific literature or archive sources was created. The temples are 55. Some of them have not previously been described in publications.

#### V. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- Yontcheva, V. Contextualizing St George's Vita via the Saint's Icon from 1610. – Porphyra, XI<sup>es</sup> rencontres annuelles internationales des doctorants en études byzantine (2018), 8, 2020, 96-128. [http://www.porphyra.it/CsB%208\\_2018.pdf](http://www.porphyra.it/CsB%208_2018.pdf), last visited on 27.07.2020.
- Yontcheva, V. The Cult of St Nicholas the New Martyr of Sofia and His Representatives at Sofia Churches in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. – Art readings 2019. Patterns, models, drawings. Sofia, 2019, 483- 508.
- Yontcheva, V. Gospodin Zhelyazkov and his paintings in Sofia's churches. – Art readings 2020. Travels (in press).
- Yontcheva, V. Church paintings by Ivan Mrkvička in the city of Sofia. – Artum - Istorijsko-umetnički časopis. Belgrade, 2020 (in press)