

## OPINION

On the presented habilitation thesis by Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva

for a competition for the academic position of *Associate Professor in Art Studies and Fine Arts* (decorative and applied arts in 20<sup>th</sup> century Bulgaria), professional field 8.1. Theory of Arts, for the needs of the Fine Arts Department, RG Modern Bulgarian Art, Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, announced in the State Gazette (No. 41 of 20.05.2025)

By Prof. Dr Bisera Valeva, Sofia University

In connection with the competition announced in State Gazette No. 41/20.05.2025 for the academic position of associate professor in Art Studies and Fine Arts (decorative and applied arts in 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgaria), professional field 8.1. Theory of Arts for the needs of the Fine Arts Department, RG Modern Bulgarian Art at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, one candidate has applied, namely Assistant Prof. Maria Koleva Miteva. She has submitted for review a thesis consisting of six articles and a published monograph entitled *Art and Commission. Through the Artistic Practice in Bulgaria in the 1930s and the Beginning of the 1940s (Decorative Art, Applied Art, Architecture)*, (2025).

The candidate has many years of experience at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She joined it in 2009 as a specialist, after having successfully completed her doctorate at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Since 2010, she has held the academic position of senior assistant, and since 2018, Dr. Maria Miteva has been a curator at the Ceramics Fund at the National Art Gallery. Her professional career, as reflected in the materials accompanying her habilitation thesis, is impressive, consistent, and purposeful.

Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva has an impressive creative biography. Between 2010 and 2025, she wrote two monographs (M. Miteva, *Stefan Badzhov. Biography of a Decorator*. S., Institute of Art Studies, 2014, ISBN:978-954-8594-49-3, 258 p.; Miteva, M. *Art and Commission. Through the Artistic Practice in Bulgaria in the 1930s and the Beginning of the 1940s (Decorative Art, Applied Art, Architecture)*, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2025, ISBN: 978-619-7619-53-9, 298 p.) and twenty-three articles and studies. In addition to being a serious researcher, Senior

Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Miteva is the head of the Modern Bulgarian Art Research Group at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She participates in the organization and implementation of the long-term project at the Institute of Art Studies, "BULGARIAN ARTISTS FOR CHILDREN." She is both the head and a participant in several projects at the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, Sofia City Art Gallery, National Academy of Art, etc.

Maria Miteva's creative exploration and research focus are embodied in the monograph proposed as part of her habilitation thesis *Art and Commission. Through the Artistic Practice in Bulgaria in the 1930s and the Beginning of the 1940s (Decorative Art, Applied Art, Architecture)* (2025), published by the Institute of Art Studies, Sofia. The work is complemented by six articles that summarize the candidate's interests and define the lasting direction of her development as a researcher, scholar, and author with a distinctive critical position.

The monograph has a substantial volume of 241 pages of main text and 121 illustrations. The very detailed study is impressive, with a research apparatus of over 300 titles in Cyrillic, 15 in Latin, 18 archival fonds (personal and institutional), 40 electronic sources, and databases. This broad empirical basis forms the foundation for the subsequent interdisciplinary analysis. The focus of the work is on the applied arts in Bulgaria in the 1930s and 1940s, which logically includes architecture and architects. This approach is necessary for building complexity when examining artistic practices. The main goal of the monograph is to explore the social function of art in the form of its important and inevitable interaction with commissioned practice. The author sets herself the difficult task of combining art history analysis with achievements in the sociology of art, social psychology, economic and cultural theory. This approach allows her to situate the processes under study in a broader European and global context.

Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva emphasizes the relevance of the topic in different time periods, noting the reduction in the intensity of the issue after 2012. In her text, she refers to several significant researchers such as A. Protich, N. Boshev, architect I. Faitondzhieva, and architect L. Popov, as well as Iv. Stefanov and A. Yaneva and the Western and Bulgarian authors they propose (in their anthology), such as G. Simmel, T. Adorno, D. Lukács, H. Marcuse, P. Bourdieu, N. Trufeshchev, N. Genchev, Iv. Elenkov, T. Dimitrova, V. Vasilchina, and others.

The research focuses on the connection between the public and social recognition of works of art, as well as their interpretation as significant. The emphasis is on public commissions, which in this historical context (the 1930s and 1940s) legitimize artistic activity. A very interesting line of inquiry in the study highlights initiative

committees as an alternative source for commissioning works of art, as an additional line of social validation of the fine arts.

The second part of the work focuses on the establishment of the National Art Academy and the State school of Drawing. The opening of the first private school for applied arts in 1931 by Raina Rakarova-Nikova is rightly noted as a key moment in the professionalization and institutionalization of applied arts in Bulgaria. The collaboration between architects and artists, such as the team of architects Hr. Popov and artist Iv. Penkov illustrates the holistic approach to the implementation of artistic projects.

Dr. M. Miteva outlines the dynamics of the art scene in Bulgaria through both successful syntheses and conflicts (St. Alexander Nevsky, Sofia University). The text focuses on individuals with lasting contributions such as Ivan Penkov, Dechko Uzunov, Tsanko Lavrenov, Pencho Georgiev, and others. The creation of the Union of Artists' Associations in Bulgaria and the contributions of Ivan Lazarov and Mihailo Parashchuk is considered significant in terms of institutional support for the arts.

An important focus of the monograph is on international exhibitions (fairs), which are presented as an opportunity for the exchange of experience and cultural influences, such as Bulgaria's preparation for and participation in Paris (1937) and the subsequent awards (gold medal) in Thessaloniki (1939–1940). The artistic design of the fairs in Plovdiv and Varna is analyzed, as well as the architectural interventions in public and private buildings and religious sites (St. Sedmochislenitsi, St. Paraskeva, the house of T. Plochev). Higher education institutions and academies are identified as prestigious establishments that attract and shape artistic syntheses and professionals, for example, the Military Academy (1937) and the relief scene "The Battle of Shipka" by M. Parashchuk. The author critically notes the dependence of artistic production on institutional support and departmental strategies, which frame the possibilities for creative autonomy.

Senior Assistant Professor M. Miteva pays special attention to periodicals as a major source of influence on public opinion. Through them, she traces how artistic practices are perceived and discussed in society, although patronage in the field of fine arts is not among the priority information published by periodicals. Information about patronage and competitions, especially outside the field of architecture, is limited due to the specific and small contingent of participants and the lack of a central body of the Union of Artists' Associations. The author's research findings include additional data found in the magazine *Rodolyubie*, which enriches the overall picture of cultural information.

In conclusion, Dr. Maria Miteva systematizes her observations on the interaction between art and patronage in the Bulgarian cultural context during the 1930s and 1940s, summarizing the main characteristics of this process. She places important emphasis on the value and quality of the work as being dependent entirely on the artist. She concludes that this is the artist's personal responsibility when choosing a role – creative or conveniently executive.

I accept as accurate the contributions summarized in the abstract, and I would like to emphasize the one that problematizes artistic patronage as an independent field of research. Also significant is the contribution to the presentation of a substantial body of archival and visual materials, some of which are being introduced into scientific circulation for the first time. And, of course, for me, the main contribution of the monograph is the enrichment of the general understanding of art and cultural development in Bulgaria in the 1930s and early 1940s.

Of the other materials, the text of the article in the collection *Between Image and Text II (Religious Imagery in the Work of Stefan Badzhov (1883–1953))*. – In: *Between Image and Text 2. Collection in honor of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ruzha Marinska. Sofia, New Bulgarian University, 2025, 243-261*), which details and develops some of the author's theses in her monograph. The focus and analysis are mainly on the religious imagery in the work of the artist and decorator Stefan Badzhov, tracing his artistic activity in the context of the modernization of church construction in Bulgaria in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The article presents unknown facts about his work in the palace chapel, the artistic design of the iconostasis and the interior of the Church of St. Nicholas the New of Sofia, as well as other temples. Both the monograph and this article note the conflicts between and within guilds but also reflect the artist's work as an art editor (*Niva* magazine (1928–1931)). The author emphasizes that despite the imposed and stimulated secular trends during the change of the social model, Stefan Badzhov did not lose his divine inspiration and successfully fulfilled his role as a mediator between the earthly and the heavenly (p. 252).

The article by Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva *Decorative and applied arts from the first half of the 20th century in Bulgaria as cultural heritage. Examples from the first exhibition in 1931*. (*Cultural Heritage: Status and Prospects. Collection of papers from a conference in honor of the 90th anniversary of the birth of Prof. Lyuben Prashkov. Sofia, New Bulgarian University Press, 2022, 288301*) is also in the context of her research interest. The author focuses on the search for forgotten information with potential for contemporary application in the context of the

actualization of cultural heritage. She notes that during the period of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, the creative achievements of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom were most often ignored by cultural institutions. The objective lack of conditions for the preservation of decorative and applied arts led to the loss of a large part of them. The subject of the study is the first general exhibition of applied arts in Bulgaria in 1931, and the main source for analysis are publications in the periodical press. This exhibition sheds light on a long period in the development of decorative arts in Bulgaria – from their uncertain beginnings after the Liberation to their mature form later. Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva draws attention to the process that highlights the efforts to create a Bulgarian ornamental style, the search for form creation, and the collaboration between designers and performers.

The article *Texts and Images – Scientific Trajectories in the First Five-Year Plan (1949–1953) of the Institute of Fine Arts, BAS, is also impressive. (In: Text and Image. Book One. The Image in the Text, the Text in the Image. Sofia, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences Publishing House "Prof. Marin Drinov," 2023, 213-222)*, whose text presents a segment of the historical development of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS, and studies the processes of art formation for the specific time period. The author examines the interaction between artists and researchers in the context of the inevitable new directions after the political changes in 1944. Based on archival documents, the tasks of the five-year plan are analyzed, as well as the contribution of the first founding researchers Iv. Lazarov, St. Ivanov, Al. Bojinov, N. Rainov, As. Vasilev, D. Drumev, Iv. Penkov, and others, whose role is considered key to the formation of a "quality foundation" on which a stable scientific basis in the field of art history is built.

As a result of her research and creative activity, according to the materials attached to the habilitation thesis, fifteen publications by Senior Assistant Professor Maria Koleva Miteva have been cited thirty times in several scientific publications, referenced and indexed in world-renowned databases.

I believe that the presented habilitation thesis meets the requirements of the ADASRB, the Regulations for its application, and the Regulations for the development of the academic staff of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, as well as the scientometric requirements of the NACID. The candidate meets the minimum national requirements for the proposed academic position (associate professor).

In conclusion, I propose that the distinguished members of the scientific council select for the academic position of "associate professor" in Art Studies and Fine Arts (decorative and applied arts in 20<sup>th</sup> century Bulgaria), for the needs of the Fine Arts Department, Research Group Modern Bulgarian Art at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Senior Assistant Professor Maria Koleva Miteva.

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Sofia