

Opinion

From Prof. DSc Galina Lardeva

On the competition for acquiring the academic position of *Associate Professor in Art Studies and Fine Arts* (decorative and applied arts in 20th 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) with a single candidate, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva.

I. Procedure data.

Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva is the only candidate who submitted documents for participation in the competition for Associate Professor in "Art Studies and Fine Arts" (Decorative and Applied Arts in the 20th Century in Bulgaria), professional field 8.1. Theory of Arts, published in the State Gazette, issue 41/ 20.05. 2025. All necessary documents for the procedure are available and meet the requirements established by law and internal regulations.

II. General presentation of the candidate.

Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva graduated in Art History at the New Bulgarian University - Bachelor's degree in 2002 and master's degree - in 2004. In 2009, she successfully defended her doctoral dissertation on the topic *Decorative Art in Bulgaria in the Beginning of the Modern Age: Adopting the European Experience (End of the 19th–Beginning of the 20th century)*.

Since 2010, Dr. Miteva has worked as a researcher and senior assistant at the Institute of Art Studies, Fine Arts Department. Since 2018, she has also been the curator of the Ceramics Fund at the National Art Gallery.

Dr. Maria Miteva is the author of two monographs: *Stefan Badzhov: Biography of a Decorator* (2014) and *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 second work is presented as the main habilitation text in the competition. From the beginning of her work at the Institute of Art Studies to this moment, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Miteva has published twenty-three scientific articles and studies in some of the most significant academic publications in the country. The publications clearly outline the author's research profile: the overall problematization of the notions of applied art: with attention to the different parties in

the artistic process – sponsors and performers, with public attitudes and institutions, but also with the changing notions of applicability in the context of modernism between the two world wars. Typical examples of the research tasks that Dr. Miteva sets for herself are titles such as *Applied Graphics in Bulgaria during the Modern Era - Between Classicizing Trends and the Modern Vision* (2010), *The Bulgarian Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937 - Commissions and Implementations* (2016), *Mincho Nikiforov and the First Image of Yan Bibiyan in the Context of Children's Periodicals from the 1930s* (2019), *Photography as a Document. Temporary Sculpture and Festive Decoration for May 1, 1945, in Sofia* (2020). These examples are indicative of both the consistency in the author's overall scientific project and the broad scope in which she develops the notions of applied art.

III. Presentation of the habilitation text.

The habilitation text *Art and Commission. Through The Artistic Practice in Bulgaria in the 1930s and The Beginning of the 1940s (Decorative Art, Applied Art, Architecture)* contains an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, covering 300 pages together with the bibliography and an extended English summary. This volume also includes numerous illustrations and visual archival materials.

The dichotomously set topic “Art and Commission” is extremely extensive and interesting. First, because the assignment from the commissioner itself allows for a very broad meaning, different contexts and relationships. As the author rightly points out, by the mid-18th century, the mechanisms of the commission were undergoing the complex socialization of both artifact and art as a social phenomenon. The scope of the topic also comes from the fact that the commission was present in different conditions in different creative guilds, as well as in different eras and social formations. For example, the history of world exhibitions alone, with their associated projects, assignments and visions of the world in miniature, would be a completely sufficient meaningful object for a habilitation thesis. Maria Miteva's work does much more. She creates a comprehensive portrait of two decades of Bulgarian cultural and historical development through the prism of the process of announcing competitions or directly assigning and implementing large-scale applied projects.

The first chapter, *Art and Commission – Between Sociology of Art and Social Psychology. Conceptual and Historical Context* develop several theoretical and historical clarifications. Important provisions are made about the presence of sociology in the scientific positioning of the problem sought. Of essential importance to the work is the careful transformation of the notion of applied art – not always working in theoretical and historical terms – to the title pair “art and commission.”

This formula marks an apt entrance to complex relationships with the otherwise clear content of “commission” – for example, depending on the institution that commissions are made, the degree of public accessibility of the created work, the quantity of individual components, whether the artistic product has a secular or confessional orientation, etc. This section also presents a historical mapping of the time from the 1930s and 1940s.

The second chapter, entitled *Specifics of the Environment*, describes in detail the institutions (educational, guild, state) that participate in the process of commissioning, selecting a contractor, creating and controlling the commissioned work. The role of the Union of Artists’ Societies as an intermediary and regulator between the state and the artist is outlined in detail, but also as a partly heterogeneous creative community to which the commissions are ultimately directed. The place and role of IZA – a private school of applied arts – in this process is well highlighted. An important conclusion is made that it is not the political situation or any ideological pressure, but the competition in the community and the struggle for commissions that shape the negative nuance in the constructed idea of the creative compromise in “commissioned” art. As a result of this position and further on, political and ideological direction is not thought of as a determining factor in the text. The direct assignment of a significant commission to an established author leads to the opening of one type of social and guild problems, and the holding of competitions – to others. This is the mechanism that, in tracing its action, condenses the exposition. The text is extremely rich in examples and cases and does not fail to trace the reflection on the issue itself. Such a particularly characteristic example is the outline of Alexander Zhendov’s report from 1942 *For and against the competition system*.

The third chapter, entitled *The Implemented Commission*, positions the narrative on the topic in the perspective of the very implementation of several significant architectural projects, arranged according to their functionality and representativeness. Here, implementation is seen as an intersection point between the grand project of the authoritarian state, guild institutions, and creative individuals. Of importance for the location of this intersection point are also identified public needs and expectations depending on the historical moment, in which the feelings of crisis (worldwide and domestic) and prosperity (global technical and native ideological progress) paradoxically affect simultaneously, even reinforcing each other. The volume and precision in the exposition of this node allows it to stand in its full persuasiveness before the reader.

The fourth chapter somewhat unexpectedly continues the presentation, focusing on outlining the press, in which the already observed process is reflected. In this way,

the research tools are presented. This redirection has its basis both in outlining the socio-cultural and media environment, and in connection with the possibilities for observing the reflection itself on the problem under study. Here too, the researcher achieves convincing density, while at the same time paying attention to the dynamics (simultaneous multidirectional) of the connections between the different instances in the complexity of the commission and its social and creative placement.

Dr. Miteva's scientific work undoubtedly identifies and largely fills a comprehensive and significant territory in the history of Bulgarian art, which has not been set as an independent object of research until now. Scientific modesty or the rare degree of deepening, even immersion in the detailed reconstruction of the problem in our country leads to the creation of a feeling of some uncertainty. The researcher seems to feel obliged to formulate some assessment - both in terms of the assignment of a commission as a procedure and the reciprocal execution (for example, by destroying the image of compromise creativity imposed on it), and an assessment of the era (for example, a partial rehabilitation of the totalitarian regime after 1934). I do not think that this is necessary and appropriate. Excessive caution - despite the incredible volume of thoroughly researched sources (!) - has led the work to a submissive attitude towards the ideas of some texts, especially towards the productions of Nikolay Genchev, Ivan Stefanov, Ivan Elenkov, Irina Genova and their uncritical acceptance.

Despite this minor note, I believe that the work represents a remarkable achievement. It is written in excellent scientific language, conscientiously, with precision in the arrangement and composition of the exposition.

IV. Scientific contributions.

– The habilitation work of Dr. Maria Miteva is an important monograph for Bulgarian art studies. The research positions the commissioning and execution of a given commission for the creation of an artistic work as an independent scientific problem, which invariably leads to complex meanings. In this way, the relations between the artist, the perceiver and the social environment receive a new position. The commissioning/assignment/execution is presented as a dialogue between different instances about the place of art in the everyday utilitarian world, as well as the direction of this conversation towards the ideas of representativeness, prestige, success, adequacy to the era and functionality.

– As a result of the new way of posing the problem of “commission and art” outlined above, the next contribution of the work of Dr. Maria Miteva arises: the treatment of the commission as a complete procedural complex and as a social phenomenon. The

author shows how different (including divergent and opposing) activities are imprinted in the observed process. This leads to a change in thinking about several "officially" completed creative tasks and their orientation towards the polyphonic nature of a common style of the era.

– It should not be overlooked that Dr. Miteva's habilitation work also has its contribution in the sense of the usual historical research. The work has collected and connected in a dense narrative a huge array of information, which will undoubtedly be useful for future studies.

– Maria Miteva's work carries out a significant transformation in the content of the concept of applied arts. The commission is seemingly only a segment of the "applied", but during the research a significant new emphasis is obtained, through which the insufficiently clear "applied" gains visibility, clarity and functionality. This is a contribution that gradually includes the rest of Dr. Miteva's scientific publications. The "decomposition" of the concept of applied art and its rethinking is a result of her creative path.

– The saturation of the text of the monograph with a sociologically grounded methodology should be noted as an independent scientific contribution. It seems to me that this interest has developed independently, apart from the theoretical fashion in our country in the 1990s (for example, the correctly cited volumes compiled by Ivan Stefanov). The sociological insistence in the present work stems from loyalty to the object of study and its structurally determining significance.

– Last but not least, it should be said that the work has contributed to outlining the appearance of the decade 1934-1944, regardless of the hesitation highlighted above.

Conclusion. Based on the excellent research qualities displayed in the habilitation work of Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva, as well as the undoubted contributions in her scientific texts, I propose that the esteemed Scientific Council elect her to the academic position of "associate professor" in professional field 8.1. Theory of Arts, and I confidently vote "for".

12.10. 2025 Prof. DSc Galina Lardeva