

# REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Milena Georgieva, Fine Arts Department, research group

Modern Bulgarian Art

for a competition for the 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) with a single candidate, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Maria Koleva Miteva.

## **1. Brief presentation of the candidate and general description of her scientific and pedagogical activity.**

The candidate, Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva, graduated in Art Studies from the New Bulgarian University in 2004. She defended her dissertation on *Decorative Art in Bulgaria at the Beginning of the Modern Era – Assimilation of European Experience (Late 19<sup>th</sup> – Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century)* in 2009. Dr. Miteva is one of the very few colleagues who excel in the field of decorative and applied arts. I would like to point out that she inherited this vast field of research from her former dissertation supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. V. Vasilchina. Miteva works at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as a senior assistant in the Fine Arts Department. It is no coincidence that she was also asked to fill in the job as curator and head of the Ceramics Department at the National Gallery (since 2018). The candidate has the authority of a respected and rare expert in this highly specialized field, regularly participates in conferences and seminars at the Institute of Art Studies and other institutions, and is one of the few established professionals in the applied arts.

For the competition, she contributed one monograph, six articles, and studies with anonymous reviews, published in journals and collections referenced and indexed in global databases, as well as in collections of national significance. Attached is a list of 23 publications from the period 2010-2025 and one monograph related to her master's thesis and dissertation. The candidate's active publishing activity is well cited by colleagues and doctoral students. The candidate has participated very successfully in a few significant collective projects of the Institute of Art Studies, such as: Bulgarian Artists for Children, BAAART-3, New Artists, etc. In these

projects, she has demonstrated scientific and organizational qualities that are impressive due to the diversity and labor intensity of the work performed.

**2. Compliance with the minimum national requirements according to the ADASRB, RIDASRB and the additional requirements in the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Acquiring Academic Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.**

The candidate has a total of 720 points from the group of scientometric indicators from A to E, which exceeds twice the minimum requirements for the academic position of "associate professor."

**3. Scientific and applied scientific achievements of the candidate, according to the materials presented in the competition.**

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)*, ISBN: 978-619-7619-53-9 contains: text of 241 standard pages (excluding bibliography), 121 illustrations, literature and sources used with more than 300 titles in Cyrillic, 15 in Latin, 18 archival sources (personal and institutional collections) and 40 electronic sources and databases. The work is impressive above all for the breadth and scope of its subject matter, as well as for its chosen methodology, which perfectly combines theory and empiricism. Its complex composition leaves a strong impression, and it is no wonder that it is the fruit of many years of work. It deals with a theoretical problem that is fundamental to the applied arts, which has remained untouched by Bulgarian art studies until now, and draws on solid knowledge of sociology, social psychology, technology, and materials techniques—a sufficiently large and diverse range for the skills of the researcher, who is inevitably obliged to use an interdisciplinary approach, and in which, in addition to art history, sociological, cultural, and psychological methods are also present. The author is interested in the mechanisms of patronage in the period after the Liberation until 1944, with an emphasis on the 1930s and early 1940s. The research includes rare and unknown art objects, among which architecture is also included - I find this to be a very positive phenomenon, as monumental objects are mainly significant commissions by the state. It is this multifaceted nature of the interaction between the patrons of state and institutional projects and the artistic guild (p. 8) that interests the author as a fundamental issue. In this context, she answers the questions relevant at the time about the quality and artistic value of such commissions given to artists

"from outside," reflecting on the extent to which they are performers and to what extent they are creators. In other words, this work is largely devoted to the social role of art in Bulgaria, specifically monumental and architectural art. This role is largely forgotten today and intersects two points of view – that of the client and that of the artist/executor, "giving meaning to the mechanisms of commissioning, creativity and functioning/perception" (p. 10). The work on historical reconstructions is based mainly on sources from periodicals, which have been studied in detail and with great care, as they remain to this day a major source of public attitudes towards commissioning, deeply connected with the art market of that period and the role of the artist in it. This is why the researcher focuses on the international fairs in which Bulgaria participates, the artistic interior design of representative buildings – not only state and professional, but also private ones. Such a comprehensive approach inevitably draws on the biographies of the artists themselves, their membership in various societies and the involvement of these associations in the patron-artist relationship, as well as the architect-artist relationship and the profiles of the patrons themselves, who have remained in the shadows until now. The gradual introduction to the topic, where the objectives of this work are described in the **introduction**, makes a very good impression. The **first chapter** is generally devoted to the conceptual apparatus and the clarification of some important categories, i.e., it is a theoretical chapter that sets the topic as a problem for analysis. This is where the parameters of the research focus are agreed upon: in terms of the type of patron, according to the location of the object or event, according to the viewer's access, according to the period and regulations (p. 17). Here we see the first classification of the commission, guided by these parameters – as state, municipal, private, international, domestic, secular, religious, competitive, individual, according to the techniques used, etc. This chapter also includes brief historical excursions into European and Bulgarian practice as a backdrop for defining the relationship between the artist and the patron. I find it mature of the researcher to substantiate her text with brief highlights against the backdrop of major historical periods, as well as to ask complex theoretical questions and examine the problem of interest to her in depth from various philosophical perspectives from Antiquity to the present day, demonstrating a perfect command of the subject matter. This historical narrative touches upon the gradual commercialization of applied art, which peaked in the 1930s, the expansion of art consumption, and the market as a key factor in the contact between society and art in modern times. The chapter also highlights the important ideologemes of the interwar period in Bulgaria. Miteva is a keen observer of the socio-psychological moods in Bulgaria during the period under review, which she

describes in detail and depth to highlight the role of the state – a key feature of the period – and, consequently, its role as the major patron.

The second and third chapters are the essence of the monograph and consist of brief presentations, citing and analyzing specific illustrative examples of architectural objects, but also events, private cases, competitions, and relationships between clients, architects, and artists in the specific environment of Bulgarian society between the two world wars. The **second chapter** focuses on the specifics of the environment, paying special attention to the SAG and the first private school of applied arts, IZA, as they were the executors of private and state commissions, and through them SAG acquired the right to be considered the greatest expert on aesthetics in society. The role of these institutions has been written about extensively in literature, but Miteva finds her own perspective on educational institutions, presenting us with unknown facts from their archives, guided mainly by her understanding of the topic that interests her, to draw the important conclusion that "contract work is part of the educational process" in them (p. 77). She is also interested in the subjective factor – the creators of large, monumental projects for homes, the specifics of the architect-artist relationship, conflicts regarding commissioning, which are almost unknown today, as well as the evolution towards regulation of commissioning – through competitions initiated by the largest association of artists in Bulgaria for professional protection – Union of the Associations of Artists in Bulgaria. Alongside these unknown facts, the author reflects several important issues for the applied arts, such as the mass production of artistic products that are aesthetically unsound but cultivate poor taste in consumers, the search for ways to counteract this by state and professional institutions, etc.

As M. Miteva aptly observes: "Gradually, the Union of Artists' Associations in Bulgaria (UAB) will limit the Academy to performing its inherent functions, while the role of 'legislator' and regulator, primarily of state patronage, will be assumed by the new organization." (p. 62) It is precisely for this reason that she has to consider the new authority that has grown up in the meantime in the execution of artistic commissions – the UAB, as well as the very interesting question of the encounter between the need for regulation on the part of the state and the authoritarian type of state governance in the person of this Union of Associations, and here the author's conclusion that regulation is enriched by yet another factor – the mediation of the union of artists, which has adopted "the two faces of totalitarian rule" – is important. Against the backdrop of extensive knowledge about the personal creativity of several Bulgarian artists engaged in applied arts, the role of the private artist, creating an opportunity for direct contact with the client, is also examined. Miteva thoroughly examines the nature of competitions, their effectiveness or lack thereof, the optional

ideologization of the commission, which gives artists a certain degree of freedom, but also its objective modeling "from outside" and "from above," with Germany as the main model.

The **third chapter** is logically devoted to the completed commissions, their specifics, history, and message. This is the chapter in which commissions for the interiors of international exhibitions, fairs, the design of representative state buildings, and private residential interiors find their place. The peculiarities of commissioning church construction and decoration are not overlooked either. Each of these subchapters could be the subject of a separate study, but here a balance has been struck in the overall appearance of the text. The subchapters on the Bulgarian pavilion in Paris (1937), the case of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition (1938), and the design of T. Plochev's house are particularly valuable, as they present previously unknown facts and are the first independent and comprehensive analysis of these topics. All three sites have been reconstructed using numerous and little-known archival documents and periodicals covering history, authorship, institutions or private owners, sponsors, and implementation. They are aptly situated in the general reflections and conclusions about Bulgarian design of pavilions at international and domestic exhibitions, galleries, exhibitions, and private homes. This chapter analyzes the exterior and especially the interior artistic design of architectural buildings—state, public, and private—and provides historical information about them, including brief biographical notes about the artists and their work. I consider the bold but true observation that the authoritarian regime contributed to the flourishing of our cultural achievements because it actively supported culture without interfering with aesthetic imperatives to be a significant contribution.

The **fourth chapter** offers a look at the press coverage of patronage and artistic achievements. In it, periodicals are classified as follows: state and municipal government publications, including the State Gazette and a number of municipal newspapers, daily newspapers, and specialized publications providing interesting information about laws, tenders, and competitions for important state architectural projects, "tracking the entire process of patronage" (p. 247), an issue that greatly interests the author, with many eloquent examples from the press. The chapter accurately traces the sources that shape public opinion on the issue, which are also the foundation of the entire text.

The **conclusion** summarizes the findings from the chapters, emphasizing the understanding of the commission as a cultural phenomenon, rather than just a hack job, a mass-produced and commercialized product. One of the important conclusions is that the number of conflicts in the 1930s and early 1940s is seen as evidence of

"the existence of defense mechanisms in society and the relevant professional community" (p. 264), and their continuous overcoming during this period led to the flourishing of several monumental and applied arts.

**Contributions of the habilitation thesis:** In addition to the summary of the candidate's contributions, which I fully accept, I would like to add the following: I consider the summarization and systematization of this vast material on the history and theory of applied arts in Bulgaria, with its precise mastery, to be the greatest contribution of the habilitation thesis. The candidate's ability to ask questions and seek answers in different places, and sometimes to leave them as rhetorical questions, strongly distinguishes her style of work. With disciplined determination, arguments are sought in a wide variety of fields, sometimes unexpected and surprising, and valuable albums, photographs, and newspaper periodicals are found that are completely unknown but very relevant and complementary to our knowledge of the applied arts. I would say that this research can also be considered a possible history of monumental and applied arts in Bulgaria, which has remained unwritten by previous researchers. I like very much the synthesized and erudite expression of Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva in her description of broad panoramas of issues of interest to her from a socio-psychological and sociological perspective. She accurately and deliberately identifies certain points on which she focuses and examines to offer a new perspective or highlight a new fact, or simply to discuss a new vision of a particular phenomenon. In other words, it seeks alternatives and new interpretations of sometimes already known phenomena, avoiding mechanical retelling of the already known. The social aspects and conclusions are leading, which I find to be a special methodological contribution to this scientific work. The role of the social context is particularly important in this study, which is saturated with information that not only directly but also indirectly outlines the spirit of the times, its trends and paths. Historically asynchronous comparisons are also sought in the same type of art or in the typology of commissions. I would also like to mention her work with bibliography, the precisely found and appropriately inserted quotations from a wide variety of unexpected sources do a wonderful job for the author. Finally, I would like to emphasize the extremely accurate citation of other researchers with analysis of their work, not only as a reference for the curious reader, but also with the necessary respect for predecessors, which have become Miteva's credo. I would recommend that the monograph has a sequel, focusing on the commissioning of small, applied objects (furniture, ceramics, textiles), applied graphics, and the most prestigious gifts, where the relationship between the client, artist, and craftsman would also complement the general theme of art in commissions.

Senior Assistant Professor Maria Miteva participated in the competition for associate professor with six articles and studies that clearly express her interests and achievements in the field of illustration (*Mincho Nikiforov and the Earliest Representation of Yan Bibian in the Contexts of the 1930s children's periodicals*), artistic life and its state regulation in the 1930s (*Regulation of artistic practice in the period between the two world wars – models and identities. The role of the Union of Artists' Associations in Bulgaria*), the transfer of artistic ideas through the mobility of Bulgarian architects (*Specialized (business) trips reflected in periodicals between the wars – transfer of artistic ideas and pragmatic experience. Notes from the Third International Congress of Architects in 1935*), completely unknown facts from the history of the arts and crafts exhibition (*Ivan Penkov and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Sofia in 1938*), Stefan Badzhov's contributions to religious art (*Religious imagery in the work of Stefan Badzhov (1883-1953)*), the first exhibition of applied arts in Bulgaria (*Decorative and applied arts from the first half of the 20th century in Bulgaria as cultural heritage. Examples from the first exhibition in 1931*). Three articles enter the next historical period: with an interest in problematizing the decade after 1944 and its changes in culture (*Possible Transformations – Artistic Practice in Bulgaria in the First Decade after September 9, 1944*), the modernity of applied arts under the conditions of a totalitarian regime (*Anniversary Exhibition of Applied Arts from 1960/1961 – an attempt to modernize artistic practice*) and the reconstruction of the early years of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (*Texts and images – scientific trajectories in the first five-year plan (1949-1953) of the Institute of Fine Arts, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*). All publications are extremely diverse, both chronologically and in terms of the candidate's thematic interests. They are methodologically sound in the study and representation of the artistic object, examining it from all possible angles and using various interdisciplinary means, which is characteristic of the seriousness of the candidate's scientific pursuits.

**Conclusion:** I am familiar with the scientific curiosity and conscientiousness of Assoc. Prof. Maria Miteva from her doctoral years at the Institute of Art Studies, and I appreciate not only her scientific qualities, which have already been mentioned, but also her organizational skills—for many years she has been consistently elected as the leader of the "Modern Bulgarian Art" research group, as she is equally fair to her colleagues and has a positive vision for the development of the group, which she still defends with youthful enthusiasm. Her growth as a serious and leading scholar in her field is indisputable, and I therefore recommend that the scientific jury and the

esteemed Scientific Council support her candidacy for "associate professor." My assessment is entirely positive, and I vote "yes."

September 15, 2025

Signature: