

# OPINION

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On the dissertation work of Natasha Mitkova Noeva

**“RAKOVSKI” 125 GALLERY” - INSTITUTIONAL CENTRE OF ART.  
HISTORY, ORGANIZATION, EXHIBITION ACTIVITY,  
CRITICISM (1940 - 1972)”**

For acquiring the educational and academic degree doctor in

Art Studies and Visual Arts

8.1 ART THEORY

Institute of Art Studies – BAS

The subject of the dissertation is dedicated to the private cultural institution - the gallery on “Rakovski” Str 125, which directly reflects and is central to the artistic life in Sofia. Chronologically, the research is limited from the time of the gallery's establishment to the construction of a new building of the Union of Bulgarian Artists at 6 “Shipka” Street. For the years from its establishment in 1940 to 1972, due to its architectural features, the gallery took shape as a leading environment for creative expression. It was established as the home and gallery of the Union of Societies of Artists in Bulgaria. After 1944, it was the gallery of the Union of Bulgarian Artists (UAB, UBA). The hitherto unexplored place of the institutional center of cultural life in Sofia makes the topic of the dissertation topical.

The research is multidimensional and requires extensive preparation, breadth of thought and in-depth knowledge of art history, cultural studies, cultural institutions, the history of architecture and the work of the artists represented in the gallery whose exhibitions are examined. When working on such a paper, skills in sourcing are essential, as the entire dissertation is built on previously unsystematized materials of various kinds - archival documents, articles in the periodical press, photographs. Undoubtedly, the dissertation has the qualities to successfully carry out the research, as evidenced by its volume and completeness.

The volume of the work exceeds the requirements for a dissertation. The reason is the valuable factual material collected and processed, arranged in the appendices according to various criteria. The dissertation, at different levels and in different aspects, covers the broad cultural context in a way that corresponds between the individual fact and the cultural process.

The dissertation has 222 pages of text (introduction, 3 chapters and conclusion), with a 28-page bibliography of over 600 items, consisting mainly of periodicals and archival documents, the retrieval and systematization of which in one place is particularly valuable. The appendices of 277 pages are based on collected data from

periodicals and archives and contribute to research on the cultural life of Sofia. They consist of 14 tables on the exhibitions and the artists who participated in them, not only in the gallery on “Rakovski” Str, but also in the country during the period. The album part, with documents from the CSA and the UBA and archival photographs from periodicals, includes 202 illustrations.

The structure of the thesis follows the general historical logic. The gallery is considered as a "microsystem" in the great cultural process of the development of the Third Bulgarian State. Bulgaria's accession to the Tripartite Pact and the watershed of 1944 creates an opportunity to trace, through the gallery as a cultural institution, the mechanism of the violation of natural cultural continuity as the political situation changed.

The methodology of the scientific work is based on the complex interdisciplinarity. It is based on the general historical and cultural process in terms of tracing the artists' associations (UAAB, UAB, UBA), the development of gallery work, art history, comparative and formal-stylistic analysis to evaluate the individual artists whose exhibitions are discussed in Chapter Three.

A documentary-analytical approach has been used, and to apply it, texts, and photographs in periodicals from the first decade to the 1970s have been retrieved, and sociological and cultural aspects of the issues under consideration have been sought.

One of the methods used is that of reconstruction, which is based on collected sources of various natures such as press reports, critical articles, photographs, and archival administrative documents.

The text of the dissertation is even, the facts are presented in a coherent manner with the necessary analyses and generalizations. Citations are provided as evidence. In places they are considerably long. At the same time, they are extremely useful as they create clarity in terms of an understanding of the times and of individual historical facts.

The upper chronological limit, 1972, is related to the distance required for historical research. The period of 32 years is quite sufficient to highlight not only the main points of the gallery's work, but also to establish a broader cultural framework within which it functions.

Research on the role and significance of galleries and museums in Bulgarian culture is not numerous and extensive. Institutional, museum, cultural studies and art history research are contained in the structure and content of this dissertation. It has three chapters.

The first chapter, “Gallery Work in Sofia from the Liberation to the Early 1940s”, is introductory and is devoted to the general European context and the formation of the museum network in Bulgaria. It analyses the research related to galleries and museums in Bulgaria and especially in Sofia as places of exhibition, up to the time of the establishment of the gallery of the Societies on 125 “Rakovski” Street. The knowledge of the previous research, the in-depth study of the periodicals and several

archives, led to the completion not only of the chronology, but also of the facts regarding a few exhibitions held from the first decade of the twentieth century to 1940.

The usefulness and practical application of such a chapter lies in the reconstruction of artistic life in Sofia. It examines the place of artists in the cultural life of the capital. The systematization of facts complements the few similar studies in which gaps are present. The list of exhibitions at the Permanent Art Gallery and the State Art Gallery is thus supplemented. Through the analysis of artistic life as seen through the chronology of exhibitions, the watershed between the time before and after the establishment of the UAAB Gallery as a venue for organized artistic life in the country is formed.

Chapter Two “Rakovski” 125 Gallery - the Center of Artistic Life. History of Establishment, Organization, and Activity (1940 - 1947)” is devoted to the mechanism of the gallery's establishment, design, architecture, organization of work and change after 1944. It is a study of the idea of the design brief for the gallery of the Union of Societies of Artists in Bulgaria. It examines the project itself and outlines the contribution of the Dresden-educated architect Milko Bichev to the design of a modern gallery for the time. Natasha Noeva rightly notes the contemporary modern space with two exhibition halls and a skylight and concludes that its appearance has not yet found a place in historical studies of architectural history. The completeness of the study of the building - the structures, the materials, the purpose of the individual rooms with their detailed descriptions and the resulting conclusions about the building as an innovation for the time, are undeniable and show the innovative thinking of the architect. The doctoral student has not even escaped the problems of the status of the hall in terms of the register of monuments of culture and she notes that nowadays it has the status of an immovable cultural property of local significance only.

The chronology of the exhibitions organized, which appears as a “red thread” throughout the doctoral thesis, also finds its place in this chapter. Outside the appendices, there are cultural analyses of the events and their reflection in the press and in artistic life. Dividing the exhibitions into groups - Bulgarian and international - is an approach that enables the ways in which international contacts were made to be traced in the period divided into two sub-periods. For example, the period of the gallery's activity from 1940 to 1972, the smaller one refers to the time before the changes of 1944. It reflects the particularities of the general political development of the country and their impact on the cultural policy of the Union of Societies. Noeva notes the difficulty of researching this period due to the burning of the archive of the Union of Artists' Societies in Bulgaria during the bombing of Sofia and the possibilities of researching it solely from articles in the periodical press. According to the extant archival material, this chapter pays special attention to cultural conventions as an expression of the Union of Societies' institutional policy. A special place is also given to the burning of the building during the bombing and the ways of its reconstruction.

In the longer period, from 1944 to 1972, the differences in cultural policy and the abrupt change of the cultural paradigm, such as the organization of exhibitions and cultural activities, are outlined. The gradual entry of the new ideological doctrine into the cultural sphere, of which the Union of Artists in Bulgaria became the main conduit, is traced through the mechanisms of organizing exhibition activity. A detailed examination of the ways in which exhibitions were organized, immediately after 1944, in suitable spaces in various locations in the capital, due to the lack of exhibition halls because of the bombing of Sofia, provides clarity for a hitherto little explored, brief but extremely significant period.

The third chapter of the dissertation “The Exhibition Activity in the “Rakovski” 125 Gallery (1940 - 1972). Reflection of Art Criticism. Artists, Critics, Trends, Problems” refers to exhibitions as a reflection of artistic life in the capital. It is also dedicated to the reflection of art criticism in the period 1940-1972. The large number of exhibitions is approached in a multifaceted way. The organization of exhibition activity as a factology and as an element of the cultural process, and the binding of the latter to several "normative" requirements, are examined both in chronological order and by distinguishing exhibitions as international, group and individual. An enormous amount of work has been done to systematize the basis of the exhibitions described in Appendices 1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 12, 13. The material thus systematized has been used as a basis for the analytical part of this chapter. Based on discovered documents, the text highlights new fields for study and analysis. Different research perspectives are included. The dissertation's view is presented independently and through the lens of previous research. As a result of the collected material and the processed viewpoints from the critical periodical press, the artistic strategy, and politics in the field of individual and group art exhibitions is outlined, as well as their conditioning by the general political development.

The work, being quite extensive and detailed, enables conclusions to be drawn about the selection of exhibitions and artists, the mechanism of the work of artists' societies over time, state cultural policy, etc. The examination of a liminal period in which the political situation was changing enables the shift of the "paradigm" to be traced directly through the facts. One circumstance related to the financing mechanism of the construction is striking. The State Art Gallery, as a space for the paintings of the National Museum, was built by the state. Much of the funding for it came with the help of private organizations. The gallery on “Rakovski” Street was built with private company proceeds from exhibitions, raffles, and other public events. In the complicated reconstruction after the bombing, when it was impossible to bear the financial burden, the private societies resorted to the help of the state. These two facts are particularly indicative of the system of financing in two opposite and different, by their nature, economic and political situations. Such observations make the study wide-ranging - from them as private examples against the background of the general, economic conclusions can be drawn.

The practical application of such work is great. The study outlines not only the significant role of the gallery on 125 “Rakovski” Street as representative of a private institution with a public character, but also of the role of public and artistic life before and during its establishment, and especially of gallery activity in general. The appendices reflect the artistic life of this private institutional center, but also the exhibitions presented in other metropolitan and extra-capital exhibition spaces. In this way, the work provides a complete cross-section of cultural policies and artistic life in Sofia and in other major cities in Bulgaria (pp. 221).

Eleven publications and numerous scientific, public and media contributions are presented in connection with the thesis. Six of these are directly related to the research topic and exceed the minimum for publications by a PhD student.

I accept these contributions. They are formulated in 9 points. All of them are of great weight and are related to the two periods of the creation, destruction, and rebuilding of the institutional cultural center - the art gallery on “Rakovski” Str.

The contributions are made possible by the methods and approaches used. The Gallery of Artists' Societies is examined in the context of the development of exhibitions, galleries, and organized society life from the Liberation to its establishment in 1940. A particularly valuable contribution is the analysis of the cultural mechanisms of the two bordering periods, 1940 to 1944 and 1944 to 1960. These have generally been little addressed simultaneously in the scholarly literature on the artistic process.

The 36-page abstract corresponds to the thesis and reflects it fully in a synthesized form.

In conclusion, Natasha Noeva is a serious, young, and promising scholar, known for her hard work and responsibility to the tasks she undertakes, as evidenced by the work she has produced. I recommend to the esteemed jury that Natasha Mitkova Noeva be awarded the educational and academic degree of Doctor in the specialty of Art Studies and Fine Arts.

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