

# REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Joanna Minkova Spassova-Dikova, Institute of Art Studies - BAS  
On the dissertation work for acquiring the educational and academic degree doctor  
Scientific specialty Art and Fine Arts, professional field 8.1. Art Theory  
on the subject – “Rakovski125 Gallery” - Institutional Centre of Art. History,  
Organization, Exhibition Activity, Criticism (1940 - 1972),  
of Natasha Mitkova Noeva - Institute of Art Studies (BAS),  
academic advisor Prof. Dr Milena Georgieva

## **Brief data about the PhD student**

Natasha Noeva graduated in Art Studies from the National Academy of Arts, Sofia (BA) in 2013. She received her MA in 2015. Her research is in the field of painting, sculpture, and gallery as an institutional center of artistic life. She has worked as a specialist in the archives and library of the Union of Bulgarian Artists.

Her previous experience and research interests in the field of art culture and archival studies are the basis of what I consider a successfully completed dissertation.

## **Dissertation analysis**

The dissertation is 500! pages with the appendices (140 pages) and the attached album of 100 pages. It has a clear and precise structure. The 227-page thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters with several subchapters and a conclusion, a bibliography which is impressively substantial in size (more than 30 pages) and contains monographs, journal and newspaper articles, archival material, and Internet sources. There are 14 appendices and an album section (with documentary and pictorial material) with over 200 illustrations.

The research is devoted to the study of the gallery as a specific exhibition space - historical development, theoretical formulations; types of galleries - private, municipal, national; the museum-gallery relationship, socio-cultural functions, models of organization and financing of gallery activity. The focus of attention is the reconstruction of the activity of the first and only exhibition space with such a long history - the gallery on the street. 125 “Rakovski” Street, which, in addition to its professional representation as a union gallery, defines the relationship between the guild and the state government.

The objectives of the research, as stated by the dissertation author, are to highlight the place and the importance of the gallery on. 125 “Rakovski” Street as one of the main centers of artistic life in Sofia and the country, where the significant trends, phenomena, artists, formed in the cultural and artistic environment of two different periods in art in

Bulgaria, were born and manifested; to construct an overall picture of the functioning of the gallery during its long existence - from the inception of the idea for its creation, its architectural design and realization, its preservation as a privately owned company over the years, despite the change of the two regimes, the influence of the communist party and state and hence the changes that followed; to explore how and to what extent political ideology influenced the exhibition policy of the USAB and the UBA in the 125 "Rakovski" Gallery and the ideological and stylistic construction of the works; to trace the relations between the state and the Union of Artists in the period of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, which were not unambiguous even during the worst dictatorship of the communist regime.

Among the tasks of the dissertation are the retrieval of the available information about the gallery on 125 "Rakovski" Street as a cultural institution, related to the history of the USAB, UAB, UBA; the systematization in a chronology of the collected archival and documentary material, analyzing the policies and strategies of development that have reflected in Bulgarian art; the identification of individual periods and the highlighting of their leading characteristics (such as specific definition, stylistic features or emerging specificities); the study of the legislative basis, institutional documentation and union decisions, inter-institutional correspondence and issued directives.

According to Noeva, the object of the study is the establishment and functioning of the 125 "Rakovski" Gallery from its opening in 1940 until 1972, when the UBA acquired its new home with the 6 "Shipka" Gallery. The history of this gallery is significant for our contemporary art insofar as it shows the transformations that art life in Bulgaria underwent, caused by both internal evolutionary processes and factors external to the system.

The research is based on a complex interdisciplinary study, which is based on methods and approaches from different scientific disciplines. Documentary-analytical approach, comparative analysis, formal-style analysis, sociological and cultural aspects of the considered problems are used. The reconstruction of the phenomenon of the 125 "Rakovski" Gallery is based on the detailed study of rich source material - archival sources, periodical press, specialized publications, catalogues, oral history, i.e., we can define the work primarily as empirical with an interest in learning about events, authors, currents and more peripherally - individual works. The analysis and interpretation based on the collected material leads to the derivation of characteristics, conclusions, and inferences of historical, artistic, socio-cultural nature.

The main sources of information in the research are chronicles, articles in the periodical press, specialized publications, catalogue publications, invitations, archival documents and photographs stored in the collection of the Central State Archives, Ministry of Information and Arts, Committee for Science, Art and Culture, Ministry of National Education, personal funds of artists at the State Archives Agency, the archive fund of the Union of Bulgarian Artists - photo archive and archive files of its member artists, audio archive of the Bulgarian National Radio, archive of the Ministry of Interior,

personal archives of collectors and private individuals, interviews with artists conducted by the author, etc.

The introduction states the relevance of the topic, the aims, objectives, subject, object, methodology, and scope of the research.

Chapter One, "Gallery Work in Sofia from the Liberation to the Early 1940s", examines the processes of the emergence of gallery work in Sofia from the late nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth century.

In the second chapter 125 "Rakovski" Gallery - the Centre of Art Life. History, Establishment, Organization (1940 - 1947)" presents the history of the construction, opening and functioning of the gallery at 125 "Rakovski" Str. The chronological boundary of this chapter is taken as 1940 (the year in which the gallery was opened) and as the end - 1947, when it was almost rebuilt after the bombing of Sofia in 1944.

The focus of attention in the third chapter, "Exhibition Activity in the Rakovski Gallery 125 (1940 - 1972 ). A Reflection on Art Criticism. Artists, Critics, Tendencies, Problems" falls the artistic life, exhibition activity in the gallery on "Rakovski" 125, the reflection of art criticism in its attempt to trace leading trends and problems, the activity of artists and critics and the reception of artistic phenomena, especially in the period after World War II until the early 1970s. It is divided into eight subchapters, which, in addition to chronology and types of exhibitions, are arranged to address all types of art where processes of small and larger changes are taking place; where there is more liberation within the aesthetic directives of the period or where the regime of totalitarian rule and the relevance of the opposition of permissibility/no permissibility is weakening. Selected are landmark exhibitions not only for the gallery, but for the entire period of the establishment of communism.

The conclusion briefly presents some socio-cultural consequences of the opening of a new exhibition center of the Union of Bulgarian Artists. On 12 December 1972, the new gallery of the Union of Bulgarian Artists was opened at 6 "Shipka" Street in the center of Sofia. Having gained popularity as 6 "Shipka" over the years, it became an important and integral part of the spiritual and artistic life of the capital, combining the functions of the largest exhibition complex in Bulgaria and the House of Bulgarian Artists. The work notes the shift of focus to the new acquisition of the UBA and the change in the status of the gallery at 125 "Rakovski" Street. Noeva stresses, however, that this in no way detracts from its importance, as the gallery continues to be an important cultural center in the capital and the country. It retains its authentic appearance as an architectural and exhibition space and is particularly favored for individual exhibitions as well as group and sectional exhibitions, i.e., of a more chamber type. In the last years of the socialist regime, the gallery took shape as an alternative space with several emblematic exhibitions suggesting the emergence of the Bulgarian "neo-avant-garde".

The dissertator has done her research with great conscientiousness and thoroughness. She clearly knows the objects of her study and demonstrates her ability to theoretically rethink the empirical material. Noeva clearly has an interest in archival work and

analysis of facts. Her interdisciplinary approach is impressive. The text is interesting and engaging to read and has high cognitive and practical value. It should be noted that the bibliography is extensive. The citations are correct.

### **Description of contributions**

I fully agree with the pointed out by Noeva's main contributions of the thesis.

I would like to emphasize that the dissertation for the first time examines through the prism of gallery work in Bulgaria the question of the development of Bulgarian art in two different periods, under two different political regimes - the Third Bulgarian Kingdom and the People's Republic of Bulgaria, while also addressing the period immediately after the Liberation.

The work also illuminates the history of the gallery of the Union of the Societies of Artists in Bulgaria and the Union of Bulgarian Artists, a period which is the longest of the existence of all our galleries (already 83 years). It analyses the motives and reasons that led to the construction of the exhibition hall at 125 "Rakovski" Street, and for the first time examines the USBA/UBA gallery over a long period as a sustainable cultural institution, run by the artists' guild organized through societies and subsequently by a single artists' union subordinate to the state. The contribution of the study is the clarification of the gallery's status, development policies, and transformations in an extremely changing context during different periods.

The study attempts to reconstruct the background and history of the creation of the gallery - from the inception of the idea to its material realization, the calendar of exhibition activities based on systematic work with scientific works, archives, periodicals, oral history. Various new artistic facts, data, and documents, previously unexplored and not in scholarly circulation, are introduced. Based entirely on the newly discovered documentary material about the gallery, a chronology of its exhibition life is made, and its main stages are indicated.

The study of the dynamics of processes, trends, types, genres through the analysis of exhibitions is contributory, indicating their commissioners, curators, authors, works, the course of exhibition life in abundant comparative material. The gallery's contribution to culture in its two main periods is indicated, with major issues of associational initiative and assistance from the state, totalitarian power, and the gallery's development in new conditions reflected in various types of evidence.

Another contribution is the consideration of the exhibition space in terms of functional specifics, which has not been the subject of special study. Both specialized and secondary exhibition spaces are covered to outline the overall picture of artistic life during the period, with a view to the opportunities they provide for the socialization of art. A typology of gallery spaces during the two main periods is made, and an answer is given as to why the "125 Rakovski" Gallery invariably played the role of the center

of artistic life until 1972. The relationship with the SBA, the “Gurko” 1 Gallery, etc. is examined in relation to the needs of the USBA, the UAB and the SBA - a relationship between gallery and society(s) that is closely linked, mutually defining and supportive.

New and unstudied data and materials are presented in this dissertation. A methodology is developed. Prospects for future research in this field are indicated for the reconstruction of the history and activities, besides the gallery of “Rakovski” 125, of other exhibition spaces, not only in Sofia. Through them, the research of historians and theorists on the development of Bulgarian fine art, including theorists from frontier fields such as cultural studies, sociology, cultural anthropology, is facilitated and supported.

A merit of the work is the systematization of the factual material with new data retrieved from archives, periodicals, and the archive of the UBA, which has allowed the formation of a rich documentary and visual array over a long period of time, making it possible to outline and highlight the similarities and differences in the status and functionality of the gallery as an institution during different historical periods and political systems. Significant artistic processes and trends in Bulgarian fine art are covered and examined in a specific historical and socio-cultural context.

Of special value are the appendices to the dissertation with the statistical study of the gallery's activities and the records of the gallery's oral history in the form of valuable interviews with contemporary artists.

I would also highlight the practical applicability of the research through the inclusion in the scholarly circulation of the developed information guide on gallery activity in Bulgaria and the exhibition activity of artists in the periods under consideration. In fact, it constitutes a serious information base on gallery activity in Bulgaria, which could support future art studies, including research in frontier fields - cultural studies, sociology, cultural anthropology. This base could be used for the creation of a website in which the array of photographic and documentary material related to exhibition openings, works, interiors could be digitized and published, highlighting the important place of the gallery as an institutional center of cultural life in Bulgaria.

### **Recommendations and notes**

I would recommend that in the future this work be published as a monograph by refining some terminological, stylistic, and technical inaccuracies. The bibliography and citations could also undergo some revision.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed dissertation meets the requirements of Art. 6, Para 3 of the LDASRB. Natasha Noeva's publications far exceed the required minimum. She has made a significant number of contributions with papers in scientific conferences in our country and 1 in a prestigious international forum in Belgrade.

In view of all the above-mentioned merits of the work and the clarifications made, I give a positive evaluation and propose that Natasha Noeva be awarded the educational and academic degree doctor..

20. 05. 2023

Prof. Dr. Joanna Spassova-Dikova