

## OPINION

By Assoc. Prof. Architect Stela Tasheva, University of Forestry

For awarding the educational and academic degree doctor in  
*Art Studies and Fine Arts, professional direction 8.1 Art Theory*

Institute of Art Studies – BAS

To Natasha Mitkova Noeva, regular PhD student on the subject:

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

Academic supervisor Prof. Dr Milena Georgieva, IAS – BAS

Natasha Noeva graduated with a BA (2013) and MA (2015) in Art Studies from the National Academy of Fine Arts, Sofia. She has been working on her PhD at the research group “Modern Bulgarian Art” in the Fine Arts Department of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS. I know her as a conscientious researcher with a strong interest in Bulgarian art and in-depth knowledge of the field.

This opinion has been prepared in accordance with Order No. 90-RD/28. 02. 2023 of the Director of the Institute of Art Studies, BAS. All procedural requirements have been followed in connection with the submission of the thesis. The PhD student has declared a total of eleven publications. Five of them are directly related to the dissertation topic and have been published in proven, high-quality peer-reviewed journals.

Natasha Noeva's dissertation consists of 499 pages (including 222 pages of text, a 28-page bibliography, 14 appendices, and an album section with 202 illustrations, with numbers indicated in the text).

In my opinion, the subject of the work is original, topical, and significant, both in terms of the history of Bulgarian art and in relation to theoretical studies of the context, manifestations, and metamorphoses of the visual arts in general. The methodology of the research includes a documentary-analytical approach, comparative and formal-stylistic analysis, but also the tracking of sociological and cultural aspects of the issues under consideration. I find this appropriate and consistent with the focus of the dissertation.

The thesis is organized with an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. In the introductory part, the relevance of the problem is discussed, the format is set, and the research framework is defined. It clarifies the understanding of a gallery “as an institution that conducts cultural policy, implements a specific artistic program and carries out international relations and contacts with related artistic institutions”. I find the aims set out in the thesis, (namely 'to highlight the place and significance of the

gallery at 125 “Rakovski” Street as one of the main centers of artistic life in Sofia and the country...”, as well as to present the forms and phases of the gallery's functioning and to trace the degree of influence of political ideology on the object of study) as justified and particularly challenging from a scientific point of view.

The first chapter of the dissertation systematizes the main events and problems of the gallery work in Sofia. Chapter two examines the intense wartime and post-war period between 1940-1947. It recreates the chronology, roles and significance of the actors and the environment surrounding the creation, construction, opening, operation, and reconstruction of the gallery on 125 “Rakovski” Street in Sofia. In turn, the third chapter looks at artistic life and exhibition activity in the gallery throughout the period under study, 1940-1972. It traces the professional art criticism, the leading trends in artists' searches and forms of activity, as well as the perception and public evaluation of the art offered in the gallery during the different periods.

The findings and contributions are summarized in the conclusion of the paper. The extensive, detailed bibliography impresses with its range of included archival materials and records, literary sources, catalogues, and historical sources (newspaper and magazine articles from the period under review), and Internet links.

As a study, Natasha Noeva's dissertation represents a rare, and I would even say innovative as an implementation in the field, survey of a cultural topos - an intersection in the history of art in Bulgaria in the twentieth century. The PhD student simultaneously examines the location and material construction of the exhibition space, but also the forms of its institutionalization - its search, emergence, and subsequent central role in the artistic life of the capital and the country. The detailed temporal and aspectual tracing of the functions of the exhibition hall under study at 125 “Rakovski” Street turns out to be a kind of "portrait" of this gallery. However, Natasha Noeva's research also develops in-depth connections with the context of the era, and parallels with trends on the world stage. It thus represents an attempt to chart the history of gallery work in Bulgaria, but it is also a valuable "cross-section" of society in the period under study.

In addition, the work is a source of information for future research on the artists and works represented in the exhibitions, as well as a starting point for the study of several parallel phenomena in other areas of artistic life in the country. A distinct achievement of the development is the selection of projects, documentary descriptions, photographs, and images unknown to the general scientific public, as well as the clear and apt systematization of archival data and illustrations in the appendices.

For me, the data on the architectural designs of exhibition spaces, as well as on their authors, their presentations, and evaluations in the public space, prove to be particularly valuable in the dissertation research. I believe that in this direction a particularly successful "crossing" of architectural and art historical research has been achieved, which is of great benefit for future developments in the field of the dissertation and in Bulgarian studies in general. The analysis of the Union Gallery on 125 “Rakovski” Street through the prism of its architectural realization - the sought-

after characteristics of the exhibition spaces in comparison with the existing models in Europe, the possibilities of displaying and presenting the works, etc., has been skillfully carried out by the doctoral student.

Finally, the elucidation of the degrees and forms of the intertwining of ideology and social and artistic life in the mid-twentieth century, presented in the dissertation, is also in direct relation to the history of architecture in those years.

Other obvious merits of the paper are the author's well-developed, engaging language and style of exposition, the tangible objectivity of the analysis, as well as the well-formed, competently written scientific apparatus. The insight and reflection of existing scholarly texts related to the dissertation topic is also complete and well-grounded in the text.

I accept the stated academic contributions, finding that they meet, and to some extent exceed, the stated aims.

Due to the relevance, maturity and completeness of the research proposed for the opinion, my main recommendation to the PhD student is the publication of her dissertation in full, and the promotion of her results in more languages.

*In view of the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the dissertation study and I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award Natasha Mitkova Noeva the educational and scientific degree of doctor in the scientific specialty Art and Fine Arts, professional field 8.1. Art Theory for her dissertation "Rakovski" 125 Gallery - Institutional Centre of Art. History, Organization, Exhibition Activity, Criticism (1940-1972)".*

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