

OPINION

regarding the dissertation thesis of **SIMEON TONCHEV SIMEONOV**
titled: "**PREPARATORY DRAWINGS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF THE ICON
PAINTERS FROM THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY AND THE 19TH CENTURY
(BASED ON MATERIAL FROM BULGARIAN COLLECTIONS)**",

supervised by Assoc. Prof. Alexander Kuyumdzhiev, Dr.Sc.

For the award of the scientific and educational degree "Doctor", Specialty Art Studies and Fine
Arts, 8.1. Theory of Arts

by

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1. Information about the doctoral student.

Simeon Tonchev Simeonov was born in 1995 in Haskovo. From 2014 to 2018, he studied at the National Academy of Arts, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in art history and a professional qualification as an art teacher. He continued his higher education at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in the master's program "Renaissance and Memory" (2018-2020), where he received a master's degree in history. From 2021 to 2024, he was a full-time doctoral student in the Fine Arts Department at the Institute for Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He was dismissed with the right to defend his thesis by decision of the Scientific Council of the Institute for Art Studies (Minutes No. 5, item 3 / May 30, 2025), and the order for the appointment of the scientific jury was issued on the same day by the director of the same institute (Order No. 263-RD / 30. 05. 2025).

2. Overview of the dissertation.

The text of Simeon Tonchev's dissertation consists of eleven sections numbered with Roman numerals, with sections I and VIII representing the introduction and conclusion, respectively, sections II–VII forming the main content of the work, and sections IX–XI including

a list of abbreviations, a bibliography, and an appendix with descriptions of various archival materials (323 pages in total). To this should be added an album with 247 images, which should be considered an integral part of the dissertation.

The introduction (Section I) defines the object of the study – drawings on paper by icon painters, builders, and woodcarvers from the collections of various museums, archives, and libraries (pp. 4–5); in chronological order (from the time of A. Protich to the present day) and the main scientific studies on icon painters' drawings are traced in great detail (pp. 5-13).

Section II provides a general overview of the drawings in Bulgarian collections up to the end of the 19th century (pp. 14–64). It presents not only the formal topography of the monuments documented and analyzed in detail later in the dissertation, but also addresses a wide range of issues concerning their genre, dating, authorship, etc. This section reveals the doctoral student's interdisciplinary approach, his unwavering pursuit of maximum comprehensiveness, as well as the difficulties he encountered in his research. We can only regret that, for one reason or another, S. Tonchev has been left with almost complete access to (see p. 14) the unpublished drawings of the Tryavna icon painters and masters from the collection of the Specialized Museum in Tryavna (pp. 50-51), the drawings from the Museum Complex in Bansko (p. 53), and the materials of the monk Theodosius from the archives of the Rila Monastery (pp. 60-61). Regardless, the materials covered by the doctoral student—including a number of completely unpublished ones—are too numerous and undoubtedly provide a solid basis for in-depth and representative scientific observations.

Section III presents the materials and techniques used in drawings during the 18th and 19th centuries. Special attention is paid to watermarks as an important reference point for dating works with unclear chronology, to the different types of paper used by icon painters, etc. (pp. 65–70). The various iconographic materials, often handmade by the masters themselves – inks, tints, etc. – are analysed (pp. 71-77). Next, working techniques are presented, with many interesting examples from iconographic manuals compared with surviving drawings (pp. 77-86).

S. Tonchev's specific studies are presented in detail in sections IV, V, and VI (pp. 87–207), devoted to the paintings of the iconographers from the Tryavna, Bansko, and Samokov schools. The presentation is very precisely structured and demonstrates excellent knowledge of the available literature. It is worth noting a number of contributions by the doctoral student in relation to bringing unpublished, unknown, or poorly studied materials into scientific circulation,

such as the drawings by Nikola Obrazopisov from the Museum of History in Samokov (pp. 201–202), the collection of drawings in the Regional Museum of History – Kyustendil (pp. 58, 68, 119, 145, 162, 182, 274, 311-313 – inventory, as well as a separate article by S. Tonchev from 2025), the archive of drawings by late Tryavna icon painters in the personal collection of teacher Bogomil H. Daskalov, kept in the State Archives – Gabrovo (pp. 111-116, 318-320 – description) and others.

Section VII, entitled "Applications of drawings in the creative process of Renaissance icon painters" (pp. 208-265) is also valuable and original in its content. It critically analyzes the terminology used to describe drawings both in scientific literature and by the icon painters themselves, examines the different categories of drawings, and traces their use or application in the creative process. Attention is also paid to the "emancipation" of the drawing as an "autonomous art form" (p. 265) in the work of our first academically trained painters.

I hope that S. Tonchev will publish his dissertation as a monograph. With this in mind, I would suggest that the literature on the workshop around Pimen Zografski be enriched with two articles that were not mentioned in the overview publication by Al. Zabov from 2019, to which the doctoral student refers (p. 15, note 66) – in these works, the iconostasis of the Poganovo Monastery "St. John the Theologian," which is now kept in Sofia¹, as well as fragments of the iconostasis from the first decades of the 17th century, later integrated into the iconostasis of the Church of the Ascension (built in 1855) in the village of Kalugerovo, municipality of Pravets.² I would also suggest adding manuscript No. 165 (346) to the materials from the Ivan Vazov National Library in Plovdiv, purchased in Veliko Tarnovo in 1927, which is described on the library's website rather vaguely as a notebook from the mid-19th century containing "copies of passages from biblical books and liturgical texts..., excerpts from Gospel texts, troparia..., iconographic recipes" <https://shorturl.at/Z3tr9>. In fact, it is an icon painter's notebook from the mid- to late 19th century, in which, over the course of several years, texts for scrolls on icons of various saints have been recorded in at least five different handwritings. on the front and back covers there are two carelessly made images of a myrrh-bearer (?) and the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, and on p. 6b there is a rough sketch of an icon.

¹ Гергова, И. Иконостас из Погановског манастира. – В: Ниш и Византија, VIII, 2010, 367-378.

² Павликианов, К. Фрагменти от иконостас от ранния XVII век в църквата на правешкото село Калугерово. – В: Societas Classica, V, 2011, 132-146.

3. Overview of the doctoral candidate's abstract and publications.

The abstract presented fully and accurately reflects the main content of the dissertation, and the list of scientific contributions attached to it gives an objective idea of S. Tonchev's high scientific achievements. The three original scientific publications presented by the doctoral student, one of which is in press, fully satisfy the legal requirements.

4. Conclusion.

Based on the above, I believe that the dissertation "PREPARATORY DRAWINGS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF THE ICON PAINTERS FROM THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY AND THE 19TH CENTURY (BASED ON MATERIAL FROM BULGARIAN COLLECTIONS)" demonstrates high professional skills and meets all legal requirements for defense, which gives me reason to vote in favor of awarding SIMEON TONCHEV SIMEONOV the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of Art Studies and Fine Arts, 8.1. Theory of Arts.

Sofia, 12 August 2025.

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