

OPINION

By Prof. DSc. Blagovesta Ivanova

on the dissertation by Simeon Tonchev Simeonov

“PREPARATORY DRAWINGS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF ICON PAINTERS FROM THE LATE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES (BASED ON MATERIAL FROM BULGARIAN COLLECTIONS)”

for acquiring the educational and scientific PhD degree

Art Studies and Fine Arts

Professional field 8.1: Theory of Arts

Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

This opinion was prepared in accordance with Order No. 264-RD dated 30 May 2025.

In 2018, Simeon Tonchev graduated with a BA in Art Studies from the National Academy of Art. In 2020, he completed a Master’s degree in History, focusing on the Bulgarian National Revival period. In the same year, he also completed a second Master’s programme in Art Studies and Cultural Heritage at the National Academy of Art. From 2021 to September 2024, he was a doctoral student in Art Studies and Fine Arts, professional field 8.1 Theory of Arts, at the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Alongside his doctoral work, he participated in the research teams of two academic projects.

The preparatory drawing in the creative process of National Revival painters is particularly specific for several reasons. The main one is the lack of authorization, which leads to complications in attributions. These drawings represent a stage reached after a lengthy process of work; they differ in character and purpose and are associated with various techniques of creation and transfer onto the final artwork.

The dissertation (271 pages) aims to provide a detailed, comparative analysis of the preparatory drawings by icon painters from the National Revival period. A large number of accessible drawings have been examined, including newly discovered or previously little-studied archival sets introduced into scholarly discourse for the first time.

The thesis is structured in six chapters, preceded by an introduction and concluded with a summary, a scholarly apparatus, and a bibliography (pp. 276–310). The research apparatus systematically presents the examined material, with the structure of the dissertation following the organisation of available collections of the works.

The dissertation by Simeon Tonchev offers a number of attributions resulting from the study of a substantial body of material from several artistic collections. The topic is

complex due to inaccuracies in the existing conceptual apparatus and interpretations that have become established over time regarding the most famous works of drawing.

Although the terminology regarding the functions of preparatory drawings has been clarified, refined, and corrected, it is beyond the scope and capacity of a single doctoral study to investigate in full detail such a complex and multifaceted body of material. I see this as a promising area for the future development of Mr Tonchev's academic work.

The creation of this study at the present time is both explicable and methodologically coherent. Drawing has been examined to various degrees by all scholars working on the period. These earlier studies have prepared the ground for the current research, particularly given that the drawings themselves are rarely authenticated. Another key feature is the repetition of widely disseminated models - a practice shaped by the preferences of the icon painters and by the influence of specific artistic centres or regional stylistic tendencies.

There has been no prior independent study dedicated exclusively to preparatory drawings from the time of the Bulgarian National Revival, which underscores the relevance of the topic. The research approach is investigative in nature. The collections of preparatory drawings under study are described in detail, along with the problems surrounding their formation and the gaps in existing knowledge. The act of locating and documenting previously unstudied or unexamined artworks—held in museums or archival collections—brings these materials into the light and subject to scholarly analysis.

The method applied to the accessible works is comparative, which is appropriate and, at present, the only viable approach. The comparisons are made in reference to the known iconographic works of the painters, the characteristics of the watermarks found in the paper, the time periods in which newly created models were used, possible reasons for the exchange of drawings among painters, and other factors.

The dissertation encompasses two principal research dimensions. The first (Chapters III–VI) concerns the concrete material. From a museological perspective, the work focuses on the collecting and analysis of drawings from the Tryavna, Bansko, and Samokov iconographic schools, as well as the techniques employed in their production. The doctoral candidate could further explore how drawings by individual artists reflect different genres - such as portraiture, biblical scenes, genre studies, or copies of sculptural and graphic models. This would further highlight the diverse nature and functions of these drawings.

The second dimension (Chapter VII) addresses the theory of drawing - its purpose, terminological inconsistencies, and the clarification of key concepts regarding how drawings were applied in the image transfer process and related techniques. The placement of this theoretical discussion after the empirical material is a sound

methodological decision, as the theoretical conclusions are grounded in the analysis of actual examples. This section succeeds in classifying the different types of drawings and accurately naming them in relation to their intended use.

Every scholarly work is subjective to a degree, despite the objectivity of empirical evidence. Analytical interpretation always involves a degree of subjectivity, even when supported by a defined body of sources and references. The dissertation demonstrates familiarity with both museum collections and the existing literature. However, it is unclear why the author chose not to limit himself strictly to works by icon painters - the central subject of his study. His ambition to include all collections containing drawings carries the risk of overlooking relevant material, such as the drawings of Nikolai Pavlovich in the Aleko Konstantinov Museum in Svishtov, or the genre drawings by Georgi Danchev, which, strictly speaking, fall outside the scope of iconographic drawing.

Simeon Tonchev has a total of nine academic publications - three dating from his university years and six directly related to his dissertation research. Three publications are attached to the dissertation abstract, one of which is currently in press.

A problematic element in the footnotes is the citation of authors solely by the year of publication, with the full bibliography placed at the end of the text. Additionally, the illustrations from the 190-page album are not numbered or cross-referenced in the main body of the dissertation. This creates difficulties in locating the visual material, especially since not every discussed work is illustrated.

Particularly valuable are the five inventories of the studied works, organised by collection (from RIM-Kyustendil, CIAI, NCIAM, DA-Gabrovo, and the archive of IEFEM). These inventories include accession numbers, descriptions of techniques, dimensions, and inscriptions.

A strong point of the dissertation is that Simeon Tonchev challenges existing claims and presents his own arguments in a well-reasoned and convincing manner. I accept the validity of the contributions listed by the doctoral candidate.

The dissertation abstract accurately reflects the content and structure of the dissertation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise the author's in-depth knowledge of previous research and the integration of that scholarship into the empirical material at the core of the dissertation. The precision of the analyses, the methodical and meticulous articulation of the text, the clarity of expression, and the absence of typographical errors are all noteworthy features - particularly commendable in today's academic context.

Based on the above, I confidently recommend that the esteemed scientific jury recognise the scholarly merits and overall quality of the dissertation, and award Simeon Tonchev Simeonov the educational and scientific degree of PhD in the academic specialism Art Studies and Fine Arts, professional field 8.1 Theory of Arts.

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24 July 2025