

## REVIEW

On the dissertation thesis for receiving the educational and scientific degree  
"Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Art and Fine Arts", 8. 1.

PREPARATORY DRAWINGS IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF THE LATE 18th AND  
19th CENTURY ICON PAINTERS (USING MATERIAL FROM BULGARIAN COLLECTIONS)

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Simeon Tonchev graduated with a Master's degree in Art History from the National Academy of Arts as well as from the Renaissance and Memory programme at the Faculty of History of the Sofia University (Master's degree), which is a testimony to his early interest for the period and art of the Bulgarian Revival. Several of his publications while still a student show an independent and successful choice of topics and a mastery of professional language. His participation in the international RICONTRANS project during his doctoral studies broadened his field of competence.

The dissertation is 323 pages long and includes: an introduction; six chapters; a conclusion; a bibliography with 464 titles; an appendix, and an album with 247 illustrations.

The topic of the dissertation, "Preparatory Drawings in the Creative Process of the Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Icon Painters (Using Material from Bulgarian Collections)" gives an idea of the conception - to study famous Renaissance drawings from the perspective of their function. Renaissance drawings have been published and studied from different points of view, but usually the publications refer to individual collections, or as part of the opus of individual scribes, or treat specific problems. A generalized study such as Simeon Tonchev's dissertation has so far been lacking and this can be described as his first and major contribution.

The study is based on a very large body of art works, both published or digitized collections and works discovered by the dissertator himself. It is important to note that some significant collections of drawings are examined here for the first time, such as those in the RHM-Kyustendil, the National Ethnographic Museum, from the archive of Kesarius Popvasilev at the BIA, etc. Simeon Tonchev has gone beyond the wording in the title, as he also deals with decorated manuscripts from the Renaissance, as well as quite comprehensively with hermeneias. While illustrated manuscripts do not meet the definition of "preparatory drawings," architectural drawings and schematics, such as they are known to exist, could be presented in more detail because they are essentially preparations for future construction or furniture. With a view to the eventual publication of the thesis, I would recommend referring to D. Drumev's "Tryavna Carving Art", where preparatory drawings for church furniture are published, as well as publications by arch. M. Marinov in the magazine Architecture, issue 3-4, 2020 and his monograph on architect Dimitar Sergyuv containing examples of architectural plans by Renaissance builders.

The introductory part of the dissertation clearly and accurately defines its goals and the ways to achieve them, as well as a precise historiographical review.

The main part of the dissertation deals with the collected material in various aspects, and the dissertation has tried to cover almost everything: collections, artistic centers and artists, attributions and dating, subjects, character of drawings, materials and techniques of execution. Very valuable are the parts that refer to the terminology used by the researchers, as well as the names that the authors of the drawings themselves left in their documents. The tradition of drawing and the specifics of this artistic activity are thoroughly traced, as well as the instructions in the icon painter's manuals for the preparation of materials and copying techniques.

In the chapter dedicated to the collections of drawings the reader receives not only systematic data on each of them, but also on their origins, with unexpected connections between different collections, the result sometimes of the dispersal of original collections, careless work on their museum processing, and in some cases the reasons cannot be clarified. Despite the question marks correctly left by the dissertator, this "museological" aspect of the text is very important and contributory; it should be stressed that no such study has been done before. To find connections between individual collections of drawings, Simeon Tonchev also investigates formal characteristics of individual drawings such as the type of paper used, watermarks, presence of perforations, techniques used, etc.

For objective reasons, some museum collections of drawings have remained inaccessible, but for a dissertation for the degree of doctor of science and education, full comprehensiveness is not necessary.

The next part of the text is devoted to classifying the drawings according to the origin of the artist: the zoographers from Tryavna, from Bansko, from Samokov, as well as individual zoographers gravitating around the main artistic schools.

The attribution of drawings is a very delicate matter. Simeon Tonchev is well acquainted with all the literature on Renaissance drawings and approaches the opinions expressed on the authorship of individual works with honesty and care. In some cases, he offers his own different opinions of authorship, supported by observations about the formal characteristics of the drawing, as well as by parallels or correspondences he has found with executed frescoes and icons. Valuable are the attributions of the drawings from the notebook in the National Museum of History attributed by S. Tonchev to the Tryavna zoographers Simeon Tsonkov and his nephew Joanikii Papa Vitanov (the volume and dating of the notebook are specified); on the basis of careful analysis, the opinion expressed in the literature that the drawings in the notebook in the CSBS belong to Dimitar Sirleshtov is challenged; some drawings from the collection of the National Art Gallery are attributed to Vasil Pop Hristov Radoykov from Samokov, etc. The conclusion about lost drawings in Toma Vishanov Molera's notebook based on drawings of later zoographers who copied him is interesting. In all cases where individual painters are mentioned, their work is briefly presented according to the publications, but these publications are not just quoted, they are used to search for and find correspondences between drawings and paintings.

The complex analysis of the drawings has another important result: in many cases their patterns are identified: graphic, pictorial, or other drawings.

One of the most significant aims of the thesis concerns the functions of drawings. This topic begins with an overview of practices from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the evidence for the Balkan region is comprehensively traced. In this way, the drawings of Bulgarian icon painters are placed in as broad a temporal and territorial context as possible. The drawings are classified according to the technique of execution, drawing on recipes found in hermeneias. Thus, three groups of drawings have been distinguished: those copied mechanically, those copied freely from the original, and drawings by imagination, or drawing from life, which in

Bulgarian collections are most characteristic of Zahari Zograf and academically trained artists.

Copying has been identified as a widespread method of training for icon painters. Another of their uses is also related to the nature of orthodox art, reproducing established authoritative models. It is specified here, for example, that the drawings from Stanislav Dospevski's time in Russia are not related to his training, but are the result of extracurricular activities.

Notebooks with drawings are often referred to in Bulgarian literature as 'hermeneias', which is not entirely correct; the dissertator believes that they are essentially pattern books.

Particular attention is paid to the perforated drawings, by which the image is usually transferred from the model to the copy. Interesting are the observations of the existence of perforated but unused copy drawings in some masters.

The demonstration drawings that the craftsmen showed to the commissioners were, according to Simeon Tonchev, more characteristic of builders and carvers. The recently discovered plans of churches in the Turkish archives among the documentation for requesting permission to build point to other uses of this kind of drawings. It would be good to pay a little more attention to the use of drawings in the creative process of carvers, for which there is evidence.

As in any major text, some minor errors can be found in this peer-reviewed dissertation. Some of these are errors of the authors, which S. Tonchev quotes, and I would not dwell on them. With very good literary awareness, however, some omissions can be seen. Just one example. About the church in Lozno and its frescoes Assen Vasiliev has written in the collection *Kyustendil and Kyustendil region* (1973). Inaccuracies have been made in the transmission of some original inscriptions, but epigraphy is a difficult subject, which is studied especially.

The language of Simeon Tonchev is clear and well structured, grammatically and orthographically correct, which must be pointed out as a merit of the work.

Instead of the usual catalogue, there is an appendix at the end of the text with an inventory of five icon painters' notebooks with drawings, of which only one has been published but without a detailed description. The citation of inscriptions and texts accompanying the drawings provides valuable information.

Simeon Tonchev cites three of his publications on the subject of the dissertation, which are in authoritative collections, two of them referred to in the web of science.

The abstract correctly conveys the content of the dissertation. The contributions that the dissertator has articulated are both accurate and well generalized.

The reviewer is asked to assess whether there is plagiarism in the thesis - my answer is negative.

In conclusion, I can summarize that Simeon Tonchev's dissertation "Preparatory Drawings in the Creative Process of the Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Icon Painters (Using Material from Bulgarian Collections)" meets and exceeds the usual requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education and Science. The topic of the drawings of the Renaissance icon painters is important and not fully developed in Bulgarian art history. A future publication of the thesis (which could also include the collections now under restoration), as I hope we will see, would be a contribution to our science. Simeon Tonchev's approach to the material under study - precise, analytical and critical, the desire for comprehensiveness, the expansion of research "optics" speak of a promising young scholar. In recent years our studies on the art of the Bulgarian Revival have stagnated, active scholars are counted on the fingers, large fields have been abandoned, very few young people are devoting themselves to this important sphere of Bulgarian artistic heritage. That is why I attach particular importance to Simeon Tonchev's text and its qualities.

The merits of the dissertation mentioned in the review justify my vote to award the degree of Doctor of Education and Science to the full-time doctoral candidate Simeon Tonchev Simeonov.

I congratulate him on his work and excellent results and wish him success!

11. 07. 2025

Sofia

Cor. Member, Prof. Ivanka Gergova

