

PEER REVIEW

for the scientific and artistic contributions of Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva

in relation to the announced competition for occupation of the academic position of “Professor” in Specialty “Mural Painting”, Scientific field 8.2. “Fine Arts”, in the Fine Arts Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv

I. General overview of the procedure and submitted materials for review.

The competition for a Professor in Mural Painting under Scientific field 8.2. “Fine Arts” was announced in State Gazette, Issue 5, dated 16.01.2024. One candidate, Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva, submitted documents for participation in the competition. These documents comply with all requirements and academic standards, demonstrating achievements that significantly exceed the minimum national requirements outlined in Article 2b, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

By Order No ПД 27-047 dated 14.03.2024 by the Rector, and based on the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Fine Arts, documented in Minutes No 7/11.03.2024, a scientific jury for the competition was convened.

II. Brief biographical data of the candidate.

Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva is an exceptionally productive professional with a diverse range of creative activities, scholarly achievements, cultural management skills, and public engagement. She leads the Mural Painting Specialty at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv and has been a long-standing lecturer in subjects, such as “Technology and Technique of Painting and Mural Painting”, “Iconography”, “Mural Painting”, “Composition, Color Study, Conservation, and Restoration”.

Dr. Kantareva-Decheva graduated in “Conservation and Restoration” from the National Academy of Arts in Sofia in 1989. She has completed two specializations at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in Massachusetts, USA (in 1997 and 2006). She is also “Doctor” in the field of Arts, Professional field 8.2 “Fine Arts”.

Between 2011 and 2014, Associate Professor Kantareva-Decheva worked on the design, management, and execution of the restoration and conservation of the Small Basilica in Plovdiv. Later, from 2015 to 2021, she was involved in the restoration activities of the floor mosaics of the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis. The opening of this site to the

public is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in the recent history of Plovdiv and on a national scale.

Together with the team she leads, Associate Professor Kantareva-Decheva has created icons and murals in more than fifteen Eastern Orthodox churches from the late 1990s to the present. She has participated in dozens of art exhibitions and has delivered scientific reports on the conservation and restoration of monumental art at numerous prestigious forums both in Bulgaria and abroad.

Since 2021, she has served as the Director of the Ancient Plovdiv Municipal Institute. For 15 years, she was the Chairman of the Management Board of Bulgarian Cultural Traces Non-Profit Association.

III. Relevance of the problems addressed.

The relevance of Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva's exceptionally active work can be delineated through several primary directions. **Firstly**, her efforts in the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage across the contemporary Bulgarian lands create a crucial link that often entails the challenging task of coordinating, motivating, and rationalizing work with various institutions of differing specificity and functionality. **Secondly**, the planning, creation, and management of well-trained teams that not only possess the capability to perform highly specialized work but are also fully dedicated to the mission of restoring and maintaining cultural monuments. Such an approach to the work (especially creative work that complexly relies on exact sciences) should be considered relevant and encouraged in the education of future generations. **Thirdly**, the insistence in Dr. Kantareva-Decheva's work that science is an integral component of the identity of every cultural monument is highly relevant. **Fourthly**, the continuous relevance lies in the turn towards Eastern Orthodox values, the quest for new creative solutions concerning canonical images, and the adherence to enduring artistic concepts.

IV. Description of the scientific and artistic activities of the candidate.

Under **indicator A** of the scientometric table, Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva's dissertation titled "*Floor Mosaics from the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis – Technology and Technique, Condition, Problems, Restoration*", is included. This work was brilliantly defended before a scientific jury and subsequently published. It has been widely referenced and actively cited, thus becoming an integral part of the scientific discourse. It is noteworthy to emphasize that the author's comprehensive involvement has been pivotal to the existence of this project. The creation of the museum site, the Bishop's Basilica, would have been inconceivable without her longstanding commitment: from the inception of the idea through the stages of restoration and the establishment of

project collaborations with foundations and institutions, to the design of a specially equipped building for exhibition purposes, and the creation of zones for children's activities, the success in developing the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis into a comprehensive artistic product was achieved through the goals and methods of science. However, it was also facilitated by the integration of the learning process as a particularly important intermediary link between theory and practice.

Indicator C includes two primary creative achievements: the design and execution of frescoes for the churches St. George the Victorious in the Byala Cherkva Residential District, Pancharevo, and St. Nicholas the Wonderworker in the Sarafovo Quarter, Burgas. The execution of both projects is described in detail and precision, with impressive methodological consistency and clarity. The presentation clearly reflects the rich experience of the team led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva. This experience forms the basis of numerous comparisons with the processes and practices in the fresco painting of other churches (such as the frescoes in the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Church in the Pamporovo Resort Complex or the St. Theodore Stratelates Chapel in Shiroka Laka). The description includes outlining various aspects of the work performed: iconographic, technological, and interpretive issues, as well as viewpoints related to the historical development within the system of Eastern Orthodox canon. Particularly significant here is the pursuit of balance between the canon requirements and the possibilities of the immediate architectural environment. Achieving this delicate balance requires specific creative solutions. Additionally, decisions need to be made and situational cases justified, such as the rejection of the technology of casein-acrylic technique, which allows painting on concrete substrates, followed by a return to the traditional egg tempera. The execution of complex activities in both cases is based on excellent knowledge and adaptation to the church architecture (both in a general principled and specific plan). Remarkable spatial impressions have been achieved in both focal cases, which is noticeable when observing the documenting photographic images. It should be noted that the project portfolio itself is of remarkably high quality. Another significant aspect is the impact of the achieved results: behind each individual fresco solution, there are numerous studies of hagiographies, liturgical books, and scientific literature.

Indicator D presents the publication based on the defended doctoral thesis, as well as five articles. Three of the articles are in English, written for participation in prestigious international conferences in Nicosia, Alghero, and Barcelona. The high-profile forums attest that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kantareva-Decheva is undoubtedly a recognized scholar, whose name permanently resides in the network of specialized publications, and that she is wholeheartedly accepted in the specialized research community.

In the same indicator, two participations of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kantareva-Decheva as a supervisor are included: for the design and execution of conservation and restoration of the mosaic on the architectural site Small Basilica and the restoration and painting of

thirty-seven icons for the iconostasis of the St. Prophet Elijah Church in the village of Sinapovo.

In **indicator E**, the candidate's citations in the competition are described: nine of them are in referenced scientific publications, and five are in non-referenced publications with scientific review. It should be noted that in each of these publications, the candidate's works are cited several times. Like with the other indicators, the citations find a completely natural presence in Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kantareva-Decheva's academic journey. This situation is entirely understandable: her works, which present the results of her activity, are an unavoidable standard for those writing about the culture of late antiquity in our lands. At this point, I would like to emphasize something different from the undeniable measurable achievements. In high scientific communities, the publication and its reception are a mandatory complementary part of the artifact to which they relate, an indispensable condition for transforming the artifact into an aesthetic site, if we use the distinction made by Mukařovský.

In **indicator F**, participation in a national scientific and educational project by the Bulgarian Heritage Foundation for the preservation of contemporary monumental art in Bulgaria is presented, along with work on leading four projects for restoration and conservation, participation of lecturers and educators in the Fifth Biennial of Church Arts in Veliko Tarnovo, and an annual exhibition of lecturers and students from the Faculty of Fine Arts. These activities, diverse in their essence, not only complement the researcher's portrait but also direct it towards a particular space, from which organizational activity yields a lasting pedagogical effect. It is necessary to realize that if we want any future presence for the things we do in the field of material culture, we must ensure their place beyond tourist and market-driven interests. And this can only be achieved by creating concentric circles of educated environments and cultural reception. If the tightly knit team formed around Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kantareva-Decheva over the past quarter-century represents the first, most specialized concentric circle, then from here onwards, the formation of a broader circle is necessary, in which the specialized activities of the team will be monitored, understood, and popularized.

In the same indicator, there is also the Plovdiv Award for 2019 for contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage, as well as the award from the Boris Hristov Foundation for the Development of Artistic Talents for outstanding contribution to the culture of Plovdiv.

V. Contributions of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva.

– The first contribution is related to the chosen problematic focus by Assoc. Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva: entirely original artistic solutions in the work of iconography in Eastern Orthodox churches. Before us are significant creative achievements, which are aligned simultaneously with multiple factors: the specific architectural environment, the

Orthodox tradition and practice, the immediate circumstances of each individual case, the understandings of the church clergy, and so forth. The exceptional impact of the murals created by Assoc. Prof. Kantareva-Decheva and her team represents both a creative and methodological contribution to the overall task of church iconography.

- It can be said that through her activity and example, Assoc. Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva imposes the idea of iconography as a process. Already at the level of individual tasks, process-oriented thinking is embedded in the linkage between planning, comprehensive research (from chemical analyses of the plaster to tracing the iconological type of the images in the hagiographies), practical work, and the holistic image. In the context of the long series of painted churches, process-oriented thinking outlines guiding principles and creates an impression of a mission connected with the highlighting and defense of shared values.

- The direct presence of the candidate's publication activity alongside her work on the restoration and conservation of mosaics (another main object in the competition activities) demonstrates the approach of a significant scholar on a European scale. For Assoc. Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva, the exposure of the material carrier of a cultural monument is inseparable from its descriptive image in scientific publications – with the presentation of the context and the state of previous research and hypotheses, outlining the stages of restoration, and the peculiarities of the chosen technology, etc. Such an attitude, taken to exceptional levels of depth and internal consistency among the individual activities, represents a contribution that will continue to pave the way for specialists in the field of cultural heritage preservation in the future.

- Elena Kantareva-Decheva's contribution is unparalleled in its strategic depth. It finds expression in the harmonious and exceptionally effective combination of multiple roles in her person – as an educator, researcher, artist, restorer, leader, organizer, and public figure. This is a contribution of a fully realized human presence, in which different knowledge, skills, consistency, taste, insight, curiosity about the world, sensibility, and understanding are organically combined. Based on this exceptionally rare combination, not only is the personality shaped, but also the vision for cultural heritage is constructed.

VI. In conclusion: Based on the undeniable qualities of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva and her exceptionally strong presence in contemporary Bulgarian culture, I would like to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to confer upon her the academic title of “Professor” under Professional field 8.2. “Fine Arts”. I confidently vote “For”.

Prof. Dr. Galina Lardeva

03.05.2024