

PEER REVIEW

by

Professor Dr. Vladimir Dimitrov Avramov,

Faculty of Fine Arts at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo
under a procedure for occupation of the academic position “**Professor**”, Higher education
field 8. “Arts”, Professional field 8.2. “Fine Arts”, Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music,
Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv
Fine Arts Department, specialty “Mural Painting”,
Competition announced in State Gazette, Issue 5 dated 16.01.2024

1. Data about the competition

The competition for occupation of the academic position of “Professor” under Professional field 8.2 “Fine Arts”, Higher education field 8. “Arts”, and the scientific specialty “Art Studies and Fine Arts – MURAL PAINTING”, was announced to meet the needs of the Fine Arts Department, specialty “Mural Painting”, at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv. Only one candidate has submitted her documents for this position – Assoc. Prof. Dr. ELENA NIKOLAEVA KANTAREVA-DECHEVA, who is currently employed as a full-time lecturer under the same specialty. The competition was announced in State Gazette, Issue 5/16.01.2024, followed by the establishment of a Scientific Jury by Order No ПД-27-047 dated 14.03.2024 of the Rector of the Academy, based on Article 29a, paragraph 1 of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria. I am participating in the competition as an external member, responsible for preparing a peer review.

The first session was held on 25.03.2024. All regulatory requirements for in-person and remote participation and voting were observed. A chairperson and a secretary of the Scientific Jury were elected, and reviewers were designated, by specifying which members will prepare peer reviews. The time for the second and final session has been set for 05.06.2024. Upon reviewing the documentation related to the competition procedures, including the submitted scientometric data, I declare that **there have been no violations during their implementation and that all requirements of the National Center for Information and Documentation have been fully met!**

2. Data about the candidate

Elena Kantareva began her professional education at Tsanko Lavrenov National Art High School in Plovdiv. In 1989, she graduated with a degree in “Conservation and Restoration” from the National Academy of Arts in Sofia. That same year, she started working at the National Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Monuments in the field of ancient mosaics and at the Archaeological Museum in Plovdiv. She specialized in “Mural Painting Conservation and Restoration” at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in

Massachusetts, USA, in 1997 and 2006. From 2012-2013, she was appointed Deputy Director of the Ancient Plovdiv Municipal Institute, and since 2021, she has been its Director.

From 2003 to the present, she has been a lecturer at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv (2003-2006 – part-time; 2005-2008 – full-time). In 2008, she became an Associate Professor in the Fine Arts Department, where she leads the “Church Painting” and “Mural Painting” specialties. She is a member of prestigious professional creative organizations: the Union of Bulgarian Artists, the Association of Restorers in Bulgaria, and the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics. She has led creative teams (from 2003 to the present) for the restoration and conservation of floor mosaics in the Small and Great Basilica in Plovdiv, and she practices as a muralist and icon painter (together with Dechko Dechev): Assumption of the Holy Virgin Church in Pamporovo, icons in St. Vissarion of Smolyan Church, murals in St. Petka Church in the village of Rila; St. George in the Biala Cherkva Residential Complex in Sofia, and others.

Assoc. Prof. Kantareva has an impressive creative and scientific biography, which includes: over 15 large-scale restoration projects, more than 40 participations in specialized art exhibitions, 20 participations in scientific conferences and symposiums, and numerous publications in the field of mosaics.

3. Description of the scholarly work

In the competition for occupation of the academic position of “Professor”, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva presents an extensive habilitation thesis, encompassing some of the most emblematic objects in her rich career as a muralist. These objects are accompanied by an adequate and precise description of the creative and scholarly contributions to them, fully characterizing the innovations in contemporary Orthodox mural painting. Considering its “cumbersome” and conservative, seemingly rigid system resistant to the acceptance of integrated authorial programs and styles, this is no small feat!

The main habilitation works are three sacred objects (two murals and one iconography project), organized into a unique architectural ensemble, creating a personal, very intriguing, and recognizably identical visual “temple”. Simultaneously, as an integral part of her creative portfolio, she also presents her impressive experience in the conservation, restoration, and exhibition of the floor mosaics of the now emblematic Bishop’s Basilica in Plovdiv. This entire project has been realized with exceptional professionalism, creative energy, and faith. Kantareva’s aesthetic philosophy is supported by extensive theoretical and applied work.

4. Artistic and creative contributions

As mentioned, the artistic and creative activity of Elena Kantareva progresses in two parallel and mutually influencing directions. One direction embodies the artistic creative

act (sacred painting), while the other is more a functional consequence of the first, dominated by humanitarianism, ethics, and the preservation of cultural heritage (restoration). Both form the basis of the presented habilitation work, unified by the candidate into an integrated product. The summary of contributions includes several key creative “sites” for her. The first section includes:

1. St. George the Victorious Church in Byala Cherkva Residential Complex, Pancharevo, Sofia, designed and executed in the period 2011-2012.

In the impressive 386 square meters, a comprehensive iconographic program has been developed, fully aligned with the topography of the Church and the requirements of the Orthodox canon. The execution follows a “classical” technology, including a conceptual project at a scale of 1:20, working cartoons at a scale of 1:1, and the actual on-site execution (tempera technique with egg emulsion). It should be noted that Kantareva seriously argued that she would have preferred to use a casein-acrylic technique, but subjective factors determined the use of egg emulsion. The placement of the Crucifixion with the accompanying Raising and Lowering from the Cross in the Third Register on the West wall is particularly interesting. This is not the typical location for these compositions, but the presence of the architectural element “pediment” necessitates their depiction there. This is an excellent example of a successful architectural and artistic synthesis! Indeed, the synthesis between architecture and mural painting reflects Kantareva’s comprehensive conceptual and aesthetic vision. The **relationship between church architecture and ecclesiastical mural painting** is subject to the overall conceptual framework of the research. In their millennia-old established interrelationship, approaches are applied that attempt to transform and innovate the canonically dogmatic environment. This is not merely a purposeless creative improvisation, but a broadly comprehensive and organically creative solution, supported by the creative intellect of Assoc. Prof. Kantareva.

The presence of biblical narratives within the architectural elements is logical and predetermined. There is an **established connection and interaction between architecture, theology, art, and culture, supported by the necessary historical facts.** This interconnectedness implies a philosophical and aesthetic collaboration across various cultural domains. The relevance of the habilitation is one of the most valuable qualities of this theoretical and practical research. Within the overall framework of the work, there exists an unpretentious universalism, through which Assoc. Prof. Kantareva’s comprehensive presentation exudes high professionalism and intellectual presence.

2. St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church, Sarafovo District, Burgas (painted from 2018 to 2023)

This Church is similar in terms of issues and creative solutions to the one previously discussed. However, acrylic paints were used here, which is much more suitable considering the presence of a latex coating on the walls.

3. The third major contribution in the work is the creation of 24 icons for the iconostasis of the St. George the Victorious Church in Pancharevo. Here, the contribution of selecting the size of the images is particularly significant. The monumental torso images “substantially contribute to the overall resonance of the iconostasis and icons as a unified ensemble, integrating seamlessly as a single element into the church space” (quoting the author). The portrayal of different forms of **monumentality, inspired by the inherited cultural legacy and the atavism of great previous periods of Faith**, is another way to reveal the profound philosophical mystery of man’s spiritual closeness to God. All the components involved in structuring the primary pictorial category (icon or mural) enhance the spirituality and spatial impressions. In this case, creative subjectivism is predominant and prompts us to reflect on how logical impressions are created through the illogical nature of intuition and aesthetic sensibility.

In the second section of her habilitation work, Assoc. Prof. Decheva emphasizes her extensive efforts in restoring and exhibiting the floor mosaics from the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis. The entire specificity of this activity is detailed in the book published by the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts based on her defended dissertation. I had the opportunity and pleasure to thoroughly acquaint myself with this aspect of Kantareva’s work as her reviewer, and I must once again express my admiration for this impressive endeavor, a unique embodiment of crystallized creative empathy and remarkable professionalism.

Additionally, the comprehensive training and experience of a restorer (which Assoc. Prof. Kantareva undoubtedly possesses) enable the extraction of the “essence” from the restored sites and its interpretive integration into original sacred mural projects. By default, the technological impeccability here is unquestionable!

In conclusion:

Through the presented works and the distinctive contributions highlighted after each one, Assoc. Prof. Kantareva outlines her artistic strategy, focused on the presence of an individual creative (but also highly professionally executed, not to say – meticulous) approach to each of her sites. To achieve the full sensation of monumentalizing subjects, both in mural paintings and icons, she applies elements that form the foundation of the mural axis “easel-monumental”. Here, the paradigm is not only in the synthesized stylized image and artistic generalizations (all attributes of the monumental) but also in the pictorial development of large architectural spaces, enriched with detail, color, and volume.

The most significant contributions, from my perspective, are the following:

- The stylistic unity and noticeably present personal authorial manner.
- The chromatic gradation in the compositional organization of the overall ensemble.

– The profound spiritual depth in the psychological portrayal of the images, despite their “inherent: idealization and schematization.

– The appropriately chosen optimal techniques and materials for work, strictly individual for each site and depending on its specifics.

From the analysis, it is evident that this is a work of undeniable significance, both as an artistic and conceptual message and as a methodological foundation, which conveys the experience from the practical (and to a large extent – pedagogical) work of Elena Kantareva to all who would need and benefit from it – colleagues, students, creative performers.

5. Teaching activity

Since 2008, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva has been conducting lecture courses in mural painting-composition, painting and mural techniques and technology, icon painting, color study, conservation, and restoration. Her teaching work is distinguished by professionalism and innovation in the use of various pedagogical approaches.

I would also like to highlight the administrative and civic-social contributions of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kantareva. As the director of the Ancient Plovdiv Municipal Institute (from 2021 to present, and previously from 2020 to 2021 – Deputy Director), she has managed to implement numerous projects and art events that have contributed to the promotion of Plovdiv both on the Bulgarian and international artistic scene. I regard her work in this area as significant, supported by excellent vision (including idealism) and responsibility throughout her academic and creative career.

6. Conclusion

I believe that the work of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva is a respectable original contribution and fully meets the requirements of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

After presenting my opinion on the proposed habilitation thesis, the contributions, and the teaching activities of the candidate, I submit to the esteemed Jury my ***absolutely positive review***. I recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury propose **to the Academic Council of the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, to appoint Assoc. Prof. Dr. ELENA KANTAREVA-DECHEVA to the academic position of “Professor”** under Scientific specialty 8.2. “Art Studies and Fine Arts – Mural Painting”.

Prepared by:
/Prof. Dr. Vladimir Avramov/

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Veliko Tarnovo