

PEER REVIEW

by

Prof. Dr. Zdravka Vasileva, National Academy of Arts – Sofia, regarding a competition for occupation of the academic position “Professor”, Specialty “Mural Painting”, Fine Arts Department, Professional field 8. “Arts”, announced by Prof. Asen Diamandiev Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv,
with a single candidate – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva

The candidate of the current competition Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva, has professionally and accurately presented to the Scientific Jury all the necessary documents and materials pertaining to the competition. Habilitation materials, report on contributions, list of creative performances, list of scientific publications, scientometric indicators, etc., are attached.

Associate Professor Dr. Kantareva-Decheva is well-known as a lecturer, restorer, and muralist. In recent years, following the finalization of the significant project that gained wide public and institutional recognition – the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis, her professional work has once again received public, institutional, and international acclaim. Elena Kantareva-Decheva graduated with a degree in “Conservation and Restoration” from the National Academy of Arts. In 1997, she won a competition for specialization in “Conservation and Restoration of Paintings and Art Objects” at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in Massachusetts, USA. In 2006, she undertook another specialization in “Analytical Techniques in Conservation” at the same Center. Since 2005, she has been a regular lecturer at the Fine Arts Department at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, and since 2008, after a competition, she has held the academic position of “Associate Professor”.

Her book published in 2022 – *“Floor Mosaics from the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis – Technology and Technique, Condition, Problems, Restoration”*. In fact, from 2015 to 2021, Dr. Decheva led the team for the restoration of mosaics and archaeological objects in the Great Basilica, and from 2011 to 2014, she led the restoration of the mosaics of the archaeological site Small Basilica and the ancient Eirene Building in Plovdiv. Between 2003 and 2009, she led and participated in various national and international projects: from 1998 to 2018, she designed and executed murals in over ten churches in Sofia, Burgas, Plovdiv, Smolyan, Asenovgrad, Pamporovo, Rila, and other towns, by designing and painting a large number of icons in these and other sites, most of which are her own creations. She has a significant number of participations in scientific conferences and publications dedicated to her research and restoration work.

In recent years, she has been primarily associated with the floor mosaics of the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis, with an area of over 2,000 square meters, a monumental project in terms of both management and execution – a site of late antique art. This is the largest

preserved on-site mosaic floor of an early Christian Basilica from the 4th-6th centuries in Europe. “The technical-technological study and documentation of the floors during their restoration provide important information about the sequence and method of their laying, the type, and properties of the materials used.” “The results of the studies carried out during the conservation and restoration of the mosaics are further evidence of the contribution of this interdisciplinary and relatively new science to the overall study of the site”, writes Dr. Kantareva. This successful work, its analyses, and contributions documented in her book are of exceptional importance both for the professionally oriented audience and for the general public. As a result, we have beautifully restored and preserved early Christian mosaics, but behind the beauty of the Basilica and the opportunity to appreciate all this lies the experience, professional, and leadership qualities of Elena Kantareva-Decheva. Her work on this grand project is very responsible, meticulously planned, and well-researched. A conservation, restoration, and exhibition plan for the mosaic floors has been developed. Laboratory analyzes and comparisons of the techniques and materials used have been carried out. The most modern methodologies and analyses have been used, as well as full stratigraphic research of the mosaic floors in all the separate rooms in the Basilica. A periodization and chronology of their laying has been established. All of this is evidence of the significant contribution of her scientific work.

As part of the creative contributions in her habilitation thesis, Elena Kantareva-Decheva presents three additional completed projects related to the execution of murals at two sites and the painting of icons for the iconostasis of one of them. These projects include the murals for the St. George the Victorious Church in Pancharevo, Sofia (2011-2012), the design and execution of 25 icons for the iconostasis of the same Church (2008-2009), and the design and execution of the murals for the St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church in Sarafovo, Burgas (2018-2023).

In the described stages of work presented in the habilitation thesis, the exceptional professional and precise approach of Associate Professor Dr. Decheva is evident, both in theoretical, scientific, and practical aspects. The research and analysis of the foundation directed Associate Professor Decheva and her team to the most suitable technique and method for executing the murals. The preparation of a technology tailored to the given conditions and characteristics of the foundation included sanding, impregnating, and preparing the walls for work.

In some cases, ready-made acrylic paints were used, but for specific projects, such as the painting of the St. George the Victorious Church, classical technology was employed at the request of the contracting authority, involving the preparation of tempera paints with an egg emulsion, which undoubtedly posed a challenge for the team of iconographers.

Moreover, beyond the approach, research, and preparation for the work, there were significant contributions in the compositional and iconographic solutions. In this case, the classical craftsmanship and the author’s concept of the muralist skillfully balance personal interpretation and canonical accuracy in the images. The sense of reverence and veneration

of the individual saints is part of the harmonious and unified expression – both compositionally and coloristically – of the depicted scenes.

The design and painting of the icons for the St. George the Victorious Church in Pancharevo, Sofia, include eight icons from the Royal Row, two icons for the Royal Doors (Annunciation), twelve icons for the Apostles' Row, and two pcs. Ripidi. I will quote Associate Professor Kantareva-Decheva: "In terms of technical and technological aspects, no compromises were made. In my long-standing practice in church painting, I have been convinced that modern synthetic materials do not yield good results, and I avoid their use. As much as possible, I follow the time-tested technology and techniques of the old iconographers."

The wooden bases were prepared entirely using classical technology: glued linen canvas isolated with a glue solution, multilayer chalk ground with a glue solution, polishing of the base, gold leaf with 23-carat transfer, applied with mixtion, and the use of only pigments and egg emulsion for paint preparation.

The painting of the St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church in Sarafovo, Burgas, began in 2018. We must highlight and acknowledge the technical and technological work and approach, as well as the selection, thematic distribution, and iconographic scenes that are in harmony with the architectural layout of the Church.

Here, we again see an authorial decision strictly adhering to the canonical iconographic scheme. Balanced and harmonious compositional solutions were found, executed in a painting technology that considers the specifics of the plaster in the Church. It may indeed be a matter of skill and years of successful practice to subordinate the artist's ego and the need for self-expression to the unified, spiritual, and powerful presence of the saint's image and the impressive atmosphere in the Church, while still retaining and asserting the authorial line.

When discussing the work of Associate Professor Dr. Decheva, we must truly recognize her contributions not only to young restorers, iconographers, scholars, and artists in this professional field but also her immense contribution to the preservation and maintenance of Plovdiv's cultural and historical heritage.

Associate Professor Dr. Kantareva-Decheva is an authority in her field, with over 25 years of professional experience and undeniable contributions to both her creative and scientific work. Considering the aforementioned and my impressions of her extremely active, highly professional, and socially significant work, I confidently support this candidacy and recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury vote positively and award the academic title of "Professor" to Associate Professor Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva.

10.05.2024

Prof. Dr. Zdravka Vasileva

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