

## **PEER REVIEW**

by Prof. Dr. Miglena Lyudmilova Prashkova, University of Veliko Tarnovo, Professional field 8.2. "Fine Arts"

regarding a procedure for occupation of the academic position of "**Professor**"  
Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts  
Fine Arts Department  
Faculty of Fine Arts

### **General information about the announced competition:**

*Higher education field:* 8. "Arts"

*Professional field:* 8.2. "Fine Arts"

*Scientific specialty:* "Fine Arts – Mural Painting"

The competition was announced in State Gazette, Issue 5, date: 16.01.2024

### **1. Data about the competition**

The competition for occupation of the academic position of "Professor" in Mural Painting is announced to meet the needs of the Fine Arts Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv. Only one candidate has submitted documents – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva, who has been employed under a permanent contract with the Department since 2005. The Scientific Jury was appointed by Order No ПД-27-047/14.03.2024 of the Rector. According to the protocol of its first meeting held on 25.03.2024, the submitted table was accepted, showing that the candidate meets the minimum national scientometric indicators. At the same meeting, the date for the final meeting was set for **05.06.2024**, and the chairperson and members of the Scientific Jury were selected to prepare reviews and opinions. There were no violations with regards to the procedure.

The documentation presented to me for review under the competition meets the requirements of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its applications, and the requirements of the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts.

### **2. Data about the candidate**

Elena Kantareva-Decheva graduated with Master's degree in "Conservation and Restoration" at the National Academy of Arts in Sofia (1989). She also obtained two specializations in restoration from the Art Conservation Center in Williamston, Massachusetts, USA (1997, 2006). Since 2005, she has been a regular lecturer at the Fine Arts Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, where she is an Associate Professor and teaches courses in the specialty of "Church Painting", later named "Mural Painting". In 2020, the Academy of Music,

Dance and Fine Arts awarded her the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor”. The topic of her dissertation was *“Floor Mosaics from the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis – Technology and Technique, Condition, Problems, Restoration”*, and the text was printed as a monograph (2022) and presented in the candidate’s table of scientometric indicators (D7) under the competition.

Since graduating from the National Academy of Arts, Elena Kantareva-Decheva has worked as a restorer, and since 1994, she has also worked in the field of contemporary church painting, executing icons and murals independently and as part of teams. Her activity in both areas is impressive. For the purposes of the competition, it is advisable to summarize the information presented in the candidate’s artistic biography: 15 large-scale restoration projects in Bulgaria and abroad, 15 projects for icon painting and murals in Bulgaria, as well as 42 participations in exhibitions and art forums in the country and abroad. Alongside her artistic work, Elena Kantareva-Decheva has significant scientific activity directly related to her work as a restorer and her participation in numerous scientific conferences and forums both in Bulgaria and abroad. The results of her extensive research in the field of restoration and the preservation of cultural monuments are the subject of 19 publications, also both in Bulgaria and abroad. Evidence of their significance is the citations of the articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals. It is worth mentioning that two large-scale projects carried out in the last decade are an excellent example in the field of restoration and exhibition of ancient floor mosaics – the so-called Small Basilica and the Bishop’s Basilica of Philippopolis. The candidate is the author and direct supervisor of the implementation of these projects, which are of unquestionable contribution on a global scale.

Elena Kantareva-Decheva is member of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Restoration Section; the Association of Restorers in Bulgaria; the International Association for the Study of Ancient Mosaics (AIEMA), and the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics (ICCM).

### **3. Description of the works presented as a habilitation thesis**

In the competition for occupation of the academic position of “Professor” in Mural Painting, Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva presents three main original works: the design and execution of murals for St. George the Victorious Church in the Byala Cherkva Residential Complex, Pancharevo Region, Sofia (2011–2012); the design and execution of murals for St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church in Sarafovo District, Burgas (2018–2023); and the design and execution of 24 icons for the iconostasis of St. George the Victorious Church in the Byala Cherkva Residential Complex, Pancharevo Region, Sofia (2008–2009). In support of her habilitation work, five co-authored publications are provided, contributing to the field of early Christian art research. Additionally, two more extensive projects are included: “Conservation, Restoration, and Display of the Archaeological Site Small Basilica – Plovdiv” (2011–2013) and “Leadership, Restoration, and Painting of 37 Icons for the Iconostasis of St. Prophet Elijah Church, Sinapovo” (2015–2016).

#### 4. Artistic and creative contributions

The monumental works and icons presented by the candidate in the competition are intended for contemporary church interiors. The publications complement knowledge in the field of ancient art research. The project for the restoration and exhibition of an archaeological site is part of a comprehensive solution for a modern museum space. Due to their scale, they cannot be thoroughly analyzed separately within the scope of this peer review. Therefore, I will attempt to summarize the results of Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva's artistic and scientific work, which can be examined in three main categories and determine the contributory nature of the presented works.

*Firstly. Creation of a unified ensemble synthesizing the arts in the church.*

The themes adopted from Church tradition are united in a common solution, adhering to the main themes – liturgical, related to the Holy Eucharist and the Incarnation, as well as Evangelical and historical, connected with the catholicity of the church. The contemporary sound of the executed monumental works is attributed to the author's color palette and recognizable painting style, as well as the mastery of scale, proportioning of figures in individual compositions, and pictorial fields, all of which are subordinated to the architecture of the respective church. The candidate convincingly presents the entire process from design to implementation and substantiates the decisions made in the annotations accompanying each project. The ensembles are created through the skillful use of artistic means, with prior preparation including research, the compilation of a comprehensive iconographic program, and the selection of materials for execution.

*Secondly. A research interest that is directly related to design and implementation work.* Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva possesses a pronounced research interest directly tied to her project and execution work. Her research interest is inherently linked to her role as a restorer. The investigative phase in this activity is mandatory and inevitably influences the execution of projects, whether they are related to the creation of new works or the preservation of cultural heritage. The technical and technological aspect of these investigations is typically contributory, serving as a guarantee for the successful realization of contemporary artistic solutions in both church interiors and museum spaces. High technical proficiency is particularly necessary in the process of training future specialists in mural painting, providing them with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

*Thirdly. Practice and teamwork.* The large-scale projects presented, authored by Dr. Kantareva-Decheva, have been successfully executed thanks to a wide range of practical activities, based on the experience gained over the years. This includes not only specific knowledge and skills but also the ability to work in teams. The organization of these large-scale implementations inherently contains elements of the training process. Involving performers with different individualities and levels of skill in the course of the collective work until the expected end result is achieved requires the leader to possess special qualities. In this sense, the leader is also a teacher. Thus, each of the realized

projects becomes a sort of educational course, creative studio, or workshop.

### **5. Teaching activity**

Dr. Kantareva-Decheva's work in the Department is related not only to the development and updating of the curriculum for the specialty and the programs for the disciplines she directly leads, but also to all extracurricular forms of education that she conducts, rather than just participating in them. In this regard, the main line is formulated in the third category of contributions, which is of particular importance for her teaching work. In the teams she leads, both assistants from the specialty and current trainees or graduates are included. Dr. Kantareva-Decheva repeatedly organizes joint student exhibitions, projects, and participations in artistic and creative forums, where the trainees have the opportunity to interact with both established and young artists. Traditionally, students from the specialty present their work at a unique forum – the Biennial of Church Arts, held in Veliko Tarnovo. I am one of the initiators and organizers of the last one, so I have no doubt about the candidate's full and successful teaching work.

### **6. Conclusion**

Given everything said so far, I **confidently** propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Assoc. Prof. Dr. Elena Kantareva-Decheva the academic position of "Professor" under Higher education field "Arts", Professional field 8.2. "Fine Arts", Scientific specialty "Mural Painting".

21.04.2024  
Veliko Tarnovo

Prof. Dr. Miglena Prashkova