

REVIEW

by Prof Miglena Ludmilova Prashkova, PhD, Veliko Tarnovo University
professional field: 8.2. Fine Arts

regarding the procedure for occupying the academic position Associate Professor
Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts, Plovdiv,
Faculty of Fine Arts,
Department of Fine Arts

General information about the announced competition:

Field of Higher Education: 8. Arts

Professional field: 8.2. Fine Arts

Scientific specialty: Fine Arts - Mural painting

The competition was announced in: SG no. 63 of 25.07.2023

1. Information about the competition:

The competition for the academic position Associate Professor in Mural Painting, has been announced for the needs of the Department of Fine Arts, the Faculty Fine Arts AMDFA, Plovdiv. Only one candidate has submitted documents – Stefka Ilieva Popova, PhD, who has been working in the department since 2010. The scientific jury has been appointed by Rector's order No RD-27-121/21.09.2023. According to the minutes of its first meeting, held on 05.10.2023, the presented table in the documents has been accepted and it shows that the candidate fulfills the minimum national scientometric indicators. At the same meeting, the date for the final meeting was determined – 05.01.2023, the chairman and the members of the scientific jury were elected to prepare reviews and opinions. No violations were committed in the procedure.

The documentation submitted to me for review meets the requirements of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for its application and the requirements of the AMDFA.

2. Information about candidate

Stefka Popova graduated with a Master's degree in Church Painting in 2009 at the Faculty of Fine Arts of AMDFA - Plovdiv. Since 2010, she has been a teacher in the Department of Fine Arts of the same faculty and teaches classes in the specialty Church Painting and Wall Painting. In 2020, AMDFA awarded her the educational and scientific degree Doctor. The topic of the dissertation is *Creation of Creative Models for Decoration of a Modern Temple in the Education of Students*, and the text is published as a monograph (2023) and is presented in the table of scientometric indicators (G7) of the candidate for the competition.

Since 2010, she has been working in the field of church painting. She has a solo exhibition presented at the New Bulgarian University, Plovdiv, in December 2011 - February 2012. Her creative

work is associated with a number of participations in teams of students and teachers from her department – designing and painting murals and icons, mainly in the region of Plovdiv and Smolyan. Sha has also participated in collective exhibitions of icons, several editions of the International Biennale of Church Arts (2013, 2015, 2017, 2023), which takes place in the "Rafael Mihailov" Exhibition Halls in Veliko Tarnovo, and others. One of the teams in which she works is in the realization of the large-scale project of Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva for the restoration and conservation of the mosaics in the so-called Great Basilica in Plovdiv (2019–2020), as an assistant restorer.

She has six publications that discuss various topics in the study and development of the ecclesiastical arts. Evidence of her achievements in this field are the presented three citations and two reviews, one of which is for the edition prepared by the candidate on the basis of her dissertation work.

3. Description of the works presented as a habilitation thesis

In the competition for Associate Professor, Stefka Popova participates with a solo exhibition of icons, opened on 16 December 2011 in the Sempre Gallery, New Bulgarian University, Plovdiv. The portfolio for the competition shows 15 icons from the exhibition, with different formats and various subjects, executed in traditional icon painting technique (egg tempera) on wooden panels, with applied gilding. They represent images and figures of saints, as well as more complex compositional solutions and multi-part icons, which include scenes with Mariological and life cycles. Seven more icons have been added to this indicator - four with dimensions of 100/70 cm, designed and executed for the church "St. Prophet Elijah" in the village of Churen, and three for the iconostasis of the church "Holy Ascension of Christ" in the village of Churekovo. Two of the icons for the last church have a format of 100/ 70 cm, and the third is the temple icon, with dimensions of 120/ 85 cm. Although the execution technique is not specified, I assume it is the same applied on the icons in her solo exhibition. The series of works, presents as habilitation work, is complemented by two mural panels, designed and executed in the vestibule of Paisiy Hilendarski Secondary School in Plovdiv, which represent a scene with the figures of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius and a composition with the figures of Stoyan Mihailovski and Panayot Pipkov. The last presented work is the restoration of the icon "St. Nikolay" from the church "St. George" in the village of Yoakim Gruevo and the study of its origin.

4. Artistic and creative contributions

Most of the works presented by the candidate in the competition are icons intended for temple spaces. Only the wall-painting compositions realized in one of the Plovdiv schools have a secular character, although the idea of depicting both the figures of the saints and the images of the two authors of the hymn *March Ahead, O Revived People* in itself is also of a sacred in nature. Therefore, I will not analyze each of the presented icons and murals separately, but I will try to summarize the contributions that are the result of the artistic and creative work of Dr. Stefka Popova and can be considered in two main categories.

First. Tradition and modernity. Indeed, the author uses traditional subject matter adopted from the Tradition of the Church. Her works are executed in traditional icon painting technique, but created in the 21st century, have a modern appearance. Known academic techniques are used for the plastic construction of the painting. In this sense and through the author's color, Stefka Popova's icons and murals have their own recognizable style. Compositionally, the pictorial field of each work is mastered, regardless of whether known patterns are used or new iconographic schemes are composed. The mastery of the artistic skills and the knowledge of the properties of the materials used are of particular importance for the teacher who has devoted themselves to the specific educational process in the art of icon painting.

Second. Research interest. Stefka Popova demonstrates a serious research interest related to the composition of creative models in the design of icons and murals for temple and public spaces. This experience is particularly important for teaching work in a purely practical specialty, taking into account the prior theoretical training as well as good technical literacy.

Not only the iconographic compositions require preliminary research. On the contrary, the author sets herself a creative task related to display in one space, on the one hand, the images regulated by the Tradition of the Church, and on the other hand – persons connected with the Bulgarian history, whose faces are documented through photographs. This is a challenge that also requires its own research, re-adjustment of thinking or a different perspective. At the same time, executed on the walls of a school, both compositions should have a single message. The result is probably yet to be commented on, but the artistic solution has a contributing character and is easy to perceive by the students.

The candidate's participation in large-scale restoration projects, for example in the team that worked on the mosaics in the Bishop's Basilica in Plovdiv, is a guarantee of acquiring irreplaceable experience both in research work and in the improvement of practical skills. A good example in this respect is the restoration of the icon from the church in the village of Yoakim Gruevo – an example from the time of the late Bulgarian Revival, the work of one of the great masters, a representative of the second generation of Samokov painters. The study of such a monument, which inevitably provokes research interest, can certainly contribute to the formation of a new point of view, a new approach or new experiments in practical education.

I have some recommendations that relate to the overall presentation of the works in the applicant's portfolio. The dimensions and the execution technique of some of them is not mentioned. It is important to note the dimensions and technique of the wall panels in the school space, for example. This is not just supplementary information, but relates to the technical and artistic characteristics of the murals. The works should be presented on a catalog basis, with technical data and a short annotation for each, and the approach for all of them should be unified.

5. Teaching work

As an external member of the scientific jury, it is difficult for me to evaluate the teaching work of Stefka Popova, who teaches classes in Icon Painting, Iconography, Wall Painting, Composition and

Drawing. In the submitted documents it is mentioned that she compiled and updated the curricula for the disciplines of Iconography, Drawing, Theology and Painting.

Stefka Popova's participation in creative workshops, which are related to demonstrations and performances of the fresco technique, is impressive. Such activities are important for students who have the opportunity to work on material together with their teachers. This is a modern option for in-studio training, in the form of extracurricular activities that is designed for students who want to devote themselves to wall painting.

Many of the general exhibitions were organized together with students and teachers of the specialty, which speaks of good teamwork. Live communication is of particular importance for good practical training, as well as for the creative process itself, so I have no doubts about the successful teaching work of the candidate.

6. Conclusion

In view of all that has been said so far, I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award Stefka Ilieva Popova the academic position Associate Professor in the field of higher education 8. Arts, professional field 8.2 Fine Arts, scientific specialty Mural Painting.

18. 11. 2023

Veliko Tarnovo Prof Miglena Prashkova, PhD