

OPINION

for the scientific and artistic contributions of Dr. Stefka Ilieva Popova
for occupying the academic position of Associate Professor in a professional field 8.2. Fine Arts,
specialty Mural Painting, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of
AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" Plovdiv

I. Information about the competition

The competition for the occupation of the academic position "Associate Professor" in a professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, specialty Mural Painting, is promulgated in the State Gazette, No 63 of 25.07. 2023. Documents for participation in the competition have been submitted by only one candidate – Stefka Ilieva Popova PhD. The submitted documents fully meet the requirements of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act. Pursuant to a decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Fine Arts, documented in protocol No. 2 of 18.09. 2023, is issued an order with No. RD 27-121/ 21.09.2023 for the appointment of a scientific jury for the competition procedure. There are no violations in the competition procedure.

II. Information about candidate

Assistant Stefka Popova graduated with a Master's degree in Church Painting in 2009 at AMDFA Prof Asen Diamandiev. As soon as she graduated, she was extremely successfully integrated into the teaching staff of the specialty. Immediately after graduation, she started teaching, and in the period 2010-2016 she was the secretary of the Department of Applied Arts. The teaching career of the candidate covers a wide range of fundamental disciplines: painting, iconography, icon painting, mural painting, color sketch, drawing. The official reference shows that during the last academic year, Stefka Popova PhD had a workload of 720 hours, equated to exercises. In 2020 Stefka Popova defended her doctoral dissertation titled *Creation of Creative Models for Decoration of a Modern Temple in the Education of Students*.

Along with her teaching work, Stefka Popova is constant member of the team of Assoc. Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva in the work on restoration and inscription of Orthodox churches. I am listing only a small part of the projects: restoration and conservation of the Bishop's Basilica; fresco in the temple of St. Nikolay – Yoakim Gruevo village; painting of festive icons for the iconostasis of the church "St. Ilia" in the village of Sinapovo; inscription of the icons in the church "St. Dimitar" in the village of Sarnegor and in "St. Assumption" in the city of Smolyan; painting murals for the church "St. George the Victorious" in the Pancharevo neighborhood of Sofia; inscription of the temple icon for the iconostasis of the "Ascension of Christ" chapel in the village of Churekovo, Smolyan region. Stefka Popova is also the author of a solo exhibition of author's icons (New Bulgarian University - NBU-Plovdiv, December 2011 - February 2012).

She is the author of numerous scientific articles related both to immediate problems of iconology, the Christian canon and the historical development of temple painting, as well as to questions

about the teaching of church painting. Based on her doctorate, she published the monograph *Creation of Creative Models for Decoration of a Modern Temple in the Education of Students*.

III. Description of the candidate's scientific and artistic work

The candidate's work is in three directions that are particularly interconnected: rich artistic practice, consistent teaching work, remarkable scientific developments. The first two areas were partially described in Section II. Here it is necessary to add that students of church painting are traditionally extremely well received in the circles of their teachers. This is one of the very few happy exceptions, not only within our Academy, but in our national science in general. The results of this are visible: all these large-scale and complex tasks of restoration and inscription of temples were conceived and executed as a team. More than a decade ago Stefka Popova PhD was accepted by her teachers as a colleague, and now she is passing to young specialists not only her experience, but also her attitude towards the collegiate community. In this sense, she is not just a worthy candidate, but her candidacy would also contribute to the specialty's institutional and creative affirmation.

The complex qualities of Stefka Popova PhD are also evident in her practical work on the inscription of many Orthodox churches: the excellent mastery of technology and the problems of the Christian iconography, the creative use of the normative poetics in the Orthodox canon, the knowledge and understanding of the immediate tasks both at present and at the same time historically.

At this point, I would like to emphasize the monograph of Stefka *Creation of Creative Models for Decoration of a Modern Temple in the Education of Students*. I believe that this scientific work is particularly significant precisely as an intersection between the various activities and spheres of her work. This work demonstrates that she is not only a well-prepared artist in the specialized field of Christian iconography, but also a scientist with fundamental theoretical training, with an idea of the overall chronotopy of the image in the Orthodox Church.

The main position of the research is built on the following internal paradox: the problem of the unity between the permanent stability in the essence of the canon and the dynamics of its development. - The main question that the researcher formulates in the conditions of this paradox is – what is the place of the learning process in it. For the purposes of this search, the author uses a broad, plastic concept of historicity: "*Historicity is that which most often changes one iconographic type with another*" (p. 8). In parallel, Stefka Popova develops the foundations of an aesthetic-semiotic reading of the complex image of the icon. In this regard, the reconsideration of the studies of the Byzantologist Viktor Bichkov - both with his specific work on the statements of the church fathers and with his efforts to build a comprehensive typology of Orthodox culture – is very useful for her research. To build the phenomenological point of view to the semiological perspective, she uses very aptly and with understanding Boris Rauschenbach's book *Spatial Composition in Painting*.

The methodological point of view in Popova's monograph is already found at the end of the first part with the fundamental section "Importance of studying iconography in the specialty Church Painting at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv and other higher schools". The methodology is built on

the basis of the already outlined historical plasticity of the canon. At the same time, from here on - in the second and third parts - the monograph also takes on a distinct empirical appearance. As in a kind of diary, here is a description of the successive steps in the practical field work. In this sense, Stefka Popova's book also offers practical instructions for future specialists, as well as for those who will train these specialists.

IV. Scientific and artistic contributions of the candidate.

- The practical experience of Stefka Popova PhD in her work on restoration and inscription of Orthodox temples is undoubtedly helpful. In addition to the contributions listed here in Section II, at least as many more can be added – always executed with technical and technological precision, with creative interpretation of the norms of the canon and research understanding.

- The entire career of Stefka Popova presents her as an indisputable expert on church painting in Bulgaria. The creation, rationalization, maintenance and direction of this characteristic complexity of activity related to the place and the role of the Christian temple in the context of the Orthodox tradition, it should be emphasized as her fundamental contribution. This deployment binds the aspects of the ritual and the applied and builds its meanings over their opposition, binds specific pictorial traditions and their architectural placement and brings out this placement of the image in the architectural as a complex problem, binds stable canonical norms and their transformations over time.

- The particularly important methodological aspect of the candidate's work is subordinated to the overall composition described in the above contribution. In connection with this complexity, the methodological concept of Stefka Popova includes an analysis of educational content (problematization of lecture material with historical and technological basis), description of empirical approaches (including describing erroneous work models and creation of working algorithms) and field studies with the development of immediate work plans.

- A third complex contribution of Stefka Popova's work is related to the significant social tasks that the Eastern Orthodoxy should fulfill. There is a need for the Christian orthodox tradition to be preserved and developed in terms of iconology, technology and in terms of the overall concept. The candidate in this competition is at the level of this need and is fully aware of the challenges of the current situation, the possibilities and means of expression of church painting and its teaching.

In conclusion, in view of the constant and particularly strong presence of Stefka Popova in the specialty Church Painting, as well as on the basis of her scientific and artistic contributions, I propose to the respected scientific jury to award her the academic position of "Associate Professor" in professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, in specialty Mural Painting, and I confidently vote "In favor".

7 November 2023

Prof Galina Lardeva, PhD