

## **REVIEW**

by Prof Vladimir Dimitrov Avramov, PhD  
VTU “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”, Faculty of Fine Arts  
on the dissertation of **Assoc. Prof Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva**  
on topic:

### **FLOOR MOSAICS FROM THE BISHOP'S BASILICA OF PHILIPPOPOLIS – TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUE, CONDITION, PROBLEMS, RESTORATION**

AMDFFA “Prof Asen Diamandiev”, Plovdiv

Scientific field: 8. Arts

Professional field: 8.2. Art

Doctoral program: Applied, Fine Arts and Design"

Academic supervisor Prof Galina Lardeva-Minkova

#### **1. Information about the candidate**

Elena Kantareva began her professional education at National Art School “Tsanko Lavrenov”, Plovdiv. In 1989 he graduated in Conservation and Restoration at the National Academy of Art, Sofia. The same year she was already working at the National Institute of Immovable Cultural Heritage (in the field of ancient mosaics) and at the Archaeological Museum in Plovdiv. She specialized Painting Conservation and Restoration of at the Art Conservation Center in Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA in 1997 and 2006. In 2012-2013 she was appointed Deputy Director of Municipal Institute "Ancient Plovdiv", and since 2021 is its director.

Since 2003 she is a lecturer at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts, Plovdiv (2003-2006 – part-time; 2005-2008 – on employment contract). In 2008 she became an associate professor at the Department of Fine Arts, where she was the head of the majors "Church Painting" and "Wall Painting". She is a member of prestigious professional organizations: Union of Bulgarian Artists, Association of Restorers in Bulgaria, member of the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics (ICCM). She is a leader of creative teams (since 2003 until now) for the restoration and conservation of floor mosaics in the "small" and the "big" basilicas in Plovdiv, she is also active mural and icon painter (together with Dechko Dechev): the Assumption Church in Pamporovo, icons in the church “St. Visarion Smolenski”, Smolyan, frescoes in the church “St. Petka ”, village of Rila; in the church "St. George” in Byala Cherkva Residential Complex, Sofia, etc.

Assoc. Prof Kantareva has notable creative and scientific career, which includes: over 15 large-scale restoration sites, over 40 participations in specialized art exhibitions, 20 participations in scientific conferences and symposiums, numerous publications in the field of mosaics.

## **2. Information about the dissertation**

Elena Decheva is enrolled as a doctoral student individual form of study at the Department of Applied Arts of AMDFA, Plovdiv with order № RD-27-034/ 28.04.2017. She was unregistered with the right to thesis defense with order RD-27-006 / 02.06.2020. **No violations were committed during the realization of the dissertation.**

## **3. Information about the thesis and the author's abstract**

The work fully complies with the requirements of the Higher Education Act of the Republic of Bulgaria. It is a model for clear structure and logical exposition and together with the abstract they are comprehensive and original scientific study. It consists of: table of contents, introduction, 5 chapters, conclusion, scientific contributions, publications on the topic and bibliography including 83 titles. A total of 176 pages, the dissertation is supported by 130 photographs, presenting visually the specifics of the research topic. The abstract correctly reflects the text of the dissertation and has a clear generalizing function. The methodology and tools used are optimally selected and correspond to the objectives and purpose of the study.

From a linguistic point of view, Elena Kantareva's stylistic device is a rhythmic combination of erudite "recitatives" (Chapter II and Chapter V) and well-placed "silent" journalistic pauses between them (Chapter III and Chapter IV). Such a "morphological" model is magnificently synthesized by Mozart in his famous phrase: "The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between".

## **4. Scientific contributions**

The author's creative and scientific work is focused on two directions, marking two parallel spheres of creativity – one of them is rather on the border between science and art, dominated by humanitarianism, ethics and preservation of cultural heritage (restoration); the other embodies the demiurgic creative act (sacred painting and murals). This is a distinctive feature of the artist Elena Decheva, a physiognomic author's mark, which is largely projected on the choice of the study. Although the author builds up her exposition quite impassively at first glance, I think that in this seemingly distant view on the restoration there is a huge element of powerful personal impulsiveness, of a very personal attitude (subjective, of course, but in the best sense of the word) and love... I think that this "25<sup>th</sup> frame" is of great importance for expressing the author's position on the topic of the thesis and I will start from there:

Restoration is a very noble, ethical profession (territory), including both extensive scientific training in various fields such as chemistry, physics and biology, and a moral personal imperative to preserve and protect the material nature of our national cultural values. However, the profile of the restorer is not one-sided and directly subordinated only to the paradigm of "encapsulated" physical protection of artifacts. The modern restorer has the competencies for skillful communication in

parallel fields, he is in close collaboration with scientists, curators, art critics, managers, representatives of various church denominations. And last but not least - the professional nature of the "great" restorer includes his intuitive sense of preventive conservation of seemingly problem-free, reliable objects. Perhaps this is the basis of the cognitive view of the restorer to the natural subject of the restoration - the mosaic artist, mural painter (respectively icon painter). In its optimized version, this "dialogue" (tandem) is combined in one and the same person – called to create and preserve at the same time. This is exactly the case with Elena Decheva. Her comprehensive training and routine enable her to derive the "essence" of the restored objects and to integrate them interpretatively in her author's projects. By default, the technological perfection here is undeniable!

The **contents** of the dissertation is very well structured both chronologically and technically and terminologically. Its dialectical consistency strongly reminds me of a kind of library classifier. The **introduction** naturally emphasizes the prehistory, the modern technical and technological studies of floor mosaics, and the current restoration methods for such temporal dialogues. The floor mosaics in Philippopolis from the two main periods are described very correctly (with the necessary dating and style characteristics): II-II c. and IV-VI c. Particularly important for the dissertation is the second period, which includes the floor mosaics of the Bishop's Basilica. With its stunning area of over 2000 sq. m., this is "the largest preserved mosaic floor of an Early Christian basilica from the IV-VI century in Europe" (p.5). Emphasis is placed on the analysis of the restoration processes until 1990, and even after this fateful year for the economic situation in Bulgaria. The introduction largely embodies the development of thesis itself - from the general to the individual. On a general map of the floor mosaics of ancient buildings (Eirene, the Small and the Big Basilica), Decheva places her protagonists (technique and technology) like on the mise-en-scene in the time staging of her mosaic "play" – from previous conservation and restoration works. (1983-2000) to the current state of the Basilica, the fruit of a combined creative and technological process: conservation, restoration, display and protection (2015-2020). This process gives the Bishop's Basilica a "chance for a new life" (p. 5) - the great goal of the research, and for the author of the dissertation – a unique opportunity to "apply modern analytical techniques and methods of restoration" (p. 165). And she uses them (the specialized methods) in their entire range: from purely practical "laboratory analysis", "stratigraphic research", etc. to theoretical and interdisciplinary: historical, descriptive, comparative, stylistic iconographic analysis, experimental-analytical, even deductive. This adds to the work an additional sense of unity of time, place and action – something very typical of the Roman art (respectively the Roman floor mosaic).

The tasks of the research are "solved" very ingeniously and are in fact the basis for the scientific contributions of the work. It is no coincidence that the wording of the 12 contributions at the end (certainly of high value) almost completely overlap with the tasks set in the Introduction. This in itself is very demonstrative of the disciplined and methodical work in the "pursuit" of the objective and the tasks of the study.

A strong support at the end of the Introduction is the information background, ensuring its objectivity and including works of renowned architects and mosaic artists from antiquity to the present day, laboratory analysis of mortars, binders, tesserae, publications on conservation and restoration of mosaics.

**Chapter 1** begins with an impressive list of 13 sites with ancient floor mosaics, discovered only in Plovdiv (p. 9) - a fertile basis for studying the continuity of the Roman mosaics from the time of the Imperium in the subsequent Eastern Roman Empire. The places for their display are also marked – in Archeological Museum Plovdiv, as well as outside it. Naturally, the main emphasis is on item 2 of the list – the Bishop's Basilica from the IV-VI century (pp. 14-16) – a three-nave impressive building with an open courtyard and uncovered polychrome floor mosaics, in places in three layers on top of each other, or with "3 floors" according to the author (p.64 -65). The building is a major "participant" in the large-scale joint program of 2017 between the municipality of Plovdiv and the Foundation America for Bulgaria for restoration, conservation and exhibition of antique mosaics on the territory of ancient Philippopolis.

In **chapter 2** focus is on the specifics of floor mosaic from antiquity to the present day, as well as on the organization of the mosaic studios. As a practicing sculptor-monumentalist (and leader of a mural team), I will note that the way of coordination of a creative team in antiquity and modern times is completely identical. Especially in the implementation of large-scale projects, the internal organization and unconditional discipline and dedication are absolutely necessary. The stylistic proximity and professional dexterity of the various members of such a collective greatly ensure the quality and aesthetics of the "common" work, and the skillful management of the process adds the implicit cumulative energy that each work of art has by definition.

The chapter also discusses the classical ways of arranging mosaics (so-called opuses), as well as the technological sequence of the respective type of arrangement.

I may be slightly off topic, but I would like to mention that from the ancient specimens described in the first and second parts, and the technological development of the mosaics in Philippopolis (the necessary base, the allegorical "landscape" of scientific research) almost as if from Aladdin's lamp there comes the "historical magic" of this actually pointillistic stone painting with all its "pearls": the small broken stone tesserae, the enamel mosaic and the opus sectile, the enamel... And since I brought Aladdin in, let me say that when I look from above the restored mosaic planes, I feel just like him, floating on the magic rug over this fabulous surface.

**Chapter 3** is the natural "stem" of the study, whose indisputable leaf crown "shoots up" the most in chapter four. Slightly derivative of the first chapter, chapter 3 discusses in much greater detail (and in historical periodization) the **main "attribute" of the Great Basilica – the floor mosaics**. The unique decorative-illusionist formations are really a huge challenge for their restorer. A prominent sculptor-monumentalist like Decheva cannot help but "reveal" the compositional symbiosis between the decorative modular panels (be they friezes or parquet figures) and the realistic images in the spaces

between them - baskets, vases, fruits and birds. Basic principles of mural painting are touched upon - rhythm, tectonic order, symmetry and asymmetry, raster, orthogonal grids, color harmonies... Here is the big point, fixed by the author: "These mosaics have no parallel with any of the famous compositional schemes and decorative elements common in the Roman Empire. They have their own specific appearance, combining different influences with the local culture, traditions and resource" (p.87-88).

Similarly to the connection between chapters 1 and 3, **Chapter Four** is a genealogical continuation of the second chapter, only adapted to the respective object. The stratigraphy and the technological mosaic order from the Mediterranean Antiquity have been transferred to a specific terrain – Plovdiv and the Bishop's Basilica. The in-depth and very accurately described observations are the literal equivalent of a technological manual for laying floor mosaics; on a "train through the centuries" that the modern mosaicists (students) can "ride", accompanied by an informed guide, through the seemingly inaccessible and enigmatic territory of the mosaic...

Stepping on her erudition and brilliant knowledge of the nature of the mosaic materials, Elena Decheva quite naturally puts the "crown" of her work – **Chapter Five**. This chapter combines scientific analysis and shared personal creative practices, clear cohesion between theoretical possibilities and practical results. For me, this is the most valuable part of the work, because it unconditionally reveals not a abstract polemicist, but a true practicing artist, using her knowledge in an optimal and operative way. This is a serious contributing moment in terms of pedagogical methods that Assoc. Prof Kantareva undoubtedly uses – the formation of teams that allow her current graduates to enter prepared in the eternal collaboration between a teacher – apologist and a student – adept.

Instead of recommendations (which I really do not have) I want to honestly admit that the reality created by Elena Decheva and her team inspires such a respect and is so tangible that my vocabulary simply cannot cover its large scale. It also seems to me that it is too pretentious and heartless to define or classify it in some banal stylistic-artistic form (norm). What she has "resurrected" just has to be experienced and felt on site! It must be visited many times! And here I will rely on Henri Bergson: "There is nothing in my mind that has not previously passed through the emotions ..."

The **conclusion** summarizes the observations very precisely and has an enviable, almost intonational structure of the text. This makes it clear and definite, without "lightening" its semantic potential.

In her **scientific contributions** Elena Kantareva presents very correctly in 12 points the main qualities of her dissertation. They are precise summaries of the in-depth studied internal movements in the restoration practice and **I absolutely agree with them**. And one more thing: her contributions are not burdened with unnecessary pompousness. They focus directly on the contemporary conservation and restoration art and formulate it with eloquent vocabulary. Their wording is very intelligent, with both an outspoken (dispassionate) and an internal (Looking inwards) point of view (as I mentioned at

the beginning). They cover the entire role of an honorable artist, analytically and methodically approaching the issues in the various genres in which she works. They are deliberately devoid of provocation and shocking innovations, which are almost always the equivalent of a superficial demonstration of self-serving outrage and difficult to cover up an "empty" art form.

**The publications in specialized editions are entirely on the subject of the dissertation** and are completely sufficient to meet the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act and the National Center for Information and Documentation.

### **5. Conclusion.**

The research of Assoc. Prof Kantareva-Decheva is a very tight, complex work, a literal "dissection" of the problem. It creates the feeling of "entering" the topic in the first person, with a marked creative presence based on the accumulated rich empirical experience. For me, however, the unconditional "usefulness" of the work is in a slightly different plane, namely: through her in-depth scientific and practical analysis in such a respectful field, Elena Kantareva symbolically provides guaranteed solid training of her students, her professional successors - plastic, aesthetic, ethical... There is both a meticulous examination of realized personal objects and an immanent statement for the formation of a modern holistic restoration-conservation model, including both mosaics and murals, icons and church utensils.

Based on all the above and after a thorough reading the scientific work and the accompanying documents, **I give my positive assessment of the dissertation. I stand firmly behind the merits of the research and recommend to the Scientific Jury to award Assoc. Prof Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"!**

09.01.2022  
Veliko Tarnovo

Prof Vladimir Avramov