

OPINION

on the dissertation for obtaining educational and scientific degree "Doctor" of Assoc. Prof Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva on the topic: Floor mosaics from the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis – technology and technique, condition, problems, restoration

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Iva Doseva,

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Information on the dissertation and the procedure. Assoc. Prof Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva is an active artist-restorer with very extensive experience in restoration and preservation of cultural heritage. Among the sites where she headed the restoration of mosaics (management, design and execution), in addition to the Bishop's Basilica (2015-2020), are the archeological site "Eirene" (2003/2004) and Early Christian Basilica with Baptistery (the Small Basilica) (2011 - 2014), all from the ancient Philippopolis (Plovdiv). She has also worked on the restoration of murals, iconostasis, icons in churches throughout Bulgaria, including those that are cultural monuments of national importance ("Assumption of the Virgin" in Bachkovo Monastery and "St. Mary" in Pazardzhik, etc.).

In 2003 Elena Kantareva started teaching at AMDFA, Department of Fine Arts (in 2008 she becomes associate professor) in the field of technology and technique of painting: icon painting, mural painting, composition, color study, conservation and restoration. Undoubtedly, the transfer of experience, knowledge, skills to generations of restorers is a very important aspect of her work and is among the long-term contributions of the doctoral candidate.

Throughout her professional career, Elena Kantareva pays significant attention to her scientific work – she participates with reports in national and international forums, symposia, conferences, seminars. She is the author of scientific publications with impact factor. According to the attached list, since 2007 her publications in national and international scientific journals are eighteen (10 are in print, 7 of them are co-authored), there is also another one, nineteenth, with a popular science character. The candidate continues her work as an artist, as she annually participates in exhibitions and/ or workshops, some of which she is the organizer of. In some cases, together with Dechko Dechev, she is the coauthor of numerous icons and frescoes in churches throughout Bulgaria.

He is a member of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Restoration Section, the Association of Restorers in Bulgaria, the International Organization for the Study of Ancient Mosaics (AIEMA) and the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics (ICCM).

Assoc. Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva also has significant administrative experience (Deputy Director, now Acting Director of Municipal Institute "Ancient Plovdiv", Chairman of the Board "Bulgarian Cultural Traces"), which experience is beneficial for the preservation of the cultural heritage, the preparation, the provision of funding, the implementation of projects for the restoration of monuments and their presentation to the public.

Assoc. Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva is a doctoral student, individual form of studies, at the Department of Fine Arts at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof Asen Diamandiev - Plovdiv. She was enrolled in 2017. She has fulfilled her individual plan and submitted her documents on time and was admitted for evaluation by the scientific jury. I am not aware of any procedural omissions or/ or violations.

In addition to the dissertation and the abstract, the presented documents include publications for the period 2007-2017: five scientific articles related to the topic of the dissertation, two of which are co-authored with members of the research and restoration team. Quantitatively and qualitatively the materials meet the requirements. Again, the publications presented are cited in scientific papers.

Dissertation work. The work contains an introduction, five sections with subsections, conclusion, bibliography and list of contributions, 130 figures in the text, most of them with several photographs and/ or drawings.

The first two chapters are more general, but show the excellent knowledge of the cultural heritage in Plovdiv, especially regarding the ancient mosaics and the sites from which they originate, the condition, the history of their restoration and the principles followed, changes over time, problems due to the imperfections of the legislation in Bulgaria concerning the cultural heritage. Great skill is shown in the comments on the technological specifics of the ancient mosaics in general, the principles of restoration, the technical prescriptions of the ancient authors, with which prescriptions the author compares the technique and technology of the Bishop's Basilica.

In the next three chapters, the author specifically focuses on the problems of the mosaics of the Bishop's Basilica, respectively, the history of research and intervention; classification, stratigraphic studies, stylistic analysis, image parallels of the series of mosaic layers; the technology and technique of laying mosaics; conservation and restoration.

It is important to keep in mind that the Bishop's Basilica is an extremely complex site, not least because it is extremely large and richly decorated. Built in a rapidly adapting environment, in a central place that has its past in Roman Philippopolis, the Basilica has undergone a series of reconstructions, more or less large-scale, followed by laying new mosaic floor coverings, taking more time and money than usual, namely due to its large size. After the cessation of the function of the Basilica, life, respectively, interventions continue through the centuries until today: a medieval church was built over its ruins, a necropolis was developed, archeological research and restoration interventions began in the last century, followed by a period of destruction and the need for urgent but comprehensive studies, restoration and conservation, exhibition.

In this context, the differentiation of the stratigraphic layers, which the author has made on the basis of complex analysis, but with the leading role of technical and technological features, I find particularly contributing. The analysis of the technical and technological features, in turn, is the basis on which the conservation and restoration activities are planned and carried out, which are undoubtedly the greatest contribution to the work of Assoc. Prof Kantareva-Decheva.

I accept the contributions mentioned by the author, in the necessary sequence, which shows the extremely adequate approach that the author has found, theoretical but focused on the practical realization of an inexpressible achievement, such as the restoration and the display of world-class objects. It is important to note the contribution of the research and the restoration team, headed by the candidate, to the inclusion of the Bishop's Basilica, together with Eirene and the Small Basilica in the UNESCO Indicative List for Bulgaria as a World Heritage Site (2018).

Last but not least I should mention the informative qualities of the attached photographic and graphic documentation, an inseparable aspect of the restoration work. And also, since I am familiar with the work of Assoc. Prof Kantareva-Decheva over the years on the site, I would like to emphasize the important, saving for the monument significance of having a restorer at an archaeological site.

Remarks. Since I recommend the publication of a monograph on the basis of the dissertation, I would recommend the author to refine the bibliography (all literature listed in the bibliography should be cited in the text, as well as to include more literature). For example, regarding the ktitors's inscription in the Small Basilica, two different hypotheses are made about the identification of the mentioned Basilisk and, accordingly, about the dating of the mosaic. Also, it would be good to avoid some repetitions that are observed in the presented text. However, these remarks do not apply to the overall contribution of labor.

Conclusion. I find that Assoc. Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva shows a rare combination of restorer, scientist, artist, teacher and organizer-leader. Her work as a scientist and a researcher stand out with high quality. Therefore, I strongly recommend the esteemed colleagues of the Scientific Jury to vote in favor of the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Assoc. Prof Elena Kantareva-Decheva.

8. 02. 2022,
Sofia

Respectfully yours,

Assoc. Prof Dr. Iva Doseva