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**Volume 13**

“Boyan Penev” Publishing Center  
Institute of Literature, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
Sofia, 2014



## The Murals of Saint Petka Church in Svoge

*Vladimir Dimitrov*

There are numerous monasteries in the vicinity of Sofia (Istoria 2009: 695–700), some of which have been preserved to this day. Some of them are flourishing, while others have disappeared from the map of Bulgaria's cultural and historical heritage forever. Sofia's churches differ in terms of architectural type. They are small or larger monastery churches, as well as numerous small village churches. Regardless of whether they have interior decoration or not, they form a crown around Sofia, usually called Sofia Lesser Mount Athos by analogy with the famous monastic republic on Mt. Athos and are "living evidence" of Sofia region's past. Developed in different periods of Bulgarian history, the majority of the preserved monuments date from the period of Ottoman rule.

From the end of the fifteenth century Sofia was an important social, economic and military centre in the Ottoman Empire. If the population of the city was varied, including Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, and Ragusans, among others, the population in Sofia region was entirely Bulgarian. Numerous monasteries and parochial churches which, besides the spiritual needs of the locals also provided education, were built and renovated to meet the religious needs of these Orthodox Bulgarians with funds of individual wealthy donors, some guilds and the village communities. Part of them became important centres of literature and culture.

A large number of the monasteries are located at the foothills of the mountains around Sofia – Lozenska, Vitosha, Lyulin, Mourgash, the Balkan Range. According to certain specialists, the number of monasteries approached 100 while the number of parochial churches and chapels can hardly be established.

The Saint Petka Monastery in Svoge has architectural forms similar to those of most monasteries built in the region in the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The churches are small, principally dug into the ground, with separate small and mainly rickety residential and farm buildings, part of which were used as the so-called "cell schools", particularly in the nineteenth century. Some of the churches have preserved

their decoration completely or in part. Some of the artists remain unknown to this day, others are related to the work of Saint Pimen of Zographou (c. 1540–1620) (Moussakova 2005; Gergova 2011). His vita mentions two monasteries from the region of Svoge – Cherepish and Souhodol (today in Serbia). Most mural ensembles are characterized by a similarity of preferred thematic and character subjects. In addition to the generally revered Orthodox saints, the cult of Saint John of Rila was particularly important. After the relics of the saint returned to Rila Monastery from Tarnovo (1496), remaining for a short time in Sofia, veneration of this saint spread and acquired a nation-wide, not simply local character. To these reasons for the high esteem in which the Rila saint was held I would also add the localization of his birthplace in the region of what is today Kourilo, according to the latest research of Ivan Dobrev (Dobrev 2007: 482–523). The images of the Sofia martyrs particularly venerated during the National Revival, more specifically Saint George of Sofia the New and Saint Nicholas of Sofia the New, among others, are found in the repertoire of murals in the region.

The murals and the inscriptions in them, most of which in Bulgarian, are a brilliant example of the flourishing of cultural life in the region. The commemorative inscriptions prove the increased confidence of Bulgarians. Church buildings and their decoration are evidence of both the economic prosperity of the Bulgarians and the desire for autonomy and their consolidation around a national institution, such as the yearning to establish an independent church.

Systematic archaeological research to attest the earliest information about settlement life in the region has not been made so far. The importance for the transport of the Iskar Gorge has been known ever since Antiquity and today one can see parts of Roman and Ottoman roads in the vicinity of Svoge. Relatively little is known about the history of Svoge and the majority of the studies, the fruit of local amateur enthusiasts, rarely use scientific methods and scientific apparatus.

A number of hypotheses and legends revolve around the name of the town, the most acceptable of which is the one put forward by G. Hrousanov. According to the author, the name derives from *suvodije* (confluence) as near Svoge the Iskretska River flows into the Iskar (Naidenov 1996: 30–31). In Ottoman tax registers a settlement with the name of Isvodie is registered in 1728. The village was small, beautifully appointed, with many sheepfolds around it. Iskrets Village was the chief settlement in the area in the nineteenth century. A change in the settlement structure in the Iskar Gorge began with the launch of the construction of the Sofia–Varna railway line and of the section around Svoge in 1894–1897. New settlements related to the new railway line were born, others shifted their location to be close to it. Because of Svoge's proximity to the new railway line and station the settlement began to grow rapidly. Later, the village became a municipal centre and was declared a town in 1964.

The Saint Petka Church stands some 100m away from the road after the railway

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line is crossed. There is a legend that the monastery was founded during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century) but its fate over the centuries is known only from hearsay. It is claimed that the monastery's church was destroyed on two occasions during Ottoman rule. On the second occasion it was restored in 1860 by one Grozdan Kitov, a teacher who was born in the village of Breze and who later assumed the monastic name of Gerasimos and became the abbot of the monastery. He was both a cleric and a teacher at the newly-founded cell school in the monastery building. The cell school was established with the aim to prepare priests for the region. It is assumed that the first teacher in Svoge was Father Gerasimos, who lived to a venerable old age and died in 1904 whose grave and gravestone have been preserved to this day in the eastern part of the churchyard. The entire public life before the Liberation and long after that has passed in the Saint Petka Monastery. After the Liberation the cell school was converted into a lay one and right until the 1908/1909 school year the education of the citizens of Svoge continued in the wings of the monastery. In 1870 the monastery was visited by Vassil Levski and after the Liberation – by Ivan Vazov, who dedicated a poem titled *A Dream in the Old Church* to it. The monastery continued to function several years after September 9, 1944. The old monastery church gradually dropped out of use in favour of the neighboring spacious three-naved parochial church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul which was built in 1927. Today only the Saint Petka Church remains of what was once the monastery, huddled and stepped in oblivion behind the imposing new church. Nearly nothing is preserved from the old monastery buildings which once housed the cell school. The other building there dates from more recent times.

The old church, with dimensions 12 x 5 m is small, with one nave and one apse, without a dome and reinforced with buttresses. The interior of the church is covered with murals painted in 1860 when it was restored. At places one can discern an older layer of decoration which cannot be dated precisely without the removal of the frescoes on top which are in a very bad (critical) condition. Each day without conservation and restoration is disastrous for them. The iconostasis, too, is in a deplorable condition, part of the icons and the church plate have been looted and they even have not been recorded. The architectural features indicate the conclusion that the church was built at the end of the sixteenth – or the beginning of the seventeenth century at the latest.

There is no detailed study about the Saint Petka Church in Svoge, but a short description of it was only made by Asen Vasiliev (Vasiliev 1949: 58). In the course of an occasional review of the periodical press I found the church just mentioned in a travelogue dedicated to Svoge (Uzunov 1970). No information about the church could be found from neither the church board of trustees nor the local *chitalishte* community center Gradishte 1907.



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The large-scale construction of Christian churches and their decoration with frescoes is evidence of the increased spiritual needs of the local population, and attests to the financial capacity of the donors. The inclusion of specific national themes and saints into the iconographic repertoire also shows the revived national feeling of the local Bulgarian (Christian) population. The ideas and stylistic peculiarities of the murals are not unique for their time, particularly in this region, but the inclusion of complex dogmatic themes into the iconographic programme, ones influenced by the numerous frescoes in the Sofia Lesser Mt. Athos with which clerics and merchants were in contact, as well as of a number of national themes and saints, distinguish the frescoes in these monuments from the other mural ensembles painted at the same time. In this paper I have tried to characterize the murals in the church, or at least those that can be identified, underscoring that, with the exception of the frescoes at Iskrets Monastery, insufficient attention has been paid to both the region and the monuments dating from this period.

The frescoes painted by unknown artists follow the adopted standards in their iconography. The iconographic system which evolved even in the ninth–tenth century is divided into three cycles – dogmatic, liturgical and historical. The location of each one of them is determined by its symbolic meaning. The upper parts of the church symbolize the heavens and this is the place of dogmatic scenes. The altar is where the liturgy is performed and liturgical scenes are usually depicted there. The lower parts symbolize the Earth and feature frescoes with historical scenes, cycles from the life of Christ, the Mother of God, the patron saint of the church and so on. The lowest level is preserved for the saints needed by every church – the most famous hierarchs, the warrior saints, the venerable fathers and mothers, the martyrs, the founders of the brotherhood, the history of Orthodox monasticism and others (Lazarev 1971: 96–109).

The National Revival saw essential changes in the repertoire of depicted saints, with additions of national and local saints and new, hitherto unfamiliar historical subjects. In most monuments of this circle you can find a greater striving after detail and narration. Their iconographic programmes include scenes and characters from the Old and the New Testament, as well as scenes and stories of dogmatic and historical content. By concept, the distribution of scenes and images follows the official tradition in art (although it is difficult to speak of official art in those years), but in terms of a number of peculiarities in both the thematic repertoire and style they have specific characteristics.

The iconographic programme of a church is subordinate to both the liturgical order of services performed in it and the architectural peculiarities of the building, as well as to the personal preferences and the financial capacity of the ktetors and the artists. This, in turn, was dictated by the complicated socio-political conditions

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in which they lived and worked. In the period of a foreign faith rule, a number of changes occurred in the manner of church decoration. According to Dora Kamenova, “they were much more the result of an internal, own development than of the impact coming directly from external social factors. The changes in the external building decoration were imposed by the bondage. And if the authorities relatively strictly monitored the outlook and the size of Christian churches, these official power of foreign faith were totally indifferent towards the desire for more and richer decoration of the interior of the House of God” (Kamenova 1984: 26–27). At the same time, the institution of the church did not exercise sufficient control on the interior decoration of numerous new parochial and monastery churches which were built after the launch of reforms in the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In this study I will focus on some iconographic peculiarities typical of this ensemble.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Frescoes in the altar**

In the church which is our subject the frescoes in the altar space do not differ from the standard ones of this period. The conch of the apse features an image of the Virgin Platytera, the Virgin “wider (than the heavens),” with Christ Emmanuel in a medallion. This image is known from Greek iconography under the name of the Virgin Platytera, and in Russian, where it is particularly popular, as Our Lady of the Sign (Bakalova 1976: 12–15). This variant of an image of the Blessed Virgin was particularly popular in the period of the National Revival but it originated even in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century and spread in the eleventh–twelfth century. It is interesting that the Virgin Platytera is depicted in the altar apse conch mainly in territories distant from large cultural and religious centres. The greatest proliferation is registered in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century (Bakalova 1976: 15). According to Orthodox liturgy, at the consecration of the offerings, as well as at the prayer of oblation (the *proskomide*), the priest officiating at the sacrament also mentions the Blessed Virgin (Chiflianov 1997: 209). This place has been accorded to her as being the “Receptacle of the Divine Incarnation in her Womb”, depicted by the image of Jesus at her knee which, in turn, symbolizes the dogma of Incarnation (Chiflianov 1997: 68).

The composition of Communion of the Apostles whose symbolic meaning is the liturgical endorsement of the Eucharist, most probably related to the general outlay in the altar intended to endorse the Orthodox teaching of the celestial origin of the earthly liturgy, is outlined on both sides of the apse. The theme of earthly liturgy continues with the inclusion of the images of Saint Stephen, the first deacon of the church at Jerusalem and the first martyr of Christianity, as well as those of martyrs

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<sup>1</sup> The full description and ordering of the frescoes will be difficult before any actions for restoration.



and archdeacons Euplus and Prochorus. The inclusion of hierarchs and deacons in the altar programme is directly related to the earthly liturgy and again aims to underscore the connection between the heavenly and the earthly liturgy, as well as to endorse the authority of the cleric as a link between the Church and laymen.

There is an image of an angel in a medallion in the space between the conch and the vault. On the eastern wall there are another four representatives of the heavenly host, but it is interesting that the traditional image of the Annunciation is missing. The image of Saint Gregory, one of the Church Fathers, stands in the northern section of the eastern wall above the prothesis niche. The niche features an image of Epitaphios.

According to established practice, the prothesis niche is decorated with the composition of Epitaphios or Holy Apokathilosis (The Deposition from the Cross) (Velmans 1995; Zhdrakov 1996). There are monuments in which the prothesis niche was the only mural before a church was decorated entirely. The decoration of only this part of the altar is also characteristic of other National Revival churches. The prothesis has important liturgical significance. This significance usually gave the board of trustees reason to commission its decoration before the main part of the church.

#### **Frescoes in the vault**

The Saint Petka Church is distinguished by that the programme of the murals in its vaulted part is aligned with the rules of decorating domed churches which were introduced after the victory of Orthodoxy over the Iconoclastic heresy. The image of Christ in Majesty stands in the eastern part, behind the crowning cross of the iconostasis. This is followed by God the Father. The Eye of Providence stands in the centre of the elliptic vault and the New Testament Trinity is directly next to it. Then there is Christ Pantokrator and, in the westernmost part, an unknown saintly archpriest whose image approximates the traditional iconography of Saint Nicholas.

The artists or the donors have omitted to include in the line of saints along the vault the then very popular image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, although they have included the image of the Savior twice: once as Christ in Majesty and once again as Pantokrator. The inclusion of Saint Nicholas – one of the most revered saints in Orthodoxy and the entire Christian world – is not unusual. Traditionally, the location of this saint's image is used for the patron of the church, although there are also other monuments in Sofia region where the image of the patron is replaced by another particularly venerated saint. Saint Nicholas became particularly popular in the period of Ottoman rule. His image in murals may be located anywhere in a church. The veneration of Saint Nicholas as a patron of fishermen and protector of waters also determines some specific features of his cult, fish being an obligatory dish on his feast day. As Rachko Popov has noted, in Bulgarian folk calendar Saint Nicholas is also venerated as a patron of winter cold, ice and winter winds. To the fishermen

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along the Black Sea coast the feast of Saint Nicholas is the end of autumn and winter fishing, as there is a ban on it after this day (Popov 1991: 21). The cult of Saint Nicholas also has another aspect. In some parts of the Bulgarian ethnic territory he is revered as family patron, master and keeper of the home, the property and livestock (Popov 1991: 40). It is precisely in this capacity that Saint Nicholas is revered in what is today Western Bulgaria where the local population is barely familiar with fishing and sailing. In various parts of Bulgarian territory Saint Nicholas is also regarded as a patron of merchants, carters, millers and others. There are limited locations where he is considered to send the souls of the deceased in the beyond. On the other hand, newly-built houses are consecrated on his feast day as a patron of the home.

In fact, the *vita* of Saint Nicholas has united in one the life of two saints of the same name. The Bishop of Myra in Lycia lived during the reign of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. He appeared in the dreams of the emperor and he was a patron of disadvantaged. The second Saint Nicholas lived in the sixth century and was bishop of Pinara, near Myra, and all miracles performed on water are associated precisely with him. In fact, the acts of the latter were ascribed to the former Saint Nicholas of Myra, thus combining the two persons (Ševčenko 1983).

If we assume that the images bearing the greatest dogmatic significance are located along the vault, in compliance with tradition, then the next register features the prophets. Each prophet is depicted in a separate medallion and holds an inscribed scroll. Most of the scrolls cannot be deciphered and the same is valid for the names of the prophets. Since the research is still not comprehensive I will not dwell here on those whose names have already been deciphered.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Cycles**

Illustration of the important events in the life of Christ and the Church is one of the most important elements in the fresco decoration of a Christian church. These events are included in narrative cycles and are the most widely-developed share of fresco decoration in monastery and parochial churches. They are dominant in a meaningful sense, not only in the decorative system. One of the first cycles which evolved in Christian art is the Christological cycle known even from the sixth century (Ravenna). New cycles were formed after the Iconoclastic period: the cycle of the Great Feasts which became obligatory in monumental art since the eleventh century (Bakalova 1976: 35), as well as the cycle of Christ's Passion, existing in the decoration of sarcophagi even in the early Christian age. The last of these developed under the Komnenoi (11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century), and its new expansion and admixture with the Great Feasts and the Miracles of Christ occurred over the Ottoman period (Raceva 2005: 56). Another few autonomous cycles evolved during the age of the Palaiologi – the

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<sup>2</sup> I have paid special attention to the prophets in another paper.



Infancy of the Blessed Virgin, the Infancy of Christ, Parables, Miracles, Pentecostarion cycle. A change in the strictness of the institution of the church in respect to the development and meaning of the individual cycles changed in the Late Middle Ages. The smaller volume of church buildings, the lack of official ideology and the break with Byzantine tradition led to a marked reduction of the scenes in the cycles and their blending into one common cycle. This includes the most important events in the history of the Church, the most important feasts and, sometimes, not so widespread and popular themes, events, parables and others included in the four Gospels, or even scenes from the Apocrypha. The dominance of the evangelical cycle began in the seventeenth century and continued over the period of National Revival. It includes the most important images fundamental to the decoration of a church – Annunciation, Nativity, Theophany, Entry into Jerusalem, Transfiguration, Resurrection, Ascension and others.

The complicated iconographic programmes compiled by the educated monks from the Rila or Bachkovo Monastery were not particularly difficult to execute by the great masters of the Bansko and Samokov centres who had received their training on Mt. Athos, in Western Europe or in Russia. We know they had written painter manuals (*hermeneia*) and large *katholikons* offering sufficient area. Thus they had the opportunity to “underscore the universality of the Church” (Kuyumdjiev 2000). What were the requirements to the lesser masters who worked in small village churches, what samples they used, who compiled the iconographic programmes of these small churches – it is difficult to give an unequivocal answer. The donors obviously strived to make their churches rivals of the large churches in monasteries and cities. One should not forget that the comprehensive variant of all cycles can be seen in Christian churches with large spaces which were close to important intellectual centres, such as the Chora Monastery (later Kariye Camii and today a museum in Istanbul). Even in the period when Byzantine art flourished there was a reduction of the scenes in one cycle and contamination of scenes from different cycles into one. Such a change was also established by Elka Bakalova in the graveyard church of Berende Village (Bakalova 1976: 61–62).

The evangelical cycle in Svoge has a programme which can be called ‘standard’ for the age. It starts from the southeastern part of the church with Annunciation, Nativity, the Circumcision of Jesus and Theophany, the two Great Feasts of Circumcision and Theophany being united into a common decorative area. The cycle continues with the Raising of Lazarus and the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. On the north wall the image of Judas who has hanged himself is introduced in the cycle on the north wall, continuing from west to east with The Last Supper, Christ before Pilate, Crucifixion, Deposition from the Cross, Resurrection, and, in the altar part, Ascension.

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### **Images of saints**

The location of the saints is important for establishing the origin of the iconographic programme. The artist who drew the frescoes in Svoge has kept to the most widespread practice: standing saints in full or half-length are depicted in the lowest register related to the earthly life of the Church. The saints standardly included in the programme are divided into hermits, warriors, reverends, martyrs and healers, among others. Here I will not dwell in detail on the image and cult of each saint. Rather, I will present them in groups with a focus only on some of their individual characteristics.

The image of an unknown saintly hierarch is depicted on the south wall, directly next to the altar. This is most probably Saint Spyridon, one of the saints most venerated by the Orthodox Church and believers. The image itself is in very bad condition and I have attributed it by the specific wicker cap. Vita texts underscore the fact that Saint Spyridon was a shepherd even after he became a bishop and continued to carry a shepherd's staff and to wear the cap, his very name meaning "round wicker basket". This cap is also the main iconographic feature of the saint, who is otherwise depicted – as all hierarchs are – wearing a *sakkos* and an *omophorion* (Bakalova 1998: 320). He is revered as a patron of tailors, cloth and dressmakers, coppersmiths, builders and, particularly, cobblers who consider him their patron saint to this day. According to another legend, he is revered as a patron saint of potters, brick makers and braziers (Bakalova 1998: 323). The above-listed crafts were among the most widespread in Bulgaria and it is quite natural that their patron was popular among the people and was included in the decoration of churches. The popularity of the cult of Saint Spyridon in Bulgarian lands dates from the Middle Ages. The oldest image of Saint Spyridon which survives to this day can be found in the ossuary of Bachkovo Monastery where his bust is featured in a frame in the altar apse above the *Melismos* (Bakalova 1977: 74). Saint Spyridon is also venerated as a patron of the poor as he performed miracles to help them on many occasions.

The niche of the window features four images of women saints, but because of their bad condition they cannot be identified either, or that of the martyr saint located directly next to the window. Above the window there is an angel. What follows is undecorated space where once the bishop's throne, of which only the lower part has been preserved, once stood. Next comes The Assumption of the Prophet Elijah. Elijah is in a fiery chariot drawn by two pairs of red horses. This is a familiar scene frequently depicted in Orthodox church art in which Elijah throws his cloak to the prophet Elisha. Saint Elias is one of the most venerated saints both in the church and in folklore. He throws thunderbolts and protects crops from rain and hail. The research of Emanuel Moutafov dedicated to the cult of the saint reveals that there are many churches, chapels and consecrated sites dedicated to Saint Elias in Bulgaria. The rituals associated with his feast also contribute to his popularity and frequent appearance of his image in church art (Moutafov 1987).



Next comes a window above which there is an image of Luke the Serf, accompanied by his uncle, Saint John of Rila, who is one of the most venerated saints in Bulgaria (and the Balkans). This is the reason for his image to be present in most fresco ensembles and iconostases in Bulgarian lands. It is difficult to say why this rarely visualized scene with the saint's nephew was included and that it not the subject of this study, but this is synchronous with the thesis of I. Dobrev that the birthplace of Bulgaria's patron saint was not Skrino Village but was somewhere in the area north of Sofia, around Kurilo (Dobrev 2002: 47–61). And, as it becomes clear from the commemorative inscription, part of the donors of the monastery came from the area, Kurilo included.

The Gospel cycle follows with the images of the hermits Saint Anthony the Great and Saint Pachomius. On the north wall there are three warrior saints of whom only Saint Demetrius can be identified. Next there is a window with an angel above it, followed by Saint Theodore Stratelates and Saint Theodore Tyron. In Bulgarian folk calendar veneration of Saint Theodore Tyron and Saint Theodore Stratelates is united in one cult of Saint Todor. According to Vasil Guyzelev, the popularity of Saint Theodore Stratelates in Bulgarian lands was largely due to the fact that in the thirteenth century his relics were kept at the Saint Sophia Church in Nessebar (Guyzelev 1995). The feast of Saint Todor is always celebrated before Cheesefare Sunday, the date changing depending on the Pascha. The cult of Saint Todor should be associated with practices and notions related to the cult of the dead and the ancestors (Popov 2002: 138–139). The feast of Saint Todor stands at the point of transition from winter (death) to summer (life) and this position leads to a whole series of beliefs amongst Bulgarians. Although he is a Christian saint, Saint Todor is bearer of the demonic principle and is associated with evil forces. Those conceived, born or deceased during the week before his feast day may turn into vampires, *kallikantzaroi* (malevolent goblins) or werewolves, they roamed around during the so-called Dirty Days (from Christmas to Epiphany) in the form of wolves or dogs. Saint Todor is considered a patron of horses and riders. He himself is a saintly rider and in popular belief rides in to chase away the winter.

Next comes a badly preserved image of a warrior saint, followed by Saint George of Ioannina, another favourite of National Revival artists and neomartyr from the period of Turkish bondage. There are several neomartyrs with the name of Saint George of Sofia revered in Bulgaria, more specifically: Saint George of Sofia the Elder, neomartyr, born in Sofia c. 1407, who died at Adrianople on March 26, 1437; Saint George of Sofia/Kratovo the Younger, neomartyr, born in Kratovo in 1496, who died on February 11, 1515 in Sofia and part of whose relics are kept at the Blessed Virgin of Vitosha Monastery at Dragalevtsi; Saint George of Sofia the Youngest, neomartyr, born in Sofia, his memory is celebrated on May 26; Saint George of Ioannina/Lozen, neomartyr, born in the village of Tsourchli, near Ioannina. He died in 1838

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and is celebrated on January 17 (Gergova 2001). It is precisely this Saint George who is depicted in the church which is subject to this paper. Then comes the walled-up entrance with the traditional angel above and the image of another particularly popular saint, Saint Menas.

The western wall features the traditional Dormition of the Theotokos, accompanied by the images of Saint George and Saint Demetrius on horses. There is a commemorative inscription above the entrance. The southern part of the western wall is decorated with Righteous and Sinful Confession, the scene of 'At the medicine-woman's' and an image of Death beneath it. The northern part features the images of the equal-to-the-Apostles Saints Constantine and his mother, Helena, who are also found in most of the churches. In the Middle Ages the traditional place of Sts. Constantine and Helena was the western wall next to the church entrance because of their apotropaic function. This tradition died out during the National Revival and we can find them at different locations in the church (Gerov 2004). According to Georgi Gerov, the cult of Saint Constantine and Saint Helena evolved in the eleventh century when the new vita of Saint Constantine was probably compiled. There the information provided by Eusebius was transformed and later church myths were added. The new vita also includes the story about the discovery of the True Cross by Saint Helena thus making it the basis for the development of the iconography of Saint Constantine and Saint Helena with the Cross (Gerov 2004).

Considerable changes in art occurred in Bulgarian lands over the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. They came in response to the public and economic processes in the age of Bulgarian Enlightenment and the Bulgarian National Revival. The change in the decoration of Orthodox churches was particularly typical of the narthexes and galleries. The new themes were mainly of moral and didactic character (Genova 2001: 45). New themes appear in Saint Petka – such as Righteous and Sinful Confession (Vasiliev 1973: 12–14; Popova 2001: 3), and 'At the medicine-woman's' (Vasiliev 1973: 75–82; Popova 2001: 6), among others.

At Saint Petka there is a commemorative inscription which provides information about the donors, but not about the painters.

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Artistic culture in the period of the National Revival was imbued by the love of freedom and the romantic, and was also a unique phenomenon in the history of European culture. Stepping on tradition and influenced by the culture of neighboring and other European peoples, Bulgarian enlighteners, builders, artists and craftsmen created works worthy of this crucial moment in the history of the Bulgarian people. National spirit, economy and education were revived without a rediscovery of the heritage of Antiquity or the Middle Ages, although historicism and the glorious times

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Artistic culture in the period of the National Revival was imbued by the love of freedom and the romantic, and was also a unique phenomenon in the history of European culture. Stepping on tradition and influenced by the culture of neighboring and other European peoples, Bulgarian enlighteners, builders, artists and craftsmen created works worthy of this crucial moment in the history of the Bulgarian people. National spirit, economy and education were revived without a rediscovery of the heritage of Antiquity or the Middle Ages, although historicism and the glorious times



(particularly in the medieval past) played an important role in the formation of identity and national self-confidence.

Although there is no precise and generally accepted periodization of the age of the Bulgarian National Revival, the monument which is the subject of the present study dates from the end of this period. That was a time when artists, representatives of the major artistic centres and families, such as Nikola Obrazopisov and Simeon Molerov worked simultaneously, enjoying the respect of the public and inundated by countless commissions. The first artists with academic education also worked at the same time – Stanislav Dospevski, Hristo Tsokev, Nikolai Pavlovich and Dimitar Dobrovich. They introduced the realistic style in church art. This style, however, was too vanguard for the public at that time and did not enjoy mass success, although there were some exceptions like the icons of Stanislav Dospevski. This art was an isolated phenomenon, created by a few artists educated abroad and appreciated by a limited number of educated urban families. In the Principality of Bulgaria, attention turned to academic art only after the Liberation with the help of the official Church and it quickly ousted National Revival aesthetics. However, interest in it was preserved in the non-liberated lands and the periphery of the Principality until the first decade of the twentieth century. The spirit of academicism permeated Bulgarian church art precisely when Europe discovered the art of primitivism. The interest in these two groups of artists among Bulgarian researchers of art is considerable, both in the past and now, as shown by the numerous published monographs, studies, articles or organized exhibitions (Dimitrov 2012: 15–31).

Unlike these, a third group of artists and their work remain outside the field of interest of art historians and their work was defined as weak and not deserving attention. What is more, their preserved heritage was considered detrimental to Bulgarian national self-confidence. This opinion has resulted in unrecoverable losses and still continues to cause much damage to the monuments of this third group. The art which was most widespread in the second half of the nineteenth century was deliberately destroyed sometimes because it was considered decadent and unaesthetic. Recently this type of monuments have begun to attract attention but, regrettably, there is no established terminology in art history on this matter. The terms “primitive” and “naïve” are most frequently used to designate the monuments of this type and the artists who painted them are called “unschooled”. But are the meanings of these terms in reference to art appropriate for church art at the end of the nineteenth century?

Clarification of terminology is not the subject of the present study, but I find it necessary to specify certain points in order to avoid ambiguity at the use of the said terms, particularly in the case of this unstudied group of monuments.

The term “primitive” is used very broadly – it covers the art of non-European cultures, prehistoric art, folk art, and art created by children and mentally disabled (Previtali 1964; Venturi 1972). Thus the term “primitive” has both a positive and



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1. St. Petka Church, Svoge



2. Christ Pantocrator



3. Trinity



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4. St. Nicholas



5. Pendants with Prophets



6. Lord circumcision



*The Murals of Saint Petka Church in Svoge*

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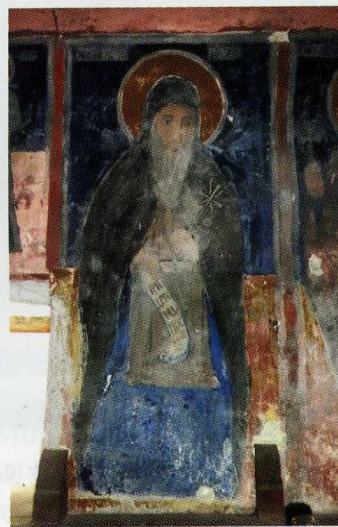
The Murals of Saint Petka Church in Svoge



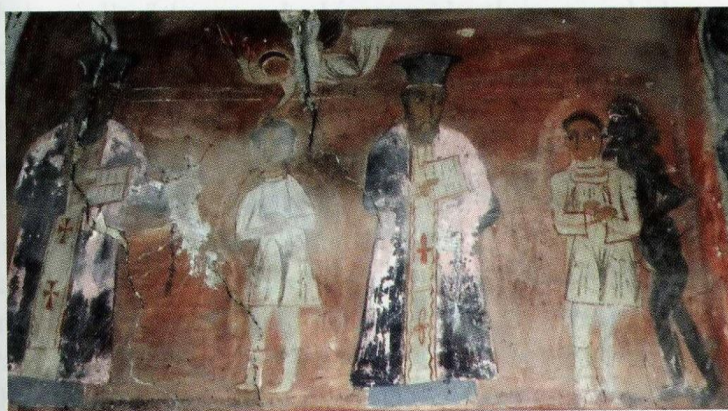
7. Resurrection of Lazarus



8. Ascension



9. St. John of Rila



10. Right and wrong confession

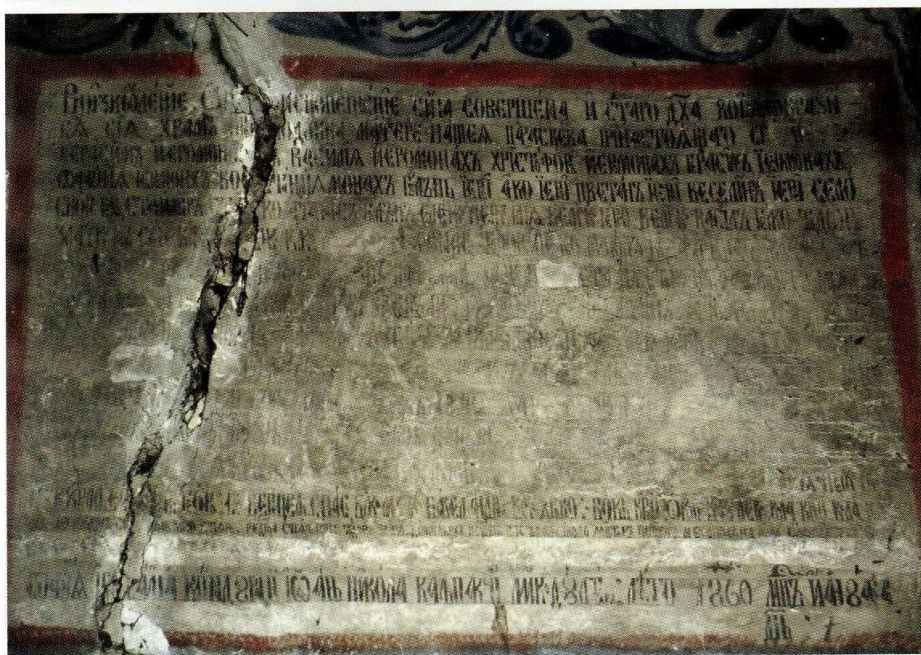


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11. To the wise-woman to cure and the image of the death



12. Commemorative inscription

Во иъзвѣленіе О(ца) и с попѣшеніе Сїна совершена и Ст҃аго Д҃ха  
 воіъзвѣрзѣ са сїа храмъ (преп)одовна матере на́шеа Параскева прї  
 нето́ащаго сг... (= ерѣмена ?):• Герасимъ ѿромон(дхъ) Васильа  
 ѿромонахъ Христофоръ ѿромонахъ Герасимъ ѿромонахъ Софронїа  
 ѿромонахъ Востанїа монахъ Гълъпъ ѿреї Веселинъ ѿреї. село Своге Геро  
 Станїмїръ Т.ко Атанасъ Гълъпъ Єленко Пенко Іліа Велїчко Герго  
 Велїчко Васїлъ Гелко Тодѣръ Златко Геро Сава В'лко ...нко В'лко ... с:  
 Кѣрїло Єп(и)фанъ Геора: с: Перецель Спасъ В'лко М(ин)ко П'вел  
 "Андреа В'лко Храно :• Бовъ кр(тѣ)нв(.) Кола Леко Кола Крѣто Кола  
 ... Лесков дол (С)т(о)анъ В'лчо Стоанъ. Рѣдї(н)а Стоанъ Герго Тодоръ  
 (Банко / Банчо): Дѣпнї врѣхъ Найдень Спасъ: Усеїково Мїтдръ Пепико  
 (?): Меча полана ... Соколь ... Софїа І(с)аїїа кондраци Ів'анъ Нїкѣла  
 кальпакчі Мїко дѣлг(еръ): лѣто 1860 мѣцъ ианвара днь : 1 :

13. Commemorative inscription: spelling out (thanks to Dr. Hristo Andreev)



### *The Murals of Saint Petka Church in Svoge*

a negative connotation. According to the Bulgarian Dictionary, “primitive” (from Latin *primitivus* – “first or earliest of its kind”) means: 1) a phenomenon which still has not developed compared to its later forms of evolution; 2) a work of art from an earlier stage in the development of culture. Obviously, both meanings are incorrect in respect to the church art in the monuments in question. First, because we do not know the “later forms” of its evolution – and there never were such. Second, because this is not an earlier stage in the evolution of church art, but rather a parallel process, as many of the monuments are also replicas of examples of “higher” artistic merit. Should we assume that the Bulgarian National Revival is closer to the Enlightenment and Reformation (Todev 2004: 364), then the art of this age corresponds to the mannerist trends which marked the finale of the great ages in West European styles. The Bulgarian artists worked on their frescoes not so much in the manner of the famous painters as by using their works as models. It was precisely this copying of models, as well as the faulty artistic training that led to their works being called naïve and primitive.

The other term which is used to designate these monuments is “naïve” (from Latin *nativus* – natural). It, too, is not acceptable in the sense we use it today, because “simple” and “gullible” are hardly the appropriate expression for those artists who had very good theological knowledge and who approximated to a maximum they examples they had seen and/or carried out the commissions of the ktetors. Although it seems the most appropriate, the term “unschooled” introduced by D. Kamenova (Kamenova 1979: 15–19) does not provide particular clarity either. These are neither professional artists who, driven by inner need seek forms close to the art of the East or ancient civilizations, nor are they those amateurs who give expression of the human need for artistic expression by painting. Those were people once perceived as “professional artists” – for example the artists of the Minov family (Dimitrov 2009), who have left their self-portraits in the Saint Demetrius Church in Teshovo, while others, who had other occupations, such as the village teacher Kosta Gerov, worked on the decoration of a number of churches at the place of their primary occupation. Nevertheless, all of them worked inspired by the national ideas which were widely-spread in that age. Thus, none of the terms used can be considered independently and each one of them is ambivalent. In Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton’s assessment of the “primitive”, they argue that: the term does not constitute an essentialist category but exemplifies a relationship. The relation is one of contrast, of binary opposition to the “civilised”: the term “primitive” cannot exist without its attendant opposite, and in fact the two terms act to constitute each other (Antliff, Leighton 1996). In the same way, “naïve” cannot be “something *third*, which is essentially a synthesis [...], most frequently of “high” and “low” (Kraev 1989). The term “naïve” most frequently “appears where there is a case of retelling, where structure turns into restructuring” (Kraev 1989). It is precisely what has been seen during the pilgrimages, particularly



to Mt. Athos and the large monasteries in the Balkans, as well as in Sofia's Lesser Mount Athos, that the artist and the *ktetor* retell and interpret at the creation of this group of monuments.

The social function of the primitive artists was also different. During the National Revival they filled in the vast empty spaces in church art, particularly the places which the artists from the major schools and families had not reached. Naïve and primitive art acquired considerable scope in the last decades of the age we call National Revival. And if in Bulgarian territories this art was ousted by the academic art making headway, in Western Europe academic art was shadowed by European artists' infatuation with the primitive.

The problem of primitive and naïve frescoes from the age of the National Revival has barely been studied. This problem in contemporary culture and folklore has been discussed by Dmitriy Varzonovtsev (Varzonovtsev 1988) and by Georg Kraev in his already quoted article. There are more studies – and translations (Gombrich 1979) – on the problem of the primitive, respectively the naïve, in modern art, which have found their place in the research of Ivan Marazov (Marazov 1968 and 1969), Tatyana Vucheva (Vucheva 2001), Valentina Ganeva (Ganeva 2005), but the subject of their research is entirely modern art and they do not discuss the problem of naïve-primitive church art. The only texts which raise the issue of defining this group of murals are the quoted works of D. Kamenova.

The monuments defined as primitive vary in the specific features of their iconographic programmes and style of work. This peculiarity was dictated by the historical events in the period when the frescoes were commissioned and painted, as well as the change in their style and repertoire. The state of "being in limbo" at the end of the nineteenth century, the weak control on the part of the institution of the church and the dynamically developing society in the liberated lands, as well as the National Revival spirit, fed again by the fact that part of the territories with residents of Bulgarian ethnic self-awareness were returned within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, generated a vacuum and church decoration, which had so far been reserved for major parochial and monastery churches, also spread to smaller settlements. The "naïve" is "the citizen's idea about the rural..." (Kraev 1989), but in the context of these monuments it becomes a notion of the "urban", or rather a notion of the "haute". Bearing in mind the specifics of the two terms and the fact that they complement each other, I think it is pertinent to use the terms "primitive" and "naïve" as synonyms and entirely in their positive aspect. It seems to me that the most appropriate definition of the primitive was made by Ernst Gombrich – as a term expressing admiration, not condescension (Gombrich 1979: 5). In the process of regular and repeated field work in Western Bulgaria I found a number of unrecorded monuments and artists whose fresco heritage can be classified in several quite varied groups. The heritage of the artists from this circle forms a specific group positioned between the art of the great

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artist families and folk art, which some scholars define as “the charm of the primitive” (Vasiliev 1981: 47).

The National Revival artist was not faced with the question about the choice of theme and narrative in the icons and murals as he had to follow the existing rules, the instructions of the written manuals and the requirements of the *ktetor*, as well as with the models he had seen. But, along with this, there was no control whether he followed strictly the number of characters, the places where they are located, their gestures and movements, etc. as they should be depicted according to canon (Kamenova 1979). Assuming that the canon modelled the entire artistic output, that it pertained to all its levels and only the formally structural ones, that it determined the narrative thematic circle, the iconographic peculiarities, the system of proportions, the colours and technical instructions (Marinska 1979: 18), it can be concluded that the artists made an attempt to conform with the accepted canonicity. However, one cannot but feel the forms of personal expression which generally have much more impact on the viewer than the defined narrative and thematic line.

In this period the murals presented two types of spatial environment – architectural and natural – participating actively in the development of the scenes. The same architectural or natural environment may be painted repeatedly but have a different impact.

The composition of the scenes is symmetrical, with strictly harmonious distribution by even square fields. Along with the images of the standing saints, the scenes from the life of Christ on earth are central to the decoration of the churches. The scenes are in chronological order, following the Gospel narrative.

The figures of the saints are very similar, particularly in the representation of the faces which are rounded, almost geometric circles, with small and elongated eyes. A universal type was applied in painting the images of the hermits, the beards and hair in the individual ensembles are similar and traditions for the various types have been kept: they are long and thin in the case of the hermits, shorter in the case of the monks and so on. The figures are with shortened static bodies, full-length or half-length, in monotonous and frontal order, in some cases with faces slightly turned towards one another. The similarity in the different churches can also be observed in the modelling of the clothes, particularly in the case of Christ, the hierarchs, the warrior saints and the hermits. Following the familiar iconographic schemes, the artists have provided a rhythmic and harmonious presentation of the colours and forms of the clothes. Decorated with numerous stamped floral ornaments, the clothes of the hierarchs stand out against the neutral blue-grey background or the modest landscape. The folds of the clothes are underlined, flowing down and underscoring the movement of the figure. In some cases the artists have been too concentrated on detail.

The colour impact of the images is quite striking and the range – quite varied. The artists use bright colours. The figures stand out with the richness and fullness of

their colours. The rules at the use of colours have been kept. Colouring also has an important role in focusing on the central figure or event. The alternation of red, blue, golden and green creates a bright and colourful rhythm. Each element of the clothes is presented in a different colour, distinguishing it from the rest of the elements of clothing.

At the present condition of the frescoes it is difficult to attribute all scenes and characters. There is no doubt the artists had different degrees of training and experience, which may be due to a considerable difference in their age or to some other reasons. This, however, does not in any way devaluate the art they have created which, along with that of many masters who worked at the same time, is expecting to find its deserved place in the history of Bulgarian art.

The choice of subjects and images of saints is the most important factor when the meaning of the frescoes in a church is being formed. The instructions and the traditions established by the painters' manuals and churches from previous periods have been followed in the selection and painting of the saints. The artists have not followed a common model at the formation of the individual church programmes and the selection and order of the saints. The same can also be said about the selection of the themes included in the Gospel cycle.

The history and the decoration of the Saint Petka Church in Svoge adds yet another touch to the above-listed problems. The description of the iconographic programme and the collection of all information about the church in one study open up opportunities for making parallels with similar monuments, as well as filling in some of the gaps in the history of church art in this interesting and barely studied northern part of the Sofia Lesser Mt. Athos.

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