

The art studies in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Traditions and perspectives

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Abstract. The text highlights the achievements of art scholars at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, emphasizing their long-standing contributions to the preservation and study of cultural heritage in the region across various art forms, including music, fine arts, theatre, screen arts, and architecture. Their research spans cultural trends from ancient times to the present. While the article provides a brief historical overview, its primary focus is on contemporary innovative investigations from recent years.

Keywords: art studies, theory and history of arts, traditions, contemporary art studies.

Art history is a particularly rich spiritual knowledge, it can be the wisdom of the world, capable of mediating its development - defending the ideas of freedom and tolerance, of human dignity and rights, of responsibility.

Elena Toncheva (Toncheva 1998)

The words of Elena Toncheva, Director of the Institute of Art Studies in the period 1996-2004, reveal the often-elusive idea in our society of the importance of art studies, which has the main concern for the study, preservation, and scientific understanding of art as “one of the most powerful means of spiritual impact” (Toncheva 1998, 7). The activity of the art historian has different levels of deployment, as “the scientific study of art relates to the processes of social development and identity formation, the problems of cultural heritage and tradition, education and creative realization” (Miteva 2024). This is the direction in which the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences continues its main mission: “to explore the problems of art, architecture, and culture in a regional, European and world context; to explore and make sense of cultural heritage and national identity” (Pravilnik 2018, 4), relying on its long and rich scientific tradition and history.

The study of the arts in Bulgaria, and especially within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, is mainly associated with the establishment of two institutes by the Literary and Artistic Branch at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: the Institute of Music, and the Institute of Fine Arts, both founded in 1947. Afterwards the study of arts in the Academy has expanded. Institutes were merged. The names were changed. In 2010, the Institute of Art Studies appeared, where scholars from different spheres of art studies have started working together, very often in interdisciplinary projects.

This text aims to cover and present the leading trends in the activities of the Institute of Art Studies in modern times. Without having the ambition to trace the history of the institution itself in detail - including its establishment and repeated changes of its structure, the leading ideas, and the dominant ideologies in its development - it focuses on the Institute's constructive development and authority in the field of art studies in Bulgaria at the beginning of the third millennium (Bakalova 1998; Bakalova 2012; Toncheva 1998; Yanakiev 2009; Yordanov 2009; Naydenova 2018; Miteva 2024, and others). The results of the last five years are analysed, outlining the current directions in the research work of scholars, caused both by new technological opportunities, i.e., digitization, real and virtual global international exchange, and by new approaches in science such as the "concept of cross-points" (Spasova-Dikova 2015, 35-36), cultural memory (Assmann, Assmann 2018), places of memory (Norra 2004), of the reconsidering of the narrow national perspectives (Spasova-Dikova 2015, 23), and others.

The beginning

The beginning was laid in Protocol No. 2 of 3 October 1947, at a meeting of the Literary and Artistic Branch at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, when it was decided to create three institutes: the Institute of Literature, the Institute of Music, and the Institute of Fine Arts. In the words of Aleksandar Yanakiev, the inclusion of art history "in the circle of scientific problems with which the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences is worthy to engage, gives it a different self-esteem" (Yanakiev 2009, 111). And much more. Goritsa Naydenova notes that "we would not be far from the truth if we see the Institute of Music as a 'pioneer in establishing academic musicology as an important field of activity for our musical culture'" (Naydenova 2018, 44). This observation applies not only to musicology but also to the whole field of art studies. In practice, various scientific problem areas were formed and established within the new institutes, which were exclusively developed there for an extended period. An academic level of art studies was established and developed, and a base and a scientific environment were built. Numerous field expeditions conducted by scholars accumulated a respectable array of records and information, which became the basis for building archives; new academic art journals and a series of fundamental scientific works appeared. Of course, modern science cannot ignore the issue of the political situation after 1944 and the ensuing consequences for the humanitarian studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences - the ideological dictate on historical

truth and its reduction to emphasizing the “useful for the development of modern socialist society” (Miteva 2024), the repressive imposition of silence, distortion of facts and their interpretation, the introduction of “Marxism-Leninism” (Zhivkova 2006).

The change

The political and social changes after 1989 gave new impetus to the development of art studies in Bulgaria. “The right to free expression and the politics of difference” (Yordanov 2009, 8) brought euphoria and bold initiatives, but the shift in paradigms inevitably led to a crisis in the post-totalitarian situation. And since “every crisis calls into question the existing consensus and leads to the desemiotization of the imposed meanings of basic concepts”, such as “the inquiries go back to the very beginning of every problem” (Yordanov 2009, 8), this process, despite the difficulties, had a renewing and healing impact on the construction of scientific life under the new conditions.

Art history at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences became an important part of the implementation of reforms to build civil society in Bulgaria. Without idealizing the process of “social modernization, burdened by the post-totalitarian situation in Eastern European societies, fitting into a post-modern globalizing world” (Yordanov 2009, 8), contemporary art history is based, on the one hand, on liberal views on “freedom as a right to choose and to tolerate creativity” (Yordanov 2009, 11) and, on the other hand, on moderate conservatism which “guarantees knowledge and respect for traditions [...] as part of the European cultural area” (Yordanov 2009, 11).

Modernity

Having entered constructively in the third millennium, the Institute of Art Studies is the only specialized research institution in Bulgaria for developments in the field of ancient, medieval, and modern art culture. Complex in composition, it has the potential “for a comprehensive scientific understanding of the Bulgarian artistic heritage and the artistic manifestations of our modernity - through systematic documentation, through historical and theoretical research, which stimulates the processes of national self-knowledge and identification” (Toncheva 1998, 7).

The Institute consists of four structural units: Music, Fine Arts, Theatre and Screen Arts, which offers the rare opportunity for interdisciplinary approaches. Research focuses on the problems of music, fine arts, theatre, screen arts, and architecture in national, regional, European, and world contexts. The richness of cultural-historical layers on the Bulgarian lands, part of several different “megacultural areas” (Toncheva 1998, 7), still insufficiently studied, offers prospects for inclusion in the treasury of the world cultural heritage precisely through the means of art studies.

Research activity

The activity of the Institute of Art Studies is carried out within the framework of five long-term problematic theme modules: “Bulgarian Cultural Heritage in the European and World Context”; “Versions of Modernity”; “Art during the Period of Socialism”; “Globalization, Art, Identity”; “Digitization and Archiving of Cultural Heritage”. The scientific work is focused on research projects from the scientific plan offering a great richness and variety of problems in different historical periods and subject areas. Main priorities are also outlined, synchronized with the leading trends in the development of our modern culture.

Among the most cherished traditions of the Institute are the fundamental researches, and today the publications of its scholars lay the foundations of Bulgarian education and science in the field of arts. In the last five years, scholars from the Institute have published over 50 monographs, over 1,400 studies and articles, as well as catalogues, corpora, encyclopaedias, and collections (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Monographs by scholars from the Institute of Art Studies

A reliable indicator of the level of scientific activity and the recognition of the Institute’s scholars is the number of citations, which has exceeded 2,000 citations in the last five years.

The Institute’s periodicals have a long-standing tradition and have recently undergone active modernization. As heirs to several decades of tradition, *Bulgarian Musicology* and *Art Studies Quarterly* continue to publish unique academic investigations. The texts are peer-reviewed anonymously and both journals are indexed in ERIH PLUS. They are an indispensable source of knowledge for students, specialists, and a wider range of readers. The integration of several art sciences at the Institute of Art Studies gave rise to the prestigious *Art Readings*

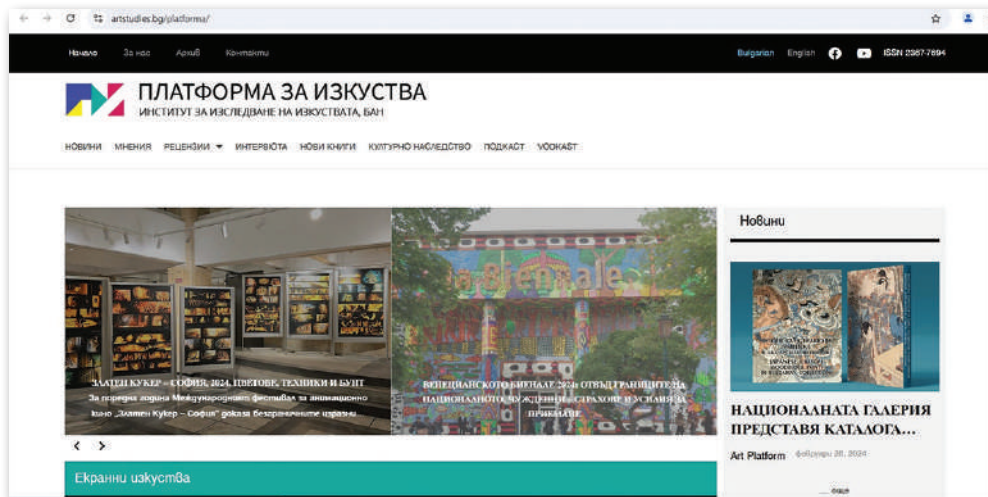


Fig. 2. *Art Platform* (<https://artstudies.bg/platforma/>)

scientific forum, as well as to the annual collection of the same name, indexed in recent years in Web of Science. The periodic *Art and Context* conference provides an opportunity for doctoral students and young scholars, with the reports from it published in a collection, edition of the Institute.

The globalized world and the digital technologies of the third millennium are a challenge for the presence of the Institute of Art Studies on the Internet. A vital tool for promoting its activities is its website, <https://artstudies.bg/>, which contains rich information and news updated daily. In recent years, the Institute has developed its own open-access spaces. One of them is the *Art Platform* - conceived as an alternative to operational criticism in magazines, newspapers (tabloids), offering a professional analyses of current cultural events by scholars at the Institute (Fig. 2). For nearly 10 years, it has been presenting articles, reviews, and interviews that have a wide and ever-growing circle of visitors. The Podcast and Vodcast segments are in the spirit of the latest trends.

In the spirit of new technologies, there is a space on the Institute's website for the Archives of the Institute of Art Studies (Fig. 3). As part of the priority for updating the technologies and digitizing the archives, the archives website includes five databases in which each unit is presented with its passport data and an illustrative file (audio, video or images - musical scores, photos, architectural drawings, etc.). Unique in their content, these archives document examples of the Bulgarian cultural heritage from the second half of the twentieth century, including musical folklore and church music, fine arts, theatre, cinema, and architecture. In their essence, these are "scientific archives", as they are "purposefully collected by researchers depending on the subject, priorities, and paradigms of each science, its documenting techniques, etc. Thus, they keep the information as much about the history of the arts in Bulgaria as about the history of the sciences of these arts" (Za arhivite).

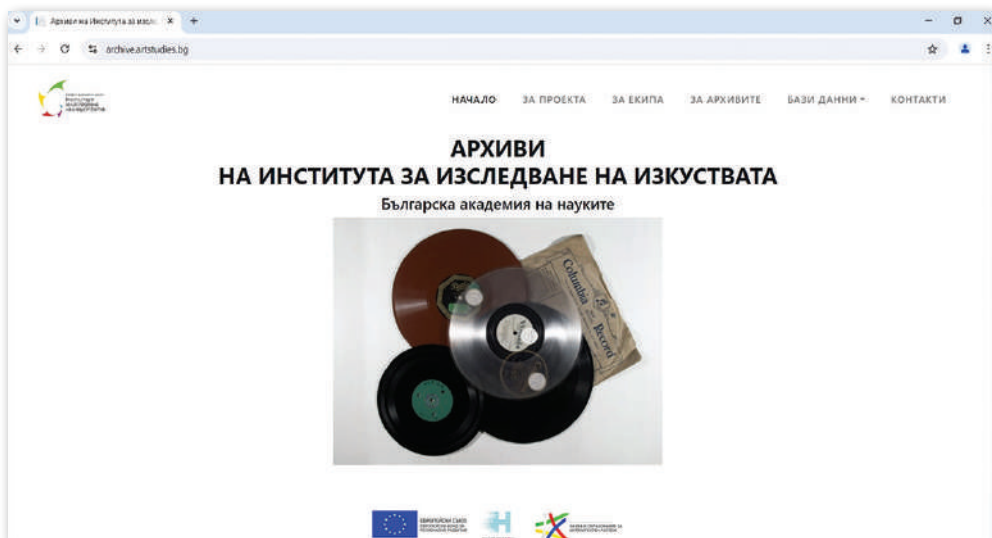


Fig. 3. Website of the Institute of Art Studies Archives (<https://archive.artstudies.bg/>)

A constant trend is the expansion of the Institute's subject matter in the direction of science and application. This allows scholars to actively promote to a significantly wider audience the achievements of their work. Popular science books, articles, catalogues, brochures, and programmes for cultural events are published, public lectures are given, and media appearances are held. In the last five years, 15 popular science books and over 400 articles have been published. Additionally, public lectures and over 600 media appearances were held.

Significant projects with external funding

The projects with external funding won by scholars from the Institute of Art Studies are precisely aimed at digitizing and updating the technologies for the storage and processing of archival materials. Among them stands out the *Creation and development of the "Heritage BG" Centre of Excellence*. The work on the project was carried out in three sub-projects: *Cultural Heritage in the Archives of the Institute of Art Studies: An Interactive Map of the Arts in Bulgaria* led by Prof. Goritsa Naydenova, PhD, *Stage and Screen Arts in Bulgaria - Research, Historical Compendium and Laboratory (within the Framework of the Large-Scale Project)* led by Prof. Nadezhda Mihaylova, PhD, and *Prayer Journeys of the Bulgarians in the 18th and 19th Centuries and Art* led by Corresponding Member Prof. Ivanka Gergova. Monographs, studies, and articles were published within the framework of the project, including the collective monograph *Prayer Journeys of the Bulgarians during 18th - 19th Centuries and Art (Molitveni patuvaniya na balgarite 2022)* and the collective electronic thematic collection *Compendium of Theatre*



Fig. 4. *Interactive Map of the Arts in Bulgaria Laboratory, Institute of Art Studies. 12 December, 2023*

and *Film Art in Bulgaria in the 20th Century* (Compendium 2023) as well as the monograph of Joanna Spassova-Dikova *The Bulgarian Theatrical Twentieth Century* (Spassova-Dikova 2023). The culmination of the large-scale activity under the *Heritage BG* project is the creation and official opening of the *Interactive Map of the Arts in Bulgaria Laboratory*, the final focus of the work of the team of the sub-project *Cultural Heritage in the Archives of the Institute of Art Studies: An Interactive Map of the Arts in Bulgaria* (Fig. 4).

The Institute is part of the project *National Scientific Programme “Development and Promotion of Bulgarian Studies Abroad”*. The activities conducted both domestically and internationally are active and encouraging for the cultural exchange, dissemination, and study of Bulgarian culture and arts in the twentieth century. Targeted research is carried out and a network of researchers is created, including scholars from Bulgaria and abroad, as well as students and doctoral students interested in the scientific achievements in the field of arts in Bulgaria in the twentieth century and their promotion.

Scholars from the Institute have won and successfully implemented over ten collective projects funded by various sources, including the Bulgarian National Science Fund, the National Scientific Program “Cultural and Historical Heritage, National Memory and Social Development” of the Ministry of Education and Science, the National Culture Fund, and others. Many publications of high scientific value appeared precisely as a result of the project activities: *Contemporary Musical Thinking* (Savremennoto muzikalno mislene 2019), *The Bulgarian 20th Century in Arts and Culture*, bilingual edition (The Bulgarian 20th Century 2019), *Roads of Balkan Icon-Painters*, bilingual edition (Roads of Balkan Icon-Painters 2020), *Prayer Journeys of the Bulgarians during 18th - 19th Centuries and Art* (Molitveni patuvaniya na balgarite 2022), and *Corpus of 16th Century*



Fig. 5. Monographs produced under the project *Post-totalitarian Bulgarian Cinema - Models and Identities* (2019-2021)

Mural Painting (Korpus na stenopisite ot XVI vek 2023). The *Post-totalitarian Bulgarian Cinema - Models and Identities* project, led by Prof. Nadezhda Mihaylova, PhD, was awarded as the best project of the Bulgarian National Science Fund for 2022 with the largest number of publications: a total of 144, of which 7 monographs, 2 thematic collections, 10 refereed articles, etc. (Alexandrova 2019; Donev 2021; Martonova 2021; Post-totalitarian Cinema 2019; Spassov 2021; Stoilova-Doncheva 2021, and others) (Fig. 5).

International activity

Established as a significant research centre, the Institute of Art Studies is part of the international scientific community as a member of the prestigious international organizations *European Alliance of Academies* and *Union académique internationale*. The Institute cooperates with research, educational, and other similar organizations in the country and abroad. Many projects under the EU's programme to support education, training, youth, and sports in Europe *Erasmus+*, projects under bilateral agreements, memoranda of cooperation and others are being implemented. Scholars from the Institute specialize in foreign universities under the Fulbright Program and others.

Training

The Institute of Art Studies is accredited to train doctoral students in all fields of art studies, taking special care to attract and help young scholars grow. In the last few years, over 50 doctoral students have completed their training and successfully defended their doctoral dissertations, providing a solid foundation for their successful professional realization.

Many of the scholars at the Institute actively teach at secondary and higher schools in Bulgaria and abroad, where they are respected specialists and academic supervisors of graduates, doctoral students, and graduate students. Teaching practice is intensified both at the level of general education lecture cycles and in the direction of specialized courses, which contributes to the dynamic exchange between fundamentality and applicability in science.

Expert activities

An important priority in the research activities of the Institute is the effective public application of the scholars' expertise and qualifications through the implementation of expert, consultative, and organizational activities to institutions and organizations both external and internal to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Art historians are highly valued experts and consultants for the creation of exhibitions, concerts, and films; as members of national and international commissions; they actively participate in procedures for educational levels, scientific degrees, and academic positions; and contribute to the preservation and promotion of the national and world cultural and historical heritage. They participate in the artistic life of the country as operational critics, performers, and screenwriters.

Awards

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Institute of Art Studies, solemnly celebrated on 5 October 2023, in Prof. Marin Drinov Hall at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, two awards were presented. The President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Mr. Rumen Radev, awarded the Institute of Art Studies with plaque *St. St. Cyril and Methodius* (Fig. 6). Acad. Julian Revalski,



Fig. 6. Presentation of the plaque *St. St. Cyril and Methodius* from the Presidency



Fig. 7. Awarding the *Honorary Golden Plaque of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*



Fig. 8. Kalina Tomova, PhD student, and Chief Assist. Prof. Darina Boykina, PhD, winners of the Young Scholars Awards

President of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, congratulated the Institute and presented the Director, Prof. Joanna Spassova-Dikova, PhD, with an *Honorary Golden Plaque of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences* (Fig. 7).

The successful scientific work of the scholars from the Institute of Art Studies has been highly appreciated with prestigious international and national awards and has received wider public recognition. These include the Pythagoras Award of the Ministry of Education and Science for significant contribution to the development of science, the honorary sign of the Ministry of Culture *Golden Age* for outstanding contribution to Bulgarian culture and the development of cultural cooperation, among others. An impressive number of awards were given by various professional unions and organizations such as Union of Bulgarian Film Makers, Union of Bulgarian Composers, Union of Bulgarian Actors, and others.

The awards won by young scholars at the Institute in the *Annual competition of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in the name of Nayden Gerov* and the *Ivan Evstratiev Geshov Award* for the youngest scholars in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences are particularly of high value. The young generation of researchers at the Institute worthily continues the traditions and gives hope for the future (Fig. 8).

Ars longa, vita brevis

In 2023, the Institute of Art Studies celebrated its 75th anniversary - a time to celebrate and thank predecessors, but also to reflect and seek new perspectives. Despite the awareness of continuous variability, strongly influenced by digital times and high technology, its scholars carry the awareness of the timelessness of art. The long-standing tradition of the Institute, on the one hand, and its survival in complex socio-historical situations, on the other, give the confidence that there is a future, following the covenants of the pioneers: *Without the help of science, one nation would never have reached meaningfulness for all mankind!* These words by Marin Drinov were chosen for a reason as the motto of the Development Strategy of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences 2018-2030 (Strategiya za razvitiye na Balgarskata akademiya na naukite 2018, 1).

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