

REVIEW

by

Prof. Dr. Elena Todorova

on

a contest for filling the academic position of „associate professor“ for the needs of the
New Bulgarian University

in the field of higher education 8. Arts,

professional field 8.2 Fine Arts,

In the “associate professor” contest announced in State Gazette, SG –
No.50/09.06.2023 for the needs of the “Design” Department,

the sole candidate is chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev

New Bulgarian University

I. Compliance assessment with the minimal national requirements and the requirements of the NBU:

The habilitation materials presented for reviewing by assistant prof. Dr. Sofroni Varbev fully comply with the minimal national requirements corresponding and covering the requirements of the NBU for filling the academic position of „associate professor“. Chief assist. Prof. Dr. Sofroni Varbev has the necessary number of points in all index groups of the minimal requirements table concerning the scientific, lecturing and artistic activities for filling the academic occupation in professional direction 8. Arts, 8.2. Fine Arts, in compliance with the Law of Academic Staff Development and the requirements of the New Bulgarian University. Beside his undisputable achievements in the field of design, he is also the author of a theoretical text explaining the creative problem of „The Advertisement Vision of National Autumn Exhibitions in Plovdiv“. In this text chief assist. Prof. Dr. Sofroni Varbev follows the process of creating various concepts and visual solutions of advertisement materials accompanying the autumn exhibitions in Plovdiv, year after year.

II. Research (creative) activities and results:

- **Assessment of the monography, creative works and other publications, which, in volume and integrity correspond to a monography, comprising an assessment of scientific and scientific- applicable contributions of the author:**

For this contest chief assist. Prof. Dr. Sofroni Varbev presents his habilitation work as an extended abstract, containing a detailed description of the creative process of preparing „The Advertisement Vision of National Autumnal Exhibitions in Plovdiv“. The work consists of 93 pages, of which 38 pages text and 55 pages illustrations. It is divided into 5 basic parts: introduction, objects, operation plan, project method and a detailed demonstration of the creative result.

This extended abstract presents a long and very successful project starting back in the year 1967. The **National Autumn Exhibitions** Forum, annually taking place in Plovdiv for 50 years now, has turned into one of the major cultural events in Bulgaria. This forum has undergone various transformations by the year 2013, when it was completely reformed. That year a new concept was created widening the opportunities of authors' works. For the first time the informal new visual solutions including interpenetrating genre elements, as well as the inclusion of media unused so far, have been recognized as rightful expressions of fine arts. Since that year an artistic forum manager was appointed, taking care of the technical, organization and artistic qualities of the exhibitions presented, but he/she also determines the basic concept and motto of each forum edition. Since 2013 to-date the manager is Galina Lardeva. In 2014 she invited Sofroni Varbev to fill the post of graphic designer. This choice was evidently very precise because for the next nine editions of **National Autumn Exhibitions** he made very successful designs of advertising materials. From the very first graphic work of Sofroni Varbev for the 2014 Forum on the topic of „Systems moved away“ one sees the depth of the designer treating the problems stated in the project motto. That year the images of the invited authors are very diverse – internationally recognized painters together with young artists of specific notable style. This is a serious challenge for the author but it is not the only one. Another major challenge is the philosophy concept of the motto which is about to reach the wide audience interested in visual arts. All this is supposed to reflect on the image of advertisement materials. Thence the successful choice of expression means done by Sofroni Varbev. As a basic element for the poster, the invitations and leaflets he uses the Totenkopf – a stylized skull image in a work by

Fillip Popov which is presented as a system of small elements – a successful reference to the forum’s motto. This is a very witty solution for achieving the abstract meaning – a subject sees itself as an object. In order to suggest an „alienation“ he sets the central subject in an asymmetric composition, thus removing the subject letting it partially out of the form, which is not only visual but also meaningful suggestion. The whole composition is dedicated to the message of alienation and achieves it successfully. The arrangement of the text gathered in compact forms without any space between the lines also helps to underline the asymmetry, respectively the alienation of spaces, in compositional opposition to the basic element – the skull. The Egyptian font is a successful choice. It’s a serif font, light, minimalistic, modern, and also clear and easy to read. Looking good in Cyrillic and in Latin letters, this font is most appropriate for advertisement products. Another method used by the graphic designer is contrast – the yellow background is in a strong contrast against the silhouette of the skull filled in a blue colored mosaic. This unexpectedly evokes a buoyant feeling rendering the image noticeable and memorable. I will not dwell in detail on all advertising materials – posters, catalogues, leaflets, invitations. I shall state in general that each product is well structured, it has its own image, and at the same time it is an integral part of the total visual concept of the product.

After analyzing the first advertising image of 2014 I shall discuss only several advertising materials dedicated to **National autumn exhibitions** I was especially impressed by. I do not underestimate the value of those I am not going to write about, a review is not supposed to reflect on all the works throughout the years.

National Autumn Exhibitions – Plovdiv ‘2016 titled „A MIRROR“

This advertising image is one of the most inspiring for me because from the first glance at the poster one enters directly into the philosophical sub-text of the motto. The mirror as a symbol of mutual penetration of image and reflection allows every observer’s imagination to create one’s own reality. The choice of Milena Tzochkova’s achromatic drawing for the composition’s background is straight to the point. Comparing the full image with its paled out double, their merging but also their separation by a dotted line achieves the author’s intention – the impossibility to escape from our deep essence, from our thoughts – our real mirror. These basic elements are set in an asymmetrical composition balanced and added by the motto written in English and Bulgarian. It’s an interesting whim to connect both words by the letter „O“ and simultaneously using it

as a symbol of a mirror. The colors are gray shades with well-placed blue accents. This creates airiness and lightness of the whole image and is in an excellent correspondence with the motto. Again the font is Egyptian, as part of the elements uniting in a joint graphic image all advertising materials of National Autumn Exhibitions. In this connection I would like to point out that the author has been most successful in achieving a common logic and visual identity of invitations, catalogues, leaflets, without allowing literal coverage of the advertising products' design.

National Autumn Exhibitions - Plovdiv'2017 „PLACEBO” “Placebo” was one of the most difficult themes for me. I was very surprised by the way Sofroni Varbev presented this motto graphically. Solving a problem by means of an imaginary, illusory approach, /as placebo does/ is presented in the most unexpected way – two fish, chasing each other in the shallow water contained in an umbrella turned upside-down. This is most unexpected, and also an obvious presentation of the philosophical motto sub-text that is astounding. The composition is slightly asymmetrical and the prevailing color is pink – a hint of optimism. The inspiration for this poster is Stefan Ivanov's installation named „Object I” from the „Random Objects“ series. Elements of this composition appear in various advertising products, the eternal connecting elements being again the Egyptian font and the common color tones. In this project we see a good balance between text and images – both as a composition and in quantity, which is typical of all other projects.

National Autumn Exhibitions - Plovdiv '2021 „Thresholds and Marks“ The last image I intend to elaborate on is „**Thresholds and Marks**“. This project is visually very different from the others. Here the basic color is black complemented by other dark tones. These heavy dark values enable the central images to stand out to the utmost. Sofroni Varbev is inspired for the image by Svetozar Benchev's work titled „Two objects (material and non-material)“. In it the author has expressed his idea of „ratio of threshold spaces“. This image is maximally close to the 2021 forum motto. In the poster composition the symmetry of the central images is opposed to the asymmetry of titles: to the left the Cyrillic alternative and to the right the English one, thus successfully illustrating the „threshold“ notion. To add the „marks“ notion, in the background one sees discrete gray lines that have appeared seemingly casually, just like healed wound marks. The discrete blue accents also contribute to this sensation. This composition, ostensibly simpler, in fact has the power to present, directly, without explanations, the deep philosophic notion in the forum motto.

The generalization of all graphic images of advertising materials for the National Autumn Exhibitions – Plovdiv, created by Sofroni Varbev, is the high professionalism of their ideas and realizations. Each poster demonstrates the depth of the philosophic notion skillfully visualized by the designer. In order to obtain this result, Varbev skillfully combines font, color, composition and balance of all elements. Every advertising product is so well composed that one finds nothing to add or remove. This is a sign of serious relation to the reflected event, combined with deep knowledge of graphic design possibilities.

- **Estimation of other creative events, beside the monography:**

The creative accomplishments of Sofroni Varbev are not limited to his work on the annual editions of National Autumn Exhibitions - Plovdiv. During all his creative career he has been working in the field of graphic design. Interesting solutions are the design of the picture book of Arch. Penio Stolarov "My way to and for architecture", „A collection of folklore“ – 2 books, compiled by the poet Boris Christov, a collection of poems called "Crazy theater", by Prodrum Dimov. Sofroni Varbev has designed over 40 posters and advertising leaflets for exhibitions and theater performances. All of them are interesting, sometimes provocative, never boring. This is evidenced by the national and international rewards he has received for his work.

Another field of his creative work are painting and cartoons. His achievements here are also irrefutable. He was awarded by the International Cartoon Competition of the newspaper “Yomiuri”, Osaka, Japan, in the years 1999 and 1995.

Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev is also actively involved in scientific research. He has published eight articles, discussing various creative problems of graphic and interior design.

- **Citations by other authors:**

Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev has a sufficient number of citations as reflected in the NIDC reference.

III. Educational and lecturing activities :

Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev was a super-numerary lecturer in the Interior Design Bachelor Program, in the Space Design Master program, and in the

Interior Product Design Master Program, at the Design and Architecture Department, NBU, since 2006. In the year 2013 he defended his doctor dissertation on the topic „Corporate Identity in the Interior“ and was employed in the Design Department. During the following 11 years he participated in the development and updating of the Interior Design Bachelor Program, and the Space Design Master Program. He actively participated in the creation of the “Interior Product Design” Master Program starting in the academic year 2017/18 , as well as in the creation of “Space and Interior Product Design” Master Program starting in the academic year 2023/24.

He worked out following courses: ARTM040 Corporate identity in the interior; ARPM302 Working medium specialized furniture; ARPM303 Transformable and multi-functional furniture; WEBM059 WEB (InDesign) graphic portfolio; ARTB912 Interior Graphic, etc. He has taken part in updating of further 12 courses of the programs.

IV. Administrative and Social Activities:

Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev has been a member of the Department council of the Design Department since 2013. Since 2021 till now he has been appointed director of the program council at the Design department. In the years 2010 – 2012 he was program director of basic programs for Interior Design and Fashion at the “Design and Architecture” Department, NBU.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate:

I have known Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev since 2006. Throughout the years I have worked with him on various creative projects. In most of them a huge amount of creative work had to be done within very short terms. What impressed me most was the rapid reaction and the excellent result. These acts of high expertise makes me treat our colleague Sofroni Varbev with respect and deference.

Conclusion:

Following the analysis of the creative work and the educational activity of Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev, I am quite confident of the high quality and professionalism of his deeds, and I propose to the honorable jury members to elect Chief assistant professor Dr. Sofroni Varbev to fill the academic position of Associate Professor as per 8.2. Fine Arts.

11.10.2023

Prof. Dr. Elena Todorova