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Dimitar Dobrovich



Studio - collection Svetlin Rusev
Lectures on Bulgarian Art

Dimitar Dobrovich

(1816-1905)

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On the coverpage
Self - portrait 1875-1880
Oil on canvas, 45,6 x 36 cm
National Gallery Sofia

Dimitar Dobrovich (1816-1905) Project
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Good evening to all! It is a great pleasure for me that Dimitar Dobrovich has gathered such a large audience. I think there is a good reason for this. Dobrovich is really a singular case. I hope that within this lecture I would be able to substantiate this claim. What is most striking in this case is that no one of us would ever be aware that such an artist existed at all if, in his old age, he had not decided to return to his homeland. If this had not happened, the only thing that the more curious among us would now know would be that there was a painter in the 19th century named Dimitrios Domvriadis whose works are now stored at the Athens Pinacotheca and that's it. Yet fortunately to us, Dimitar Dobrovich decided to return to his homeland which he left when he was in his adolescence.

Dimitar Dobrovich was born in 1816 in Sliven. Do pay attention to this date! It is pretty easy to calculate that he was only six years younger than Zahari Zograf. And let us take a look at his self-portrait. It dates back to a different epoch. It speaks of another type of painting school - a European and secular one. He was born in Sliven into the family of a wealthy craftsman and merchant named Georgi (sometimes his name is mistaken - Georgi was the name of the father). He was orphaned at the age of 11. Sometime later the troops of Dibic Zadbalkanski arrived in Sliven. They entered the town and were welcomed as liberators. But in 1830 the Edirne Peace Treaty was signed and Dibic Zadbalkanski (who was German by descent



Spinner, ca 1875
oil on canvas, 62,4 x 49
„Dimitar Dobrovich“ Art
Gallery Sliven

but went down in history by that name because he crossed the Balkan Range) was forced to withdraw. Then a considerable part of the Sliven population fled. They feared that on their return the Turks would start persecution and terror. Already an orphan, Dobrovich also fled with his grandparents. The usual course taken was to the North, to the Wallachia region and Romania - in Ploiești and Brjila. They stayed there for several months. Then word was spread that things had gone back to normal and they could return to their hometown so, taking the road through Ruschuk (present-day Rousse), they returned to Sliven. There Dobrovich took up his father's occupation and for about two years he was a frieze dealer as he was considered to be quite dexterous. Yet he did not feel at home doing it. Meanwhile, his mother remarried, this time to a man with the surname Pehlivanov, hence the name Dimitar Dobrovich Pehlivanov. In 1900, already in Bulgaria, he featured in electoral rolls precisely with this name. Otherwise, his stepfather was, to put it mildly, an undesired presence in his life and young Dimitar was eager for an opportunity to embark on his own path.

An opportunity presented itself when a business partner of his father, as we would say today, who owed him a considerable sum of money, was in Tsarigrad. So the young man headed for the city. It is believed that this took place in 1833. In Tsarigrad the Vasil Minchovich in question not only gave him the money (he had come to wealth by then) but he also acted as a noble man, giving him the valuable advice to continue his education. So Dobrovich who until then studied at a Greek school in his hometown found himself in the right place in Tsarigrad. This is a remarkable story and it's not only because there were many Bulgarians there but rather because these Bulgarians were all worthy figures. These Bulgarians held dear some public ideals, what is more, it was namely in the capital city of the Ottoman Empire that they were devising plans of how to topple it. One place of such importance in the topography of Tsarigrad was precisely this Korucheshmenska High School in which, as you may notice, Dobrovich studied alongside another three

Bulgarians whose names later left lasting traces in Bulgarian history - these were Georgi Sava Rakovski (1821-1867) with whom he shared the same room and whom he helped out of hardships, Sava Dobroplodni (1820-1894) and Gavril Krastevich (1817-1898). They studied in the same class but, more importantly, they were united not only by their roots (the three of them came from one and the same region of Bulgaria - Sliven and Kotel) but rather by their mutual passion for the fate of their motherland. This would later become the cause to which all of them would devote their lives. But to us it is also of interest to learn that the professors at the Koruchmeshka high school noticed that Dobrovich had a gift for drawing and for being an artist. They encouraged him to develop his skills in this field. But at that time plague broke out in Constantinople and seeing people die in front of his eyes, Dobrovich fled the city. Had he kept a diary, his life story could have been worthy of an adventure novel. His journey to Athens was marked by vicissitudes - he was attacked by pirates at the island of Chios and whatnot. But eventually he set foot in Athens. The year was 1837.

With the assistance and at the suggestion of the Great Powers, Athens was already declared capital of the liberated Kingdom. This act was aimed at drawing a connection with the Hellenic antiquity. In other words, as Dobrovich himself wrote in his recollections and as we know from various engravings and other landscapes of that period, Athens at the time was no more than a village. Just to make a comparison, I can provide the following data - in that period Sliven had a population of 25 thousand people whereas Athens could hardly reach 2,000. Dobrovich himself recalled the outline of those rustic shabby houses packed at the northern side of the Acropolis. But Athens was already the capital of a kingdom. A German prince who was still a minor at the time was elected king - Otto I (1815-1867). I will not quote what has been written about him in history books because this goes outside the current topic. The Greek people did not love him yet he ruled them for 30 long years. However, what they obviously accepted was that this fairly young ruler

immediately realized that it was vital to focus all his efforts on the megalic idea - the idea of Greater Greece. And that was precisely what he started doing by a series of decrees aimed at establishing Athens as a capital city of modern standards. The two brothers Hans Christian Hansen (1803-1883) and Theophilus von Hansen (1813-1891), Austrian architects of Dutch origin, were invited to work there as they had outstanding contribution to shaping the modern face of the Greek capital. The construction of the Athens University and the Athens National Observatory took place before Dobrovich's eyes. Very much in the same vein was another decree of Otto I, declaring the opening of the Royal School of Fine Arts (Polytechnion). This happened on the eve of 1837. And it was precisely during the same year 1837 that Dobrovich arrived in Athens. He was well aware that he had to complete his high-school education and he knew that the path ahead of him was that of an artist. That's why quite logically he directed himself to that school which initially was not a proper school of arts but I will elaborate on that matter shortly.

Let us now go back to the image looking at us from the screen. Usually based on age-related characteristics, experts assume that this self-portrait of Dimitar Dobrovich was painted in the 1870s. You can see how skillful and confident the brush strokes are, how comparable with European painting the style of the artist is. Some time ago when I decided that my next lecture would be dedicated to Dobrovich, Svetlin Russev told me that this was one of the first works of which he made a copy still as a schoolboy. However, I insist on showing also a photograph published in 1896 in Svetlina journal which, for no obvious reason, the fellow researchers from that period seem to have neglected and not put into use. And to my mind this is a remarkable photograph. It dates back to Dobrovich's period in Rome. It is impossible not to marvel at the nobility and dignity that this image conveys. But this is something that can be attained with age and at the beginning, after the high school in Constantinople, Athens came into his path where he spent 11 years. Naturally, he became a fluent speaker of Greek. Based on some notes regarding his return to

Bulgaria we might assume that he had a Greek citizenship. Recently I was notified that he also had possession of an Italian citizenship.

As a matter of fact, how did we find out about Dobrovich? To whom do we owe the reports we have about his life? In fact, most authors refer to two sources only. One is the study in three volumes entitled *An Attempt at Writing a History of Sliven* by Dr. Simeon Tabakov. A historian of his hometown and aged only 25 at that time, in 1902 he interviewed Old Dobri (Dyado Dobri), as he himself called him. I think that they were quite free in their usage of names at that time. So Simeon Tabakov kept writing that Old Dobri (and not Dimitar) said so and so. This is the information in one of the sources. In fact, everyone else writing about Dobrovich afterwards refers to the few pieces of information that this text contains. The second source is written by Vassil Boyanov, nephew of the artist. In 1896 when Dobrovich turned 80, he published an article about him in *Svetlina* journal. He signed it with his initials only but it was evident who the author was. Naturally, he had many more opportunities than Simeon Tabakov to communicate with his relative who had returned from abroad. Yet the information was roughly the same. Here I would like to point out that following such a long absence Dobrovich had almost forgotten to speak Bulgarian. He found it hard to express himself in Bulgarian. He was assisted by people fluent in French, Italian and Greek. Much later he would resort to the archives of Prof. Ivan Shishmanov. Around the same time in 1898 he inquired the artist in detail about his everyday life and recorded these recollections. Not long ago, the Sliven-based art gallery with the participation of my colleague Doroteya Sokolova from the National Arts Gallery released a CD on the occasion of the 190th birth anniversary of Dimitar Dobrovich where this material was also included. There is a monograph about Dobrovich released in 1957, which was penned by painter Dobri Dobrev, also born in Sliven. An article dedicated to the jubilee exhibition of Dimitar Dobrovich was published by Lyudmila Dobрева in *Arts Journal* (in 1988, issue 3). Today we would perhaps pose many more questions

Dimitar Dobrovich
A Photography
Rome



to the artist and we would have considerably richer information about him, especially about his period in Rome. Yet for one reason or another, this did not happen and only the major events of his long life path have been recorded. I believe that the entire personality of Dobrovich has not yet been given a worthy place and a worthy manner in which he deserves to be interpreted and assessed.

But let us go back now to Dobrovich's academic training in arts. There is a discrepancy between various information sources - both due to inaccurate translation and also due to lack of clarification of the history of the matter. I invested a great deal of effort to ascertain that he actually studied in one and the same institution all the time, in one and the same school, but this school transformed over the years both in terms of structure and name. So at the beginning when Dobrovich obviously completed his high school education, from 1837 to 1842, he attended the same

school. It was a bit more complicated as, although it was called Royal, the school was virtually a Sunday school. Classes were held also on holidays and weekends. So Dobrovich found himself there in the hands of a teacher whose name he recalled - this was a Frenchman, yet another Frenchman. Last time we spoke about the Frenchmen who tutored Zahari Zograf in French as he desired to get acquainted with the great art. This time this was Pierre Bonirote. It was quite by accident while I was browsing on the Internet to check the spelling of his name (as in various texts about Dobrovich it is spelt differently) that I came upon one of his landscapes recently put on sale at an auction. So it was not at all some anonymous figure and it was no accident that Dobrovich recalled that he studied first with him. But in 1834 after a restructuring this Royal School of Fine Arts really took on the shape of an Arts Academy. This was precisely the real education of Dobrovich as a painter and there he already had other professors. One of them was Raffaello Ceccoli. Obviously the connection between them both was good enough. And not only because he himself recalled him, not only because he painted a portrait of his wife (now stored at the collection of the National Arts Gallery) but also, and take note of this, because this portrait accompanied him throughout his life. He never parted with it and when he finally returned to Bulgaria, he brought this portrait with him. In this portrait one can clearly see that Dobrovich had mastered the painter's profession and adopted a European manner.

Among other things, Dobrovich received a number of awards in Athens. Obviously he stood apart from everyone else, distinguishing himself from the other students in this Royal school. In the first year of his studies there he received the second award, on the following year the first award, and on the third year he received the special order of distinction on behalf of King Otto I. It is noteworthy that even in that early period some of his works were purchased and went into private collections, and even into the collection of that school. And when much later the Athens Pinacotheca which corresponds to Bulgaria's National Arts Gallery opened

Young Maiden in Greek Costume

Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm

National Gallery Greece



doors, ten works of Dobrovich became part of its collection. Unfortunately, we have not taken the necessary steps to include these works in the comprehensive artistic biography of the painter. During a trip several years ago I had the chance to see these ten paintings - portraits and genre scenes. Of course, they were present in the catalogues under the painter's Hellenized name Dimitrios Domvriadis. The Greeks themselves who assessed him and bought his works at that time, who also today take pride in the fact that there was such a figure among their first secular painters, actually have very little knowledge of who he was. They do not know even basic life facts about him (date of birth and death, his long Rome period). In the comprehensive jubilee catalogue of the Pinacotheca, there is a reproduction of one of his works, yet the data about his life and art is imprecise and scant. If we

really want to delineate the artistic life of Dimitar Dobrovich, this could happen only in dialogue and cooperation with our Greek colleagues and certainly with the help of attracting Italian specialists in 19th century art.

This portrait of a woman dressed in a Greek national costume is kept in Athens. It was published on the website of the Athens Pinacotheca. Obviously it was painted during the years when Dobrovich was studying at that school. Even looking at it on a screen, we can see what good mastery of the craft Dobrovich already possessed. Let us look at the skillful way in which he depicted all these versatile fabrics and textures. He really had a gift from God. Another work dating back to the same period is *Italian Female Dancer*. Since they do not have information about the life of the painter, Greek colleagues date this painting to the 1850s. Such dating is unsubstantiated as during that time Dobrovich was already in Rome while his paintings were incorporated into the Greek collections before his departure. He is convincing also in this work - both in terms of composition and setting of the figure. And let us again draw a comparison between both of them - Zahari Zograf and Dimitar Dobrovich. Two almost synchronous lines, but so much apart in terms of artistic school and direction. While one of them developed the iconographic tradition, the other one embarked on an entirely different, European line of development. I find productive also the comparison with the art of Serbia, also liberated before us and having taken on a new road as early as the middle of the 19th century. I would also like to show some drawings from the Greek notebook of Dobrovich. It is unknown why in the CD released by the Sliven Arts Gallery they revised the opinion from Dobri Dobrev's first monograph, claiming that the notebook was Greek. Dobrovich brought also this sketchbook to Bulgaria and thus it became part of the collection of the National Arts Gallery. I have selected three or four drawings and I think that everyone who has a certain attitude to this subject matter could evaluate that these are rather early drawings. They could not have been painted in Rome where he arrived as a mature man, well into his thirties and already with a solid professional

Drawings, circa 1840
National Gallery Sofia





Drawings, circa 1840
National Gallery Sofia

experience. What is more, the choice of topics itself reveals the Greek character of the works. The images are clearly Balkan. Also the chain dance is Balkan. I wanted to show you these drawings so you could feel the living hand, the living movement of the pencil. This is always more clearly felt in drawings.

I do not know whether to draw your attention to another work which also dates to Dobrovich's Greek period. It is known as *Portrait of a Greek Bishop* (a replica of it is kept in Athens). I am not sure on what grounds in Bulgaria art experts always add the name of Eugenios Voulgaris who lived in the 18th century. It is more than obvious that this was a portrait painted from life. But who is depicted on it? This

Portrait of a Greek Priest, 1840 - 1845

Oil on canvas, 85 x 67 cm
National Gallery Sofia



is one of the numerous questions invariably arising when examining Dobrovich's works.

Who were Dobrovich's professors in Athens? First, let me say a couple of words about Raffaello Ceccoli about whom Greeks have very scarce information. They only know that he lived in the 19th century and that he was a professor in the Royal School but no more. This was a Neapolitan who, due to the illness of his daughter, left his country, set off for Greece and settled in Athens. But he stayed in Athens until 1852 when he left it for good. Later his traces got lost. It is possible

that he lived in Bologna. Has Dobrovich been in touch with him- we do not know. The oval painting of Ceccoli called *The Acropolis* with figures in the foreground and dated to the 1840s is now stored in the Athens Pinacotheca.

However, the traces of the other two professors whom I consider to have had a crucial role in Dobrovich's growth as an artist are well-known. These were the two brothers Filippos Margaritis (1810-1892) and Georgios Margaritis (1814-1884). They were professors precisely at the time when our Dobrovich studied at the School. Why do I think that they are very important for clarifying who Dobrovich was? Because one of them, the elder one, graduated the Academy in Rome. And Dobrovich mentioned in his accounts that he left for Rome with letters of recommendation. Most probably these were letters of reference precisely on behalf of Filippos Margaritis who most probably studied with that same professor Tomaso Minardi with whom Dobrovich would later study. I think it is good to deal more seriously with these two names. Not only because they, as alumni of the academies of Rome and Paris, directed our artist towards a certain type of style which immediately put him inside the European artistic space. There is also another important reason. These two were the forefathers of Greek photography. As early as the mid-19th century they founded the first photographic studio in Athens. Undoubtedly, Dobrovich's systematic pursuits of photography and his patent for the so-called "eleophotography" were connected to the pursuits of his professors.

So, with these letters of reference our protagonist arrived in Rome. The year was 1848. That is the reason why he is believed to be the first Bulgarian painter with academic training. There are simply no other names known from an earlier period. Perhaps there were such people but they did not return to their homeland and remained somewhere unknown around the world. 1848 was an exciting year for Europe. We are now talking about the "Arab Spring" and other similar springs. Yet this expression was first used in 1848 to refer to the so-called "Spring of the Na-

tions". The revolutions - first the French Revolution from 1848, then the other revolutions ensued almost in a chain and thus the movement of the Garibaldi followers came to life. We know that there were some twenty Bulgarians in the squads of Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) as among them the surname Pehlivanov is mentioned. I traced carefully Garibaldi's road. The possible moment in time in which their paths might have intersected is in Rome, at the very end of 1848 and the start of 1849. As a matter of fact, Dobrovich himself says that he fought under the flag of Garibaldi for about three months. I have heard that some Italian museum (and here the questions marks are numerous) keeps drawings Dobrovich made of Garibaldi's soldiers, or more precisely of their uniforms. I have asked people, I have searched in sources but so far I haven't come across a single trace. Although upon his arrival in Rome Dobrovich was 32, he again enrolled studying. He wanted to master the craft and the art of painting. Anjela Daneva and me, we still cannot overcome the barrier called the Archive of the Roman Academy. I hope we succeed soon. But until then we cannot say whether Dimitar Dobrovich was a regular student in that Academy, or whether as he himself put it, he visited the Academy for two hours in the morning and in the evening in order to paint, and the rest of the time he made copies in the Vatican. As a painter of reproductions, he really achieved mastery. What else is it that we know about this Roman period? We know that he lived at one and the same street, at 71 Sistina Street. This was at the heart of Rome. Today there is a five-star hotel rising in that place. Quite close is the Pincho hill. A veritably wonderful place. Dobrovich lived for 45 years in Rome without changing his address. When he returned to Bulgaria, he brought many works painted mainly during his Rome period. It is hard to date them and to order them in strict chronological order. There is one sure cornerstone. At the very start, he still signed his works with the name Domvriadis, but very soon started to use the name Dobrovich. Naturally, there are some works which remained unsigned.

I will start with this painting called *Italian Gypsy Woman with a Tambourine*. It



Italian Gypsy Woman with a Tambourine,

1870

Oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm

National Gallery Sofia

dates back to that period. I think that we have not yet appraised it properly, just as many other works of Dobrovich. I would like to say that we have not situated them in their European context, that's why we describe them imprecisely and superficially. Talking about European time, as a matter of fact for the first half of the 19th century this was the era of Romanticism. This was a type of Romanticism that was intersected in some aspects by Classicism, which is perhaps the case with Rome because, as you might notice, the new movements that go beyond the academic style did not originate in Rome. They came to life in the north, in Piedmont. Quite

on the contrary, Rome inclines artists towards Classicism, towards certain Romantic ideas. Rome is a fascinating place even to this day, this absolutely fabulous and majestic city strikes you with the sensation that there you can feel the course of centuries passing by. This is really the Eternal City. And this image was established precisely in the 19th century. Nothing has been studied in this direction and it would be interesting (as Dobrovich did not leave stories about Rome) to have his period there explored through other sources. One such source is Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893). There is no need to explain to this audience who Hippolyte Taine was. He was in Italy in 1864 and has left us magnificent descriptions of Rome. When I was going over Dobrovich's paintings to prepare for this talk, another image that came to my mind was that of Gogol (1809-1893) - the great Russian writer who lived in Rome for a long time and who left us a magical text. I recommend that you read it. Gogol's *Rome* is a kind of a declaration of love to the Eternal City. Gogol also described the beautiful Italian women who are so gorgeous that it is no accident Italian poets compare them to the sun, because just as the sun is full, in the very same manner they radiate this classical fullness. Gogol also described to us the artists "*upon whose faces one can see the traces of calm rigour and silent labor*". Gogol left Rome in the same year in which Dobrovich arrived there. And he lived in the same street Sistina. Let me add that Gogol was strongly related to the art scene and he moved inside Rome's artistic circle. These and many similar sources can help us recreate the atmosphere in which Dobrovich lived in Rome in the second half of the 19th century.

Italian Gypsy Woman with a Tambourine - we can comment on this work for a very long time. On the one hand, she is a typically Romantic character. On the other hand, look at the superb harmony of colors and, not least important, pay attention to the landscape spreading behind her. By the way, Dobrovich didn't leave us a single pure landscape. He painted human figures against the backdrop of a landscape, but these were human figures anyway. Here the landscape in the back-

ground is superb and the spaciousness is like an echo from the swift motion of the figure. Also dating back to this Roman period is this calm contemplative portrait of a girl. We discover the same particularly warm background that was present in the former painting. Most probably this *Girl* was painted in the Academy because on her hand the artist noted in the same color that it was painted from life. The collection of Bulgaria's National Art Gallery also keeps this painting called *Village Woman from the Environs of Rome*. Dobrovich apparently had a special attitude to this work. In Bulgaria he brought two of its versions in different formats. This one was the larger. And once again, please pay attention to the landscape. And the figure itself of the beautiful Italian woman is a unique melange of Classicism and Romanticism which takes us back to a bygone era.

The Spinner Woman is also known in two versions. One is from the Arts Gallery in Sliven as it is regarded as its emblematic work. Obviously it was not in Rome itself but in the outskirts of Rome that Dobrovich came across this model of his. And once again - there is an extremely appropriate color harmonization, which means the long years of study did not go wasted. And also the well-known Italian loveliness. Many people asked him in his old age why he never married. And he used to respond, jokingly perhaps, that his wife would be too jealous of all his female models. One way or another, he was strongly drawn to female characters. Female figures take a central place in his art. I will show you two more works which are interesting because they offer more complicated painting tasks related to light. These are *Woman with a Lit Candle* and *Fisherman*, both on display at the Sliven Art gallery. Dobrovich found no difficulty in depicting human figures and also in conveying states of mind. *Girl behind a Curtain* - a work that might be regarded as bizarre at first glance and not particularly appealing. Yet if we take a closer look and start deliberating on Dobrovich's art in an Italian and a broader European perspective, we would be able to assess also the setting of the figure and the complex usage of planes and lights blending in this vividly dense composition.



A Young Man
Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 cm
Owned by a private collection



Venetian Doge (a copy), circa 1875
Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 cm
„Dimitar Dobrovich“ Art Gallery Sliven

This famous *Portrait of a Young Lad* in my opinion belongs to the Greek period of Dobrovich.

Venetian Doge, a work regarded as a reproduction, was in my opinion painted from life. It is connected with Dobrovich's self-portrait. The fact that it is dated to the Rome period of the artist is indisputable.

As I mentioned earlier, Dobrovich earned his living by making reproductions. He made plenty of replicas. When he returned here, at least according to some



Beatrice Cenci, copied after Guido Reni

Oil on canvas, 51 x 39 cm
„Dimitar Dobrovich“ Art Gallery Sliven

sources, he brought some 150 copies. Quite an impressive figure! I have chosen to show you just some of them. I bring to your attention now this small head because there is a problem related to it. The problem is that in that same recently released CD there is a claim that this was an Italian 17th century master. I find a refutation of this assertion in the fact that in both common exhibitions of Bulgarian artists in which Dimitar Dobrovich participated after his return to Bulgaria, he did not present himself with original works nor with works of other authors from his personal collection. At the exhibition of 1897 he showed 11 copies and several eleophotographies and on the following year - 10 copies. And since at that time events were documented much better than we do it today, Izkustvo magazine published

photos of these expositions and there one can very clearly see this small head. It was namely for this reason that in my opinion this is undoubtedly a copy. And as a reproduction artist Dobrovich distinguished himself by his remarkable virtuosity.

Among his copies noteworthy is the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, until recently attributed to Guido Reni (1575-1642). Authorship in the case is not so important. More interesting is the character of Beatrice Cenci (1577- 1599). Descendant of an aristocratic family, she killed her father (she had a legitimate reason to do so), was sentenced to death and beheaded at the famous Roman bridge that leads to Sant' Angelo. Her heroic act received huge response and for centuries afterwards her romantic image has inspired poets, playwrights, composers - from Shelley to Alberto Moravia, not to mention Alexandre Dumas, Stendhal, Oscar Wilde and others. Cenci's portrait of her was constantly subject to reproduction - perhaps because it was attributed to the famous Guido Reni and perhaps because it corresponded to the ideal of beauty. Dobrovich also copied it, not once. And certainly he was the first to bring this image of a tragic and romantic halo to Bulgaria. Here are a few more copies - Carlo Dolci, Correggio, Battoni, Guido Reni. As to *Archangel Michael* of Guido Reni he reproduced it both as an oil replica and as an eleophotography.

Here I need to engage in a digression on the topic of eleophotography. Dobrovich himself valued highly this achievement of his and gave it its name. He insisted that it should be perceived as the "Dobrovich system." What do the eleophotographies of Dimitar Dobrovich actually consist of? I fear that to this day we have a rather condescending attitude towards them. Actually, these are photographs treated with oil paints. The whole thing, however, is much more complex. Unfortunately, no one has undertaken a serious study of the subject so far although there is sufficient material, if not plentiful. Because just imagine - this was the nineteenth century. Photography was not so advanced. And some of those eleophotographies were more than one meter wide. How was this done? Where was this done? I think



Aurora, copied after Guido Reni
Eleophotography, 59 x 137 cm
„Dimitar Dobrovich“ Art Gallery Sliven

that the subject of “the eleophotographic system of Dobrovich” is awaiting its serious researcher.

“Guido Reni reigns alone in Palazzo Rospigliosi with his *Aurora*. It is no doubt one of his most perfect paintings... Amor and Phoebe have the full expression of ephemeral creatures and the several people I have seen to copy the fresco make extreme efforts to impart that elusive shade to the characters which, without taking away something of their human likeness, lends them a divine quality.”

Dobrovich himself made several copies of the fresco *Aurora*. I suspect from one grammatical plural form which appears in the text of Konstantin Velichkov that it is possible that Dobrovich and Konstantin Velichkov met in Rome. It is possible that Dobrovich was a guide of Konstantin Velichkov. Interestingly, Konstantin Velichkov pays special attention to the mosaic studio in the Vatican. And it was

headed by Filippo Agricola (1795-1857), one of the professors of Dobrovich, even at that time president of the Rome Academy. This, of course, is only a hypothesis. But when asked about his life in Italy, Dobrovich mentioned several names: Tommaso Minardi (1787-1871), almost 40 years a professor at the Rome Academy, Filippo Agricola, Cesare Fracassini (1838-1868) known for his skilled mastership, and landscape artist Ferdinando Silvani (1823-1899). Within the great history of art they are of little importance. But here, speaking of mosaics, I want to draw your attention to another point overlooked when considering the work of Dobrovich. In Rome, along with the paintings, the reproductions, and the elephotographies that he made, Dobrovich was a mediator (this is a kind of business) for the transfer from Greece to Rome of a mosaic needed for Roman cathedrals. Whoever has been to Rome may have visited the basilica St. Paul outside the Walls. And even without having paid attention to the author's name one has certainly stood fascinated before the mosaics on the facade. They are the work of the same Agricola.

The year was 1893. The decision to return home was apparently taken a year earlier. Dobrovich made inquiries about whether his relatives in Sliven were still alive, looking for some contact with them. There is another curious fact that complements the portrait of Dimitar Dobrovich. I will mention it not only because my fellow musicologist Karanlakov is here with us now. When he left for Bulgaria the artist received an expensive gift – an Amati violin from 1673. At that indirectly makes us assume that he was also a good violinist. Also Misho Todorov, a composer of Sliven descent, recalls having seen the letter that went with this violin and which made it clear that Dobrovich himself played that instrument pretty well. Unfortunately we do not know where this violin is now. But there are enough witnesses claiming that the violin was always hanging on the wall in Dobrovich's room in Sliven.

So many, many questions arise regarding the life of this remarkable Bulgarian to which perhaps we should make an effort to answer. At the outset of 1893, the

first days of January, his nephew Vassil Boyanov and his old friend, the famous educator Ivan Dobrovski (1812-1896) went to meet Dobrovich in Istanbul. Obviously the nephew was not sure that he would recognize his uncle. Therefore Dobrovski was needed. And so Dobrovich returned to Sliven. The beginning was, I would say, even solemn. Immediately with the blessing and at the express order of the Prime Minister, an exhibition of the “first Bulgarian painter” Dimitar Dobrovich was arranged. I have no information whether Stambolov had a refined taste for the fine arts, but in this case he intervened decisively. The exhibition opened at the National Assembly on July 2 the same year 1893. The artist showed works he had brought and works selected by a special commission. He showed his originals, he showed his copies of works by European masters, he displayed his ephotographies. The exhibition received wide response. Another issue is that the time was then completely different. He was in another space, he belonged to a completely different generation, and now he had to communicate with people who could be his grandchildren, let alone sons. In other words, he was anyway Old Dobri, as Tabakov called him. He could not become part of the local passions, the local strives. Let me remind you that during the same year the first painters’ union was set up - the Society for the Advancement of Art in Bulgaria and three years later in 1896 the Drawing School opened doors. Dobrovich was invited and participated in the Second and Third exhibitions organized by the Society with copies, as I pointed out. There is a picture that shows the members of the Society for the Advancement of Art in Bulgaria, where we see two Italian students on top of both flanks. To the left is Dobrovich and almost farthest right is Anton Mitov. They could very well understand each other in Italian, but obviously not just the language barrier interfered with this dialogue, as there were already different stylistic guidelines, different attitudes, different generations, different ages and Dobrovich at one point apparently found himself isolated. Moreover, public attitudes to art were still extremely underdeveloped. I would like to give you a quote on the occasion of the

second exhibition of the Association of 1897. The correspondent for the exhibition in Peace newspaper wrote:

“Bulgarian art is now undergoing its most difficult times. Times of childish years, so much more difficult because there is neither the mother nor the mother’s milk - the public attention. Not to mention the very poor attendance of the exhibition. But consider the indifference with which our audience regards this type of endeavour, look at the patrons of art who are nowhere to be seen, look among the displayed pictures for the encouraging notes “sold” which are never there and you will get an idea of what sacrifice the people arranging the exhibition and the artists participating in it are making...”

We might elaborate on this text also in other aspects. But the truth is this. The space was tight, there were no purchases. But it is well known that the still living Princess Maria Luisa, whom we know was an artist and an admirer of art herself, bought two works of Dobrovich. This was also well documented. On his behalf, Dobrovich made very generous donations. In addition to making donations to the state in the face of the then institutions, he gave rich donations to Zora community cultural center in his hometown. In fact, his collection constituted the main body of works of the future Art Gallery in Sliven. Overall, most of his major works (but he obviously had discretion for his work), he distributed among public institutions, to put it in modern terms, the rest - among relatives. And later each family member disposed of them differently. As Svetlina magazine wrote, though 80 years old, Dobrovich “never dropped the brush” and kept working. He lived with various relatives, leading a humble life, yet he did not suffer from the fact that he had modest funds. He died on March 3, 1905. Ironically, the announcement that his pension had been finally granted arrived only a couple of weeks later.

Why at the very beginning did I argue that in my opinion Dobrovich is not well placed? Yes, he was one of the first artists in secular Bulgarian art along with

Stanislav Dospevski, Nikolay Pavlovich, and Hristo Tsokev. But he was something entirely different. This we should make sense of. Not only because the other artists spent three or four years abroad and they were deeply rooted into the local processes, while he was actually a person of those places. But he did things that we observe through the mindset of those same places, we look at them through the mindset of the Bulgarian lands of the 19th century. And I am convinced that Dobrovich is a figure that we have every reason to classify within the European 19th century, within the European Romanticism. We have every reason to take him out and show him openly whenever we look into Bulgarian art in a broader European context because he falls into a different category. I believe so. There's no reason why we should all fall into the same categories and move at the same pace. There are different layers and with all his fate, with all his life in Europe, he is part of the art of those lands. His being Bulgarian is all the more reason for us to explore his legacy. As you can see, Dobrovich raises a host of issues to which we have not yet given the necessary answers. I think that the underlying cultural question is actually the intersection between the personal and the universal time. Dobrovich's personal time and what are its glitches, its intersections with the common Balkan time and the universal time at large. By all means, we have every reason to thank this Dobri, Dimitar, Dobriadis, Dimitrios, Domvriadis, Dimitar Pehlivanov or whatever name he appeared under, for returning home and giving us another opportunity to delve deeper into these issues.

I am showing you now the last image. This is a portrait of one of his relatives, a niece who was fluent in French and was actually able to engage in some kind of dialogue with the elderly Dobri. This was done in 1899, one of his latest works.