



## STATEMENT FOR ASSESSMENT of PhD Thesis

From *Associate Professor, Dr. Milena Tsvetkova*  
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

For obtaining the educational and scientific degree Doctor in scientific field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences, Media and Communications (Visual Communication) Doctoral Program

With a dissertation on the topic: “Innovative Design and Experimental Structures in the Victorian Book (1800-1900) – Relief Design Binding Technology by Owen Jones for “The Psalms of David. The Victoria Psalter“

Presented by Malina Gospodinova Belcheva-Handjieva, tuition-free doctoral student in the Department of Press Journalism and Book Publishing at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

With Scientific Supervisor: *Professor, Dr. Vesselina Valkanova*

The dissertation presented for public defense is an original work by Malina Gospodinova Belcheva-Handjieva, created in the framework of a free doctorate at the Department of Press Journalism and Book Publishing at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in the scientific discipline “Visual Communication” and under the scientific guidance of the holder of this research field at the University Prof. Dr. Vesselina Valkanova.

The problem with which the dissertation is engaged – to reveal and explain the technology of the extravagance, even for the Victorian era design, of the embossed leather cover of a book, has actually prepared the study for an abundance of scientific news. But the dissertation provides science with something more – it reconstructs in practice a model of this publishing technology in its original optical, tactile, aesthetically dignified architecture. The author of this dissertation is a direct initiator and autonomous restorer of the edition of “The Psalms of David. The Victoria Psalter” from 1861, owned by The Art Institute of Chicago.

These are sufficient reasons at the beginning of my presentation to state my appreciation for the research and my respect for the scientific management of the completed work proposed for defense.

### **Parameters of the Dissertation**

The total volume of the dissertation is 360 pages. The main text is 251 pages. The bibliography contains 363 correctly described information resources, of which only 47 are in Bulgarian, given the geographical and historical roots of the research subject.

The structure of the dissertation corresponds to the international standards. It is organized precisely in four chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, a bibliography and five appendices. It is logical for the appendices of such a scientific research to be richer.



I welcome the decision to integrate part of the photo material in the main text, and in the five appendices to the dissertation to separate only the photo documentation related to the research and restoration work of the dissertation on the book “The Psalms of David”. The scientific content in research on visual communication proves the communication-receptive competence of the author precisely when it is synchronously visualized.

### **1. Relevance and Significance of the Problem Developed in the Dissertation**

The topic of restoration of the book as a movable cultural heritage is almost absent as a dissertation project in Bulgaria. The Register of Scientific Activity in the Republic of Bulgaria of NACID as of January 2021 shows that the protected dissertations with key words “conservation and restoration“ are 12 in total (mainly on the chemical-technological aspects of materials, immovable cultural heritage and fine arts), but only one is in the scientific field “3.5. Public communications and information sciences”.

Rare even in the world are scientific attempts to reconstruct the art of publishing in any period of the Gutenberg era.

The current dissertation “Innovative Design and Experimental Structures in the Victorian book (1800-1900) – Technology of Relief Design Bound by Owen Jones for “The Psalms of David. The Victoria Psalter” is an important effort in this direction. And more importantly, it has larger added value because it relies on the communication approach and the theory of media design of the book.

### **2. Theoretical and Scientific Information Awareness**

The scientific reflection of the author Malina Belcheva-Handjieva correctly suggests that the failure in the restoration of samples of the Victorian book from the XIX century is due to the lack of critical research on the technology of printing and bookbinding for this period due to lack of documented procedures technical information from earlier restoration processes.

The correctness of the observations and conclusions is prepared by the relevant selection of solid historical, art and cultural works on the Victorian era in England, including the stage of “decadence“ in European culture from the late XIX – early XX century. The author studies relevant English studies on history of the book in the XIX century; obtains a rich fund of patents for applied crafts of this era; cites major publications that explain the structure of the Victorian album. The documentary framework for the international aspects of the subject area would be more complete if attention was paid to the IFLA principles for book restoration in libraries<sup>1</sup>.

### **3. Research Methodology**

As a reaction to its obvious social commitment, the dissertation provides us with a scientific study conducted using a carefully considered methodology.

The subject of research interest is well defined – the innovative and experimental technology used to design the covers of the book “The Psalms of David“, published in 1861, which became a model of decorative publishing in Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> IFLA's Book Conservation Principles. In: Conservation OnLine (CoOL), 1988, Vol. 12, No 5. Reprinted with permission from IFLA Journal, 1979, Vol. 5, No 4, pp. 298-300. <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/byorg/abbey/an/an12/an12-5/an12-511.html>



The correctly chosen complex approach contributes to the positive result of the dissertation project: it combines cultural-historical, biographical, comparative and illustrative approach and integrates the classical methods relevant to the scientific problem such as deduction, analysis and synthesis and desktop research.

The aim of the dissertation is realistic, well-focused and therefore successfully fulfilled: the study of the method of embossed binding of the book “The Psalms of David“ and the reasons for physical degradation of its copies to contribute to a full understanding of the technology of embossed books from the Victorian era.

The precisely conducted theoretical and applied research leads Malina Belcheva-Handjieva to an unforeseen and unexpected conclusion. She found that the copies of the entire first edition of the Victorian book under study differed from each other. This means that the publisher Owen Jones (1809-1874), deliberately did not follow standardization - the circulation of his book “The Psalms of David“ from 1861 is eclectic and diverse, because it is produced by an unusually experimental and innovative method. The author also finds that it is the financial condition of Owen Jones that allowed him to experiment with the technique of lithography and embossed binding in a lavish medieval style.

#### **4. Contributions to the Dissertation Research**

In the self-assessment phase, the dissertation student formulated six contributions, which I accept. From my point of view, I will allow myself to interpret them a little more conceptually and I will organize them into three categories: innovative implementation value, scientific modeling and scientific foresight.

- Innovative implementation value. Through Malina Belcheva-Handjieva's restoration of the Victorian book “The Psalms of David“ at the Museum of Fine and Applied Arts in Chicago, she introduces a new binding in the restoration practice - more sustainable and created specifically for the restoration of books with album structure in the format “folio”. As the author herself explains, this is “an innovative model of a 'reinforced album structure that simultaneously balances the weight of the paper and the covers and ensures the mobility of the whole book body'.”

- Scientific modeling. In this regard, the author has invented and tested four working tools:

[1] procedural algorithm of reconstruction of the book body – from the compositional information of the original materials in the design of Owen Jones to the final finishing processes of the last restoration of the book;

[2] a model for a new album structure of a restored Victorian book;

[3] algorithm for photo documentation of reconstruction of the restoration process.

[4] formed a network of institutional and individual collaborators to obtain historical information, patent documentation, expert opinions and laboratory infrastructure from several countries.

In these author's achievements I believe that there is definite proof of the applicability of the scientific results of the dissertation research.

- Scientific foresight. The rule here is that if there is a scientific problem (‘disease’), we should not focus on the disease, but on the patient as a whole. Which is what the author does – her restoration work on the first edition is only a starting point for diagnosing an anomaly in book publishing during the



Victorian period – instability and impermanence of binding materials, leading to “degradation and damage.” If Arnold Toynbee's theory of cyclicity in social time is true, allusions between today's bookbinding practices and those of the Victorian era can serve as a warning to future innovators in the design of printed books. Something more. Without stating it, the doctoral student applies one of the newest methods in science – retroanalysis (so-called retronica), borrowed from checkmate. We find it in her attempt to predict the mistakes of the past by collecting artificially excluded events (“ink stains”) and restoring the tracks of these events. She achieved this by creating a new approach to restoring the body of the Victorian book “The Psalms of David“, on the basis of which Ms. Belcheva-Handjieva has decided to use the structural changes and restoration interventions made in the past.

The evaluated dissertation is noteworthy also for the personal culture of creating and organizing empirical resources. I refer to the five appendices to the dissertation: App. 1. Photographic study of a copy of “The Psalms of David“ from the special collections of Northwestern University, App. 2. Photographic documentation of the entire restoration process of the book “The Psalms of David“, App. 3. Parallel photographic comparison of elements from the book before, during and after restoration, App. 4. Photographic examination of the bindings and changes in the color of the skin according to the environmental conditions and App. 5. Photographic presentation of the exhibition “Beauty and the Book: 19th and Early 20th Century Folios on the Decorative Arts“ in Chicago. All applications are proof of the systematizing skills of Malina Belcheva-Handjieva.

### **5. Potential of the Obtained Results of the Dissertation and its Applied Value**

The scientific result in the present dissertation has an indisputable applied value. It will be useful not only for the state library funds endangered by loss or destruction, but also for the collections of books and printed editions of private collectors, various individuals and legal entities, owners of valuable collections. This dissertation will inevitably find application in the training and qualification of book restorers and librarians specializing in this practice.

Malina Belcheva-Handjieva's scientific contributions and acquired research qualities should be encouraged through research projects and active academic commitments. Only in this way will the valuable multiplier effect be achieved, in which the theoretical, methodological and consulting experience from the laboratories for restoration of books and papers in library and university institutions in Chicago (USA) and from the project for Restoration Laboratory in the Sofia University Library Malina Belcheva-Handjieva has been and continues to be engaged, she will find direct application in the available restoration laboratories and studios in Bulgaria.

I confirm my conviction that the dissertation Malina Belcheva-Handjieva is emerging as a serious follower of Ginka Saikova from the Center for Slavic-Byzantine Studies “Prof. Ivan Duychev“ at Sofia University, which for the first time in Bulgaria combined the theory and practice of conservation and restoration of paper information with library and book science.

### **6. Evaluation of the Author's Abstract of the Dissertation**

The author's abstract is well prepared and according to the rules of the scientific information documentation. Its volume is 29 pages. The self-referencing was performed in accordance with the criteria for “informative abstract“, that is - the content is reproduced by critically “compressing“ the full-text dissertation. Its structure is clear and detailed. Its content accurately and accurately reflects the essence of the dissertation and gives an objective idea of the purpose, objectives and results of the study. The author's abstract contains the three obligatory elements: theses of the main ideas and conclusions;



self-assessment of the degree of novelty and practical significance of the derived solutions; explication of the author's contribution to the research.

## 7. Notes, Recommendations, Questions

I have a recommendation concerning the terminological competence of the dissertation, as she currently collaborates as an expert at the Technical Committee “Archival, Library and Information Activities“ of the Bulgarian Institute for Standardization<sup>2</sup> and is expected to work with impeccable precision on the translation of international standards. conservation and restoration science. My recommendation is not to compromise with the standardized vocabulary and terminological discipline in our scientific field, especially when the scientific object is problematized in the technological paradigm. For example, it is not desirable to use the literally introduced English word “copy“, if only because such a unique museum artifact as the book “Psalms of David“, whose creator dedicates it to Queen Victoria, is discussed. The term in Bulgarian is “*ekzemplyar*“. Other free uses can be found in the names of the compositional elements of the book, such as the “titular page“, “right cover“ and “left cover“, otherwise called “first cover“ and “second cover“ or in combination with “the first (left/upper) cover” (p. 121). The whole terminological thesaurus of the publishing activity and the terms for the structural elements of the editions (books) themselves are codified through national standards by the mentioned Technical Committee “Archival, library and information activity” of BDS<sup>3</sup>.

To strengthen the good impressions of the overall work, it will be constructive to learn the position of Malina Belcheva-Handjieva on a theoretical issue. It focuses on the “body-vision“ relationship in the scientific concept of a book. It is known that according to sociology (George Herbert Mead) objects such as books are first social and only then physical objects. Communication theory conceives of books as a medium, ie. as a media platform for interaction between sensory (physical) communication and visual (optical) communication. Based on her competence and acquired theoretical experience, can the dissertation student say where the boundary is between the book as an artifact (object) and the book as a medium (means of communication) in terms of its physical modality? In other words, when did a rare and valuable book (the so-called rarity or curiosity, in the term of Prof. Stoyan Argirov), despite the efforts made to restore and resuscitate her body, cease to be a medium?

## 8. Publications and Approbation of Scientific Results

I evaluate the dissertation submitted for obtaining the educational and scientific degree Doctor after validation of the covered minimum national requirements under Art. 4, para. 3 and Art. 62, para. 1 of the Regulations on the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski“. I confirm that the results of the survey have been tested with sufficient frequency at an authoritative international forum.

## 9. Conclusion

I vote in favor of the dissertation entitled “Innovative Design and Experimental Structures in the Victorian Book (1800-1900) – Relief Design Binding Technology by Owen Jones for “The Psalms of David. Victoria Psalter“. The results of the conducted theoretical and applied research and the conclusions made are original, reliable and applicable to scientific turnover. This dissertation will further develop and enrich the theory of conservation and restoration science.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the personally prepared biographical reference, in the programs ISO / TC 46 “Information and documentation. Archival, library and information activities” and ISO / TC 46 / SC 10 “Requirements for document storage and conditions for preservation”, working groups “Document storage requirements” and “Requirements for materials related to preservation”.

<sup>3</sup> BDS 2497: 2017 Bibliographic data in books; BDS 11942: 1990 Publications and audiovisual materials. Main types. Terms and definitions; BDS ISO 14416: 2020 Requirements for binding books, periodicals, continuing editions and other paper documents for use in archives and libraries. Methods and materials.



From a formal point of view, the dissertation submitted for defense meets the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act, the Regulations for its application and the Regulations on the terms and conditions for obtaining scientific degrees and holding academic positions at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, namely:

- the dissertation is a novelty for the science of media and communications, as well as for the library-information science;
- the dissertation has the originality of the research focus;
- the dissertation enriches the existing knowledge and develops them;
- the author has a bibliographic culture, knows the scientific publications on her topic, is able to interpret them and justify achievable scientific tasks;
- has mastered the technology of the scientific approach, has mastered modern research methods and tools;
- the dissertation guarantees continuity and presupposes application of the scientific results in forthcoming research or business projects.

I list these parameters to confirm that the qualification and scientific goal of the doctoral program of independent training at Sofia University has been fulfilled, and that their recapitulation objectifies my conclusion that the completed written work should be evaluated the highest.

**Proposal to the scientific jury:**

I confirm to the members of the Scientific Jury my positive assessment of the scientific qualities of the dissertation entitled “Innovative design and experimental structures in the Victorian book (1800-1900) – Relief Design Binding Technology by Owen Jones for “The Psalms of David. Victoria Psalter“.

I propose that we vote unanimously for obtaining the educational and scientific degree Doctor of its author – Malina Gospodinova Belcheva-Handjieva.

Jury member: *Milena Tsvetkova*

Date: 01.02.2021