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Abstract
Of life-size height, with crossed hands on her lap, she watched me calmly and intensely, aware of her beauty and immeasurable power. Behind her, in bright hues glowed flowers and fruit. The woman appeared as if she herself was born of their gleam, but at the same time she does not merge with it, her image does not get lost in its light. She distinguishes herself; she stands apart, filling the canvas with the lightness of the nuanced tones of her festive dress, with the piercing whiteness of her face and hands. Unsurpassed in her beauty, the Mona Lisa, and also magnificent like her in dignity, the Bulgarian Madonna.

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Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora's Bulgarian Madonna

Creed, Criticism, Propaganda

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College, Wharton 2008

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2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image
Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

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> Of life-size height, with crossed hands on her lap, she watched me calmly and intensely, aware of her beauty and immeasurable power. Behind her, in bright hues glowed flowers and fruit. The woman appeared as if she herself was born of their gleam, but at the same time she does not merge with it, her image does not get lost in its light. She distinguishes herself; she stands apart, filling the canvas with the lightness of the nuanced tones of her festive dress, with the piercing whiteness of her face and hands. Unsurpassed in her beauty, the Mona Lisa, and also magnificent like her in dignity, the Bulgarian Madonna.[1]

Georgi Strumski's description of Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora's Bulgarian Madonna (Fig. 1) is particularly poignant. He wrote it on the occasion of a school trip to the gallery where the painting is hung facing the viewer directly from its prominent location in the artist's namesake gallery in the small town of Kjustendil, Bulgaria. Few people outside of Bulgaria readily recognize this image, but any Bulgarian school-aged child would identify it as Maistora's Madonna. Her penetrating gaze has compelled piety, humility, awe, and a stark sense of self, opposed to the world: the essence of being Bulgarian despite and against all odds. Undated, but presumed to have been completed between 1920-1930, this painting is also featured on a series of postage stamps for international mail with the words "Bulgaria" written above it, as if this image and Bulgaria are synonymous, inseparable.

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[1] Georgi Strumski, *Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora*, Publishing House "Narodna Mladezh": Sofia, Bulgaria, 1980. p. 89

As one Bulgarian critic noted in 1935, "The attempt that [Maistora] makes is grandiose in its undertaking. This is one attempt to create true Bulgarian art with new artistic means, which carry a true Bulgarian character. To create art, which 'will speak of the infinite and inexhaustible nature of our existence,' of the Bulgarian spirit in its most noble, most pure, and most profound form."[2]

Looking at the painting, one may also wonder "*Why the Madonna?"* and "*What is a modonna?"* Most people understand the term to signify nothing more than a woman, but Madonna also implies a deity such as the Virgin Mary, who is a central saint in the Orthodox Church. Maistora, however, would never have known of this title for his work, as it was adopted posthumously. Once, he was asked why he had become obsessed with painting women, to which he answered, "I wanted to show the spiritual sagacity and the purity of soul and the humility of the maiden" – using words from literature and folklore to describe the Bulgarian maiden – "I connect in every idea the human with the universe, which trembles with joy and takes part in everything that the human does. No matter what idea I try to convey, I always strive to show eternal life."[3] As regards the religious connotation of the term Madonna and his own religious views, Maistora commented, "I am religious, but I do not follow the official religion. Without soul, can anyone create art?"[4]

Interestingly, many people find Maistora's paintings to possess a religious, spiritual, and meditative power. One critic even described the painted "worlds" that

[2] Nicola Mavrodinov "Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora" from the newspaper "Lik" No. 24, 20. III 1935
[3] p 71 Razgovori I Spomeni – interview with Prof. Vasil Sotilov c. 1959-1960
[4] Idbid, p. 74

Dimitrov created as heavenly, "unworldly, like the story about Paradise."[5] And veritably, this painting carries more than personal meaning to some critics and writers.

The Bulgarian Madonna has been presented internationally as the nexus between the art and ideology of the modern Bulgarian state and its ancient iconographic and folkloric traditions. This painting, this image that describes the common identity of a nation, is of monumental importance to a nation that emerged in the early 20th century out of the turmoil of war and oppression. The work's international exhibits include the 1958 world exposition in Brussels, Belgium, for which Bulgaria's preeminent figures chose the painting to represent their homeland; and the 1960 exhibit in Paris, France, titled "2500 years of art on Bulgarian lands" which also traveled to Vienna, Austria. The former exhibit tied Dimitrov's Bulgarian Madonna to a 2,500 year-old artistic tradition. This tradition was founded on crafts, pagan traditions, folklore, and iconography – the only form of painting present in Bulgaria prior to the early 20th century. [6] Finally, in 1973, at the first independent international posthumous exhibit of Dimitrov's work, the Parisian critics saw this painting as a parody or perhaps emulation of Leonardo's Mona Lisa, and dubbed it the "Bulgarian Madonna." Later, Bulgarians adopted the name to praise Dimitrov's mastery – this painting really was a "Mona Lisa" to them, a "Bulgarian Madonna."

Although in 1973, the Parisian critics mocked Maistora for attempting to emulate the Old Masters, Dimitrov sought all of his life to distinguish himself from the Western canon of art. Along with many of his contemporaries in the movement "Rodno Izkustvo," which served to define the national in a distinctly traditional agrarian sense, Dimitrov

[5] Kiril Tzonev "The Exhibit of Vladimir-Dimitrov-Maistora" from the newspaper "Slovo" No 3816, 21. III 1935

presented his creed, ideals, and vision in his writings and interviews and through art that defined the motherland as synonymous with the common laborer, thereby signaling a new tendency in nationalism and socialist political thought.

After Bulgaria's conversion to Communism on September 9, 1944, the Ministry of Education, Dimitrov's official employer at the time, used the agrarian, peasant themes of this painting and others like it, which represented reapers and harvester maidens, as the visual icons for Bulgaria's Communist future. The politicians imbued the Madonna with meanings and symbols that stretched the artist's original intention, as evident in his early writings that presented his intent and aesthetic. In 1935, responding to the sensational reviews of Maistora's first major exhibit at the National Academy of Art, Sofia, one critic noted prophetically, "Especially now our notions of what is 'new' and 'modern' art depend only on the author …for us, however, namely this fact has a special implication, *because one artist can be expressed through his attitude towards his work almost as well as through his very art*."[7]

The above statement seems to be true for many modern artists. An artist's attitude towards his work is as important as his art in describing his intentions and aesthetic. What would the Madonna be without the great literary references and odes in her honor? What does this image add to the word "Bulgaria?" And what does Dimitrov's own attitude towards his work add to our perspective on his art, especially in light of criticism and political propaganda?

Let us explore how the world of art literature, both criticism and artist's statements, influences the way we perceive art as we examine Dimitrov's *Bulgarian*

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[6] From the catalogue of the Kjustendil Gallery

Madonna thorough the interviews, criticism, and writings of the artist and his contemporaries. Some art historians have argued that art literature, in tandem with other exogenous influences, alter the context in which art is received and change art's meaning in ways that depart from the artist's original intentions. Can politicized criticism transform a painting into propaganda? Likewise, how much importance should we place on the artist's statements as we view his work?

The hailed Bulgarian visionary and Revolutionary hero, Vasil Levski, is famed for saying "we are in time, and time is in us. We transform it, and it transforms us." In the same spirit, we may say that "Art is in writing, and writing is in art. Art transforms writing, and writing transforms art."

On Modern Art

Some scholars claim that the Decorative Style in Bulgaria emerged as a result of the influence of 19th century modern artistic movements in Western Europe and, particularly, France, among which most notably Impressionism, Expressionism, and Cubism. During the inter-war period, after WWI and before WWII, mainstream Western European artistic forms emerging from contemporary art movements in France and Germany began to permeate the artistic circles in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital.

And veritably, the early twentieth century was a time when artists across Europe searched for a deeper emotional expression unfettered by academic conventions through a new art form. This form took various expressions among which Impressionism and Art

[7] Stefan Mitov "The last works of Vladimir Dimitrov-Maisotra" from the newspaper "Literary Voice" No. 269, 1935. (my emphasis)

Nouveau in France, the Modern Style in England, Jundenstil in Austria and Germany, Futurism in Italy, De Stijl in Holland, and "Mir Izkustva" in Russia.[8] What came to be viewed as modern art in Bulgaria found its expression and outlet in the "Decorative Style" – the art of a distinct, clean "style" that critics characterized by the vibrant, crisp colors, flat forms, undulating lines, and material reality of its chef d'oevres. Avramov, a notable Bulgarian art historian and critic, argues that the word "style" emerged as a newly-coined term referring to just this simplification of art into line, color, and form, based on the theory and aesthetic of the various "modern" movements happening in Europe at the time.[9]

This art was invariably a response to the various phenomena of the era that inspired it. In the words of the German art critic Beno Rutenauer "Art's highest criterion is the wholesome representation of the essence of life during a given time – the essence of an era".[10] Around the turn of the century art, which academicians used to define in terms of purpose, materials, and techniques, implying a certain degree of academic accuracy as the underlying criterion for "good" art – became primarily a search for style and form that reflected the essence of modern life. Modern art sought to communicate with its time, and therefore, it sought to speak the language and to be expressed in the style of its time. The Modern era in Europe represented generally a period of de-nationalization, growing spirituality coupled with a growing disdain for religion, simplicity, cleanness, functionality, practicality, and frugality – as reflected in the clean, expressive, emotional forms and color of the new art styles. Modern art was also invariably tied to the industrial age: the architecture of apartment buildings resembled the

[8] Avramov, 9-21
[9] ibid., 22-24

clean functionality and simplicity of industrial plants; objects of everyday use became beacons of the modern preference for functionality and simplicity.[11]

The aesthetic ideas circulating through Europe around the turn of the century took root in Bulgaria, as well. The seeds of the modern were transported by Bulgarian intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, and critics, who studied abroad and, upon their return to their homeland, produced numerous travel essays and literature on art theory and criticism. In particular, Bulgarian artists adopted a taste for the decorative style through highly decorative, emotional art works like Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss." Decorativism represented a return to the primitive: the paradoxical essence of modern art. The decorative tendencies in art represented an attempt to regularize and harmonize the chaos and lack of stability that characterized life in the big city and accompanied industrialization, political unrest, and war. [12]

Art and literature sought the peasant, idyllic way of life as its prime subject. Gauguin painted Breton peasants laboring on the sun-baked fields for their sustenance and Polynesian locals lounging in the heat of the tropics, unspoiled by Western complexities, to express the primitive simplicity and naïve superstition that his Paris milieu had supplanted with machines and science. Van Gogh, too, painted peasants, inspired by a desire to revert to a cruder, more human, way of life. Andre Rousseau sought this idyllic respite in his fantasy landscapes filled with large, simplified flora and fauna, far removed from the complexity of city life, where people moved about like ants. There are countless other examples of this return to the primitive: Matisse's Islamic Art; Picasso's African-inspired tableaus; the village life paintings of Marc Chagall, and many

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[10] Ibid., 23
[11] Ibid., 22-24

examples of local interpretations of modern trends. Hectic city life and modernity pushed artists to rediscover simplicity and purity, spirituality and harmony in these primitive subjects.[13]

In Bulgaria, too, this return to the primitive way of life signaled a return to the village – an escape from the city – that formed the backbone of movements towards a more national, homely art. Bulgarian artists that participated in the movement Rodno Izkustvo and were inspired by its manifesto likewise utilized this idea of the peasant as a recurring subject, looking to folklore and ancient customs for inspiration. Ivan Milev took on themes from Orthodox iconography and expressed them in new colors with a modern style in works like "Crucifixion" from 1923 and "Our Mothers are Always Dressed in Black," from 1926, which portray old women in the mourning clothes, honoring the many mothers who lost their sons in the Revolution, WWI, and the Balkan Wars. Another artist, Ivan Penkov, expressed the love of a peasant woman for her child in his "Mother" from 1927. Vasil Stoilov, an artist who was also a close friend of Maistora, painted genre scenes illustrating the daily life of peasants in works like "Mystical Tribute" and "A Peasant with a Pitcher" from 1930 and 1932, respectively.

Avramov argues that in Germany *Heimatkunst* represented an analog and a precedent to the national art movement, *Rodno Izkustvo,* that emerged in Bulgaria in the late 20's and early 30's. Its compositional tendencies leant towards monumental, simplified forms, and hard, rugged contours that underlined the primitive spirit of its subject matter and captured the spirit of peasant life rather than its physical reality. The hero of this national, and perhaps nationalist, art was not the modern citizen surrounded

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[12] Avramov, 24-26.
[13] Ibid.

by cement constructions, but rather the village peasant surrounded by his land. The term *Heimatkunst* denoted an art of the homeland, indelibly personified in the common villager.[14]

A Brief History of Bulgaria and its Art

Bulgaria's history has been marked by cycles of great intellectual and artistic developments interposed by periods of political turmoil. A small nation located in the Southeast corner of the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria has contributed much to Slavic and European culture since its inception in 681 CE, among which most notably the Cyrillic alphabet and a rich folkloric tradition unique to the region. Torn from western civilization in 1396 by an Ottoman conquest – at the dawn of the Renaissance in Western Europe – Bulgaria found its culture silenced under the Islamic rule that lasted nearly 500 years. During this time, iconography, practiced under strict canonical rules in parishes and monasteries, and traditional crafts, like embroidery, pottery, and weaving, remained the only forms of visual artistry that were passed on as traditions. Monks kept the language alive in underground schools, where scholars and historians copied and retold Bulgaria's history and ancient literature. The year of Bulgaria's liberation, 1878, marked a new age for national art and writing. Independence ushered in an age of universities, public schools, museums, and academies.

The art produced in Bulgaria during the interwar period, following WWI and preceding WWII, parallels the country's political identity during that epoch as a small Balkan state caught between the two antipodes of East and West. The Western artistic

[14] Ibid.

undertones of the artwork produced in Bulgaria suggest the influence of late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century movements, which were permeating the newly-liberated country via the circulating French and German magazines and via the Bulgarian intelligentsia encountering Western art during travels and studies abroad.[15] Russian influence was also streaming into the country through the leading Russophile circles. Bulgaria's cultural identity thus rested in the hands of the intellectuals, who became aware of exogenous artistic and literary movements and yet drew on their own national heritage in an attempt to rediscover their sense of national identity and stir the national consciousness of fellow Bulgarians after the Ottoman occupation.

Nevertheless, as Bulgaria came into greater contact with Europe in the early decades of the 20th century, at a time when it was becoming more open to Western influence via its intellectual circles, it also became less receptive to the West, seeing it as a threat to the national industries, agriculture, and identity. The growing tendencies towards capitalism and industrialization led to the development of similar phenomena to those that were happening in the West. The country adopted protectionist economic policies that included new tariffs on imports from Europe and subsidies to many sectors of the national industry. Industrialization at the turn of the century brought about changes to the organization of labor and the agricultural sector in villages. Under Communism, the traditional patriarchal division of labor was replaced by village communes. Although some aspects of village life remained unspoiled by industry, for the most part idyllic harmony of traditional village life remained a thing of the past, (at least for the

[15] I would like to thank Liliana Milkova for her help in aiding my understanding of the dynamics of Bulgarian art during this epoch.

intelligentsia that resided in the city), romanticized in the writings of the great poets and littérateurs Yavorov, P.P. Slaveykov, Trifon Kunev, Theodor Trayanov, among others.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, became a center of intellectual learning, art, and culture. The stone streets once disturbed only by the quiet trot of horse-drawn carriages and the hollers of street vendors were replaced by broad boulevards buzzing with the dynamism of modern life: trolleys, crowded marketplaces teeming with people, shop windows illuminated by electricity, public monuments, theatres, and parks. Sofia, like other European cities at the time, was losing its local character and replacing its traditional features and local folkloric heritage with the universal features of a modern European city. This move towards Europeanization transformed the economic, political, and social character of the city and also contributed to changes in the aesthetic favored by artists teaching and working in *Risuvatelnoto Uchilishte* (the School of Painting founded in 1822, which became the Bulgarian Academy of Fine Art in 1929).[16] Many artists favored the traditions established by the high academies of the West as the paradigm for visual art, while others chose an eclectic style that merged the art forms of the East and West.

Concurrently, a handful of artists and intellectuals diverged from the Western paradigm for art and literature by hailing their Balkanism. Both artists and writers of the time began using the "type" – a characterized, stylized personage often humorous and exaggerated to represent uniquely Bulgarian and "Balkan" characteristics – to typify the whole of a nation. This tool for creating a national consciousness through stylization and characterization became emblematic for Bulgarians' identity through characters like Hitur Petur (The Clever Peter) and Bai Ganyo. Artists wielded a distinctly modern

Bulgarian style of painting, representing what some scholars argue the contemporary continuation of the iconographic tradition from the late 17th and 18th centuries fused with the modern aesthetic of clean form and color, exemplified by Vladimir Dimitrov's paintings of another Bulgarian "type" – the villager, harvester, and reaper that typified the average Bulgarian for Dimitrov, an the same way that Bai Ganyo typified the Bulgarian abroad for the famous novelist Aleko Konstantinov.

The Birth of Modern Bulgarian Art: Towards A National Style

The artist, visionary, and delegate for the Congress of World Peace, Vladimir Dimitrov – Maistora was at the forefront of a literary and artistic movement in the 20s and 30s that departed from the Western paradigm for academic art, which many of his contemporaries espoused. Even in his debut, Dimitrov showed promise as the next great talent in Bulgarian art and the great hero to determine the artistic future of his country. The first published criticism of Dimitrov's art, which appeared in the newspaper "Izgrev" (Sunrise) in 1903, the author writes that by paying for the artist's expenses at the Sofia Painting School [later the Academy of Fine Art], the citizens of his hometown "undoubtedly will serve a great favor for Bulgarian art, because with a proper and systematic specialized education, Mr. Dimitrov can become one rare artist."[17] Another renowned critic and intellectual, Chavdar Mutafov, prophetically noted "The development of this artist [Dimitrov] is on its crossroads – as if a promising and illusive

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[16] Avramov, 27.

[17] *"Bezporno shte prinesat istinska usluga na bulgarskoto izkustvo, zashtoto pri edno pravilno i sistemno spezialno obrazovanie gospodin Dimitrov bi stanal edin ryaduk hudoznik"* ["Izgrev" No. 9, vol. 17, issue 5, 1903 – *Bulgarskata Kritika* p 43].

symbol for the work of the national artistry: at times sure, at times impatient, zealous. Immortal – naïve and fantastic."[18]

Although Dimitrov spent a number of years studying and traveling abroad around Europe and the United States, even working under the private sponsorship of John Crane, he chose to spend his life and dedicate his work to the people and environs of a village in the region of Kjustendil, a small town in southwest Bulgaria.[19] It was in the climate of the 1920s and 30s that a Bulgarian Academy of Fine Art emerged, and with it the opportunity for the artist to take on new projects and exhibits in Sofia and around the country under government sponsorship, specifically the patronage of the Ministry of National Enlightenment (Ministry of Education).

The volume of criticism and reviews during the 1920s and 30s published in popular periodicals was unsurpassed; these critical essays, which were complimentary more often than not, were instrumental in shaping the artistic reputation of the young painter, hailing him a visionary, the savior of Bulgarian art; the premier modern Bulgarian painter. Not surprisingly Bulgarians dubbed Dimitrov "Maistora" – the Master – as the title reflected their great reverence for his work, the artist's great contribution to Bulgarian and European modern art, as the reviews and criticism raved. Dimitrov's critics and contemporaries recognized the "grandiose undertaking" that this young artist took on with his "attempt to create a true Bulgarian art with new artistic means, which carry a pure Bulgarian character."[20] One critic, Kiril Tzonev, acclaimed in 1935 that "the

[18] Chavdar Mutafov "Four Names" magazine "Vezni" No. 1 issue 8, 1919/1920 pp. 251-252 – Kritika p 46
[19] Marinska, 72.
[20] From an article published in the newspaper "Lik" No. 24, issue 20 , 1935 by Nicola Mavrodinov (Kritika p 91)

inspiration and vision with which [Dimitrov-Maisora] regards and creates is as pure, pious, and compelling as the work of the monk from Fiezola, Fra Angelico."[21]

Recognized as one of the first and foremost artists to create a Bulgarian national style in glorifying everything that he prized as "Bulgarian," Dimitrov depicted his homeland and the national *bitie* (existence) as the Bulgarian woman, an extension of the literary and folkloric tradition emerging from the National Revival, which portrayed the homeland as a woman figure. Dimitrov transcribed this idea of the homeland from the verbal to the visual.

Interestingly, the catalyst for self-definition – promoting a resurging patriotic spirit – appears in Dimitrov's paintings more often as a youthful maiden than as a "mother" figure. For example, in his painting *The Young Woman from Shishkovzi* (the small village in the oblast of Kjustendil where Dimitrov worked), later titled the infamous *Bulgarian Madonna*, Dimitrov was able to achieve namely this ideal. The newly liberated country is equated with a virgin, a young woman bearing the promise of new life. As one critic noted in "Lik" magazine in 1935, Dimitrov's "art speaks truly 'of the infinite and eternal existence.' It carries one unsuspected finesse, one rare nobility, which is not and cannot be the product of a mere 50-year existence of a nation [as recognized by the West]. In the Art of Maistora we see for the first time in our art that our people really do have a history dating back thousands of years."[22] Dimitrov's contemporaries recognized his style and genre as identifying closely with the Bulgarian culture and folkloric traditions, and some went on to add that his art was unique in this vision and undertaking.

[21] Kritika, p 92
[22] Kritika, p. 92

The fervor and superlatives prevalent in the criticism and reviews of Dimitrov's art from the height of his artistic career, marked by the 1935 exhibit at the Academy of Fine Art sponsored by the Ministry of Education, speak to the cataclysmic potency of his art to stir a specific type of nationalism and patriotism that reverts to the pastoral past and hails the common worker as a manifestation of the divine. One critic, Nikolai Rainov, wrote in his review of the exhibit, "Namely why I summon all those to whom the art of our land is dear to attend the exhibit of Georgiev and Maistora who have captured our land's initial direction. I know that this internal capturing will, with time, outweigh the shortcomings, inevitable for the provincial work of the artists." [23]

These reviews reflect the need that many Bulgarians felt at the time to re-discover their origins and to resurrect their heritage from its suppression during the Ottoman rule. In many ways art serves as a microcosm of a society, and this is especially true of Dimitrov's paintings of village maidens and harvesters in the 20s and 30s. Dimitrov's art signaled a new movement in the forefront of the political changes that the revolution of September 9, 1944 was about to bring. The tendency towards utopic nationalism, as reflected in the interpretations of Dimitrov's paintings, precedes the onset of communism in Bulgaria.

Vladimir Dimitrov's nationalistic art, as he mentioned in his interviews, commentaries, and writings, was the prime exemplar of his creed: a belief in the simple and humble humanity of the common field hand, a belief that outward perfection merely reflects internal spiritual and mental purity, which to Dimitrov meant an existence unfettered by the complexities of industrialization. The person is not a machine or a labor

[23]Nikolai Rainov "Skromno Izkustvo" (Humble Art) magazine "Mir" (Peace) No. 5790 vol 30 issue 8 1919; p.44 *Kritika*

input into production, his art seems to proclaim. It urges viewers to consider their common heritage and humanity. This ideology preceded and in some ways influenced and signaled political trends in Bulgaria towards socialism and communism. In 1944, a political coup launched the Communist government and proclaimed Bulgaria a People's Republic.

In one of his earliest essays about Bulgarian art entitled "Novite Techenia v Izkustvoto" (The New Movements in Art), Vladimir Dimitrov writes "*nie bulgarite vurvim podir drugite narodi"* ("we, Bulgarians, follow other nations") and advocates the need for Bulgarians to be themselves and not try to imitate the Western artistic tradition. He cites an excerpt from a review published in the newspaper "Forwertz," and chooses a statement written by a German critic concerning an exhibit of Bulgarian artists in Berlin: "but it is necessary to be more introspective into your own reality, which encircles you, so you may create your national art, which will be of greater dignity."[24]

In discussing Dimitrov's aesthetic and ideology and contemporary criticism concerning this art, which portrays the Bulgarian "type" as exemplified by the "Bulgarian Madonna," let us examine the influence that Dimitrov's personal artistic creed and writings had on the way in which Bulgarians perceived this style of painting as emblematically Bulgarian during the Soviet epoch and today.

Part 1:

Dimitrov's Bulgarian Madonna and the Aesthetic of the Homely

Dimitrov's vision of an agrarian utopia manifests itself in his early writings, where he describes his aesthetic of ideal beauty as a physical manifestation of inner grace, spiritual purity, and oneness with nature, which he valued especially and associated with the motherland. Dimitrov often insisted during interviews about his art that he spent his "entire life trying to find the most pure colors and forms, in the most simplified harmonies of nature," which he found in a small bucolic village in the environs of Kjustendil. [25] Harmony and beauty are essential to Maistora's aesthetic. In his biography of the artist, Georgi Strumski notes, "the models from real life transcended the physical realm to become immortalized in Maistora's paintings as 'emissaries of a different nation, which is not subject to time.'" The critic quotes directly from Maistora's credo, where the artist proclaims that his figurative works represent a new nation of people – people who retain some elements of their real-life models, while perfecting the rest to represent an artist's vision of an eternal, unchanging utopia on earth. These "emissaries of a different nation," as Maistora called them, represent the artist's own view of his art and mission – to create peace, harmony, and perfection in the wake of chaos, war, and destruction.

Dimitrov's early idealism emerged out of a war-torn childhood. His parents' generation was the first to enjoy freedom from Ottoman rule. Both of his parents immigrated to Bulgaria after its liberation from nearby territories that were still struggling for freedom. His parents' poor life, compelled Maistora to paint the peasant way of life, which was indelibly bound to the earth and close to nature. The peasant childhood

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[24] *"no e neobhodimo poveche vglezhdane vuv vashata deistvitelnost, koyato Vi zaobikalia, za da mozhete da suzdadete vashe nazionalno izkustvo, koeto shte ima po-goliamo dostoinstvo"* from the magazine "Listopad" 1919 vol. 7 – *Spomeni, Pisma* p142.

[25] Spomeni, pisma p. 67

fostered Maistora's humanitarian, socialist philosophy, as well as his love of the village, the traditional abode, and the lifestyle of the simple people. Maistora once admitted, "As a result of my natural predilection for the village, and also because all art stems from the national 'type' and existence, I found it necessary to live and work in a village. Only there, among the people, studying primarily their psychology and temperaments, their labor and the surrounding nature, I painted."[26]

Later, when he relocated to a village upon his return from the States, where he was commissioned by Mr. John Crane to paint a series of family portraits, Maistora undertook the task of painting the Bulgarian "type," which to him epitomized his national identity and consciousness, inspired by the national works of Bulgarian novelists, lyricists, and poets of the revolutionary era. Maistora claimed that, "Deeply imprinted in the soul of our people will be established and created our great art, which will merge together with the great cultural treasury of the entirety of humanity."[27]

Maistora's Madonna reflects elements of Bulgarian society and culture that Dimitrov's contemporaries and Bulgarians today view as emblematically Bulgarian. And it is not surprising how they arrived at that conclusion. In an interview aired on Radio "Sofia" in January 1960, the artist discussed his work with middle school children and stated, "Everything that I have done, although incomplete, is the fruit of a deep emotion, although all of my work is decorative …I expressed that national spirit mainly through the 'types' that I created – I chose 'types' so that it is evident that they are Bulgarian, young or old."[28]

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[26] Idbid, p.131
[27] Idbid
[28] interview with Prof. Vasil Sotilov c. 1959-1960 from *Razgovori I Spomeni* p 136

This search for a national identity – this sentiment of nationalism in the first half of the 20th century – influenced Bulgarians' intellectual and creative endeavors at a time when the new nation, after the liberation, concentrated on forging an identity as a European state on the eve of modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. Maistora's Madonna, however, reminded Bulgarians of their humble agrarian origins. The painting celebrates Bulgaria as an agrarian nation, rather than a developing Balkan state attempting to emulate the West. It reflects the artist's strong sense of patriotism, his love of nature, his agricultural aesthetic, and his vision for Bulgaria as a peaceful utopia: the utopia Maistora never knew.

Celebrating the Traditional Abode

Maistora's paintings celebrate the values and customs of the traditional agrarian society. This agrarian society relied on the woman as the bread-winner and mother of good countrymen who were to defend their homeland against foes and fight for its interests in wars. Paintings representing women as mothers, matrons, harvesters, reapers, and noble peasants, like the Bulgarian Madonna, celebrate the Bulgarian woman and elevate her to an emblematic status as the allegory for the motherland and a physical status as the matron of society responsible for the order and keeping of ancient traditions and customs.

The only thing that the artist loved more than his homeland was his mother, whom he admired and painted throughout his life, partly due to the early death of his father. Her life and death inspired a life-long obsession with the idea of the Bulgarian

woman. This obsession with the peasant woman, with the mother, and later the Madonna, reflected the artist's close ties to the earth, which he saw as the omnipotent mother of all living beings, and his admiration of motherly love. He also came from a family of popes and religious clergy, which influenced his aesthetic of the Madonna as an all-loving, gracious, forgiving, pious, and chaste woman. Strunski notes that "Maistora, although he uses a concrete model, strives to re-create not so much the specific likeness of the model, but the physical and moreover the spiritual portrait of the Bulgarian woman."[29]

Connections to a Byzantine Past

In an interview with his close friend and colleague Prof. Vasil Sotilov, Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora once exclaimed regarding icons, "The Icon … great art. What fiery hues and enchantment from this conditional primitiveness!"[30]

Of course, "primitiveness" here connotes a positive quality for Maistora – a certain purity of geometric form and color. Maistora often noted that he looked to Bulgarian roots for his art, and the similarities between his Bulgarian Madonna and its iconic precedents are inescapable. Dimitrov's paintings of village maidens use artistic forms characteristic of icons depicting the Virgin Mary from the tradition of the Early Christian and Byzantine periods in Bulgaria.

The facial features of Dimitrov's maidens, for instance, are stylized in a similar way as are those of the image of the Virgin, prescribed by the canonical specifications for icons. The woman's large almond eyes protrude and appear outlined as if by kohl. They

[29] Georgi Strumski, *Vladimir Dimitrov-Maistora*, Publishing House "Narodna Mladezh": Sofia, Bulgaria, 1980. p. 90

exude a motherly sense of nurture and protection. Her nose is thin, strait, and long. Her lips are small and round, like a rose blooming on her face. They are perfectly situated in harmony with her eyes and nose, seeming to form an inverted triangle. Her face is oval and symmetrical. She is never quite beautiful, but always gentle, quiet, and humble.

Icons of the Virgin and Maistora's Madonna set the image against a plain background that lacks illusory depth and perspective so as to concentrate the viewer's attention on the image of the woman, her face and hands. Unlike in paintings that imitate spatial depth and draw the viewer's eye through the picture plane, past the foreground and into the distant background, icons flatten the background space and thoroughly abstract it into a gold backdrop to allow the image of the saint to penetrate the viewer and communicate with him through the expressive eyes and hands of the saint or deity. Similarly, Maistora's choice of stylized fruits and flowers, all positioned on one plane that seems to fall directly behind the Madonna like wallpaper, shows an intentional disregard for spatial depth and an interest in the foreground plane on which the woman rests for a similar psychological effect. Any emblems or letters on the gold background of an icon communicate the Virgin's attributes and narrate her role as the instrument through which mankind will receive its Savior. Likewise, Maistora's Madonna represents hope for renewal, both natural (in the form of the agrarian cycles and the lush fruits that reward the hard agrarian labor each year) and national (in the form of a renewed patriotic spirit and pride in Bulgaria's humble origins).

The composition of Maistora's Madonna follows the centered triangular structure characteristic of icons representing the Virgin Mary. For example, Dimitrov utilizes the solid triangular composition to give the figure physical weight that substitutes for the lack

[30] Razgovori I Spomeni p 62 – interview with Prof. Vasil Sotilov c. 1959-1960

of naturalistically rendered chiaroscuro that might give her body substance and patriotic importance as the humble peasant girl – a sister, friend, neighbor, and future mother. The triangle can be traced from the top of her head to her gently folded arms that form its base. Dimitrov's use of the traditional triangular composition associated with Bulgarian iconic paintings of the Virgin Mary represents an artistic return to the compositional origins of Bulgarian art: church iconography.

The decorativeness that characterizes icons of the Virgin Mary from the Byzantine tradition in Bulgaria recurs in Maistora's paintings of maidens. The ornaments and embellishments on the Virgin's robes in the iconic images were intended to add to her glory and magnificence, only communicable in visual terms through highly geometric ornamentation -- coruscating jewels, intricately painted lace and pearls, heaps of angular folds in brilliant reds and blues, glowing gold rectangular backdrops that reflected God's light and the light of the candles, and a glittery silver repousse halo. Maistora's Madonna similarly reflect the artist's high esteem of the women and their beauty evident through the exuberance of color and geometric shapes that he used to represent the fruits and flowers in the background and the patterns in the national costumes of the women. Dimitrov's stylized, geometric decorativeness, therefore, isn't necessarily a symptom of a Western aesthetic attuned to "modern" artistic tendencies towards form simplification and abstraction, flat shapes, and experimental color, but given his patriotic sympathies, serves as an extension of a very old Bulgarian Byzantine-Christian aesthetic that bended towards bright colors and simplified geometric shapes.

By establishing an artistic nexus to the ancient Bulgarian art tradition of iconography through his images of peasant maidens, Maistora touched on an aspect of the

Bulgarian identity that remained crucial during the Ottoman occupation and the National Liberation Movement: the Orthodox faith. Dimitrov, himself, came from a family of popes (the ecclesiastical heads of Orthodox churches) and both of his parents followed in that tradition of mystical piety. Religion in Bulgaria, partially because of its role as the preserver of ancient customs and writing during the Ottoman Occupation, has served more of a cultural than ecclesiastical function.

Images of saints were intended to sustain the worshipper's faith in his or her Christian principles, during a time when Islam was being enforced upon conquered nations in the Ottoman empire, and hope that one day Bulgaria will be free and that meanwhile the people's identity as a nation will remain intact. The iconic images from the Early Christian and Byzantine tradition are not meant to be portrait likenesses of the saints or deities but rather emblematic images, and not viewed merely for their aesthetic qualities but moreover for their evocation of a deeper communion between the saint and the worshipper – an act of magnanimity that deepens the worshipper's spirituality.

The "communion" that an icon creates for the worshipper, this sense of connectedness to a holy entity, parallels the communion between the viewer of a painting – usually a modern citizen seeing one of the Master's exhibits in Sofia – and the image in the painting – a peasant Bulgarian maiden – and creates a communion between the westernizing citizen and the motherland. Dimitrov's maidens remind urban audiences of their humble beginnings as an agrarian nation – perhaps the artist's utopist ideal.

Interestingly in Dimitrov's vision, he makes it clear through his writings and interviews and letters that his target audience was peasants, which he sought to inspire with this art and make it be an emissary for his egalitarian anarchist utopia. However,

even though he exhibited his art in front of the villagers he painted, Maistora found his greatest fans among the cultured highbrows of Sofia, far removed from the agrarian lifestyle he exalted.

Notably, it was also the city dwellers that recognized Dimitrov's paintings as potential instruments of Communist propaganda in the 1940s after the official communist uprising on September 9, 1944.Given Dimitrov's unstable sources of income prior to his government position as official artist for the Ministry, it was in his best interest financially to join the party, get commissions from these people who saw a potential in him to disseminate the agrarian, communal ideal through his already popular paintings and charm with the people. Dimitrov's affinity for the land and for the peasant life was in some ways exploited and bent towards a new purpose now – to instill Communism as a new form of nationalism and national identity.

Part 2:

Misinterpretations, Exploitations: Hailing the Communist Propaganda

Although Dimitrov claimed to have worked in the 20s and 30s uninfluenced by his "modern" contemporaries in the West, we must remember that he traveled around Europe and the United States, and was likely exposed to the tendencies in art there. Nevertheless, his claim may have some credence if we consider how technologically backward and how linguistically and economically isolated Bulgaria was from the West, even at a time when it was growing and developing as a modern European state. Compounded with these factors was the country's own policy of self isolation from the

Latinized West, especially after the establishment of Communism as the national form of government. In light of these political changes, many Bulgarian artists, including Dimitrov, reverted to the idea that Europe and its art had split into East and West even with the division of the Church into Orthodox and Catholic, which ultimately led to the development of two very different aesthetics and artistic traditions.

Regardless of whether Dimitrov was influenced by Western modernists, he wanted to distinguish himself from other Bulgarian artists who were imitating Western styles in the 20s and 30s by claiming that the inspiration for his art did not come from anywhere but his homeland, Bulgaria, and her countryside and people. Maistora is quoted for exalting, "Wondrously rich is our motherland in material for art, and there is no need to look to either Asia, nor America, or Africa. Because in our fathers' and forefathers' Biblical figures – prophets, maidens, brides, and mothers – women saints, and in our wonderful fertile fields, flowers and fruit, and also mountains, rivers, and sea … we have material to create great art … that will move our posterity to the aspiration of our nation towards brotherhood between nations, and serve as a common good to all people on earth." [31]

How art, created for an aesthetic, divine purpose and imbued with certain sentiments becomes propaganda is a question that we pose only in a society where freedom of speech is more than rhetoric.

Maistora had worked prolifically in the late 20s and 30s. But by the late 30s and 40s, he was running short of funds to support his freelance painter lifestyle in the

countryside. Much of his financial support rested with the Ministry of Enlightenment. It was common knowledge at the time that official government positions like his – that of a national painter – were only available to members of the Party after the regime change in 1944. In 1946, Vladimir Dimitrov joined the Communist Party.

Contrast two statements that the artist made, the first in a letter to a friend and colleague dated January 6, 1921:

> Socialism, Kolyu, [his friend] may be the most natural path for the development of man, but I will bow down to the person who can follow the most immaculate teaching that has come to humanity – a Christ-like anarchism. As for us, I will say that *we will only think idealistically*, but in practice we will neither be pro- Marx, nor pro-Christ.[32]

the other in a short autobiography written in 1953 for catalogues and publications about paintings that were executed mainly in the 30s and early 40s:

> After I paid my dues for believing in "idealism," although late in life, I accepted the only true viewpoint – Marxism-Leninism, and as regards my art – socialist realism.[33]

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[31] 1/31/1938, report to the ministry regarding work that Maistora did during the period 5/5/1930 to 1/31/1938; p.128; at the time, he was working for the Ministry of Enlightenment, to which he left all of his works on 12/30/1938 completed during the period 1930-1938.
[32] *Razgovori i Spomeni* p.117

Even in formulating the above statement, Dimitrov concludes his brief autobiography by stating his hopes for a utopia on earth: "the bright ideals behind communism will make all people's life on earth only joy, song, light…"[34] In other commentaries that Dimitrov made during the late 50s, also, the artist demonstrates that he has not abandoned his optimistic idealism: "There will come a time when there will no longer be poor and rich, but only real human beings, who, under the same economic conditions, will work together for the great future of Communism"[35]

It is interesting that Maistora proclaims his art socialist realism in 1953, when he described it as "pure" and uniquely "Bulgarian" twenty years earlier before the regime change. In 1935, his Madonna was an "emissary of a different nation not subject to time;" by the late 50s, she had become an emblem for the egalitarian agrarian cooperatives of the Communist era.

In 1935, responding to the raving reviews of Maistora's first major exhibit at the National Academy of Art, the critic Stefan Mitov eloquently expressed what Maistora meant for Bulgarians and Bulgarian art: "As regards the infamous wanderings of modern artists … they transform today's art into an artificial problem, into an art devoid of all depth, into acrobatics executed with the means of art …but we must note that Maistora cannot be counted in with that bunch of artists who 'seek' in that way," and he added, "because *Bulgarian art does not have a more sincere artist than him, and no one else has felt the painful contradictions between that which is unreachable and great, which he wants to*

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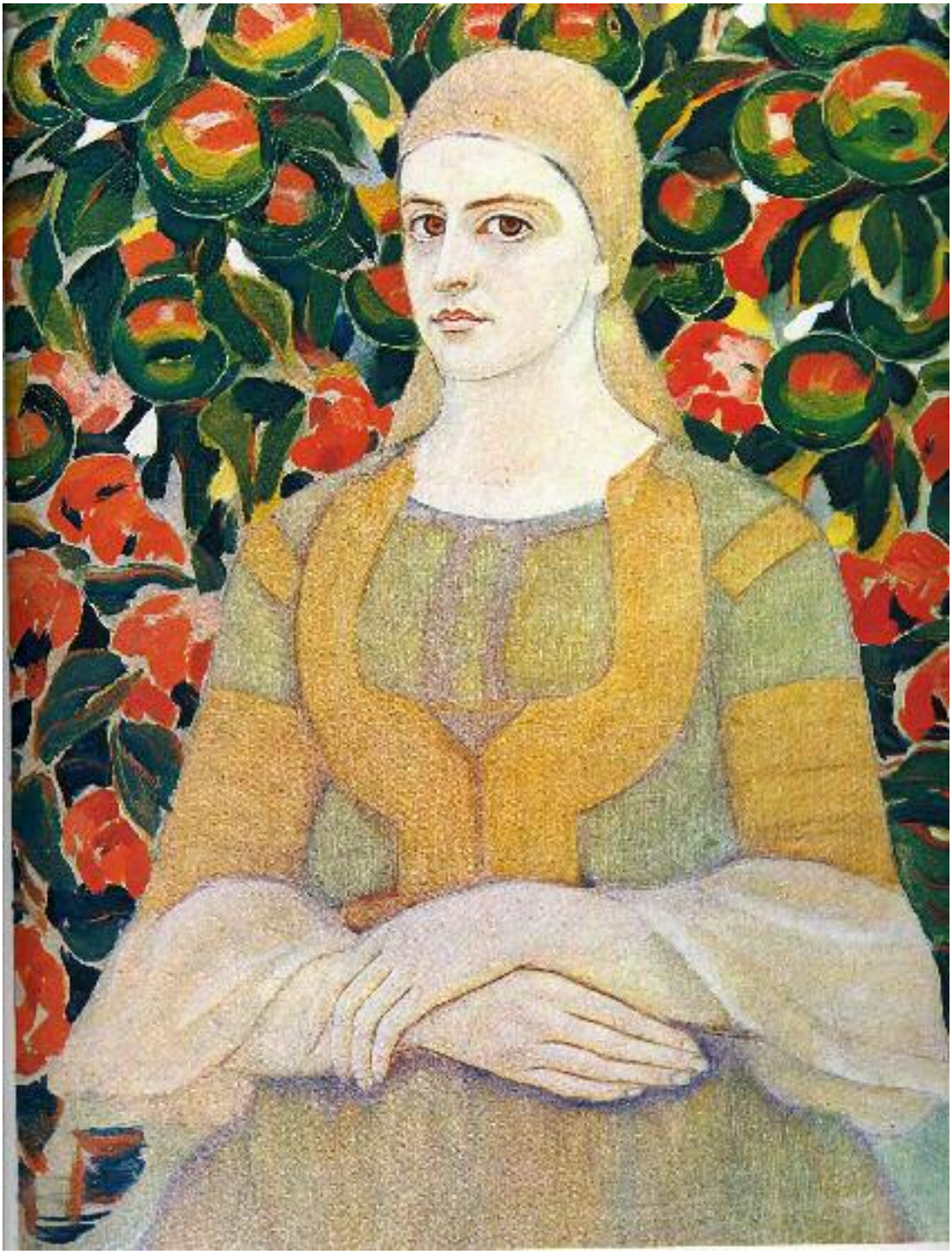
[33] Idbid, p. 37
[34] Idbid.
[35] Idbid. p 63

express, and that which his means permit him to express."[36] Mitov was probably unaware of just how prophetic and ironic his review in the newspaper "Literary Voice" would sound twenty years later.

[36] Stefan Mitov "The last works of Vladimir Dimitrov-Maisotra" from the newspaper "Literary Voice" No. 269, 1935. (italics, my emphasis)

Appendix of Figures

Figure 1. Vladimir Dimitrov- Maistora, *The Bulgarian Madonna*, c. 1920-1930



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Atanas Bozhkov. "Bulgarian Art". Foreign Languages Press, Sofia 1964. transl. Gregor Pavlov. Editor: Pauline Pirinska. An overview of Bulgarian art, which provided me with a great perspective and context.

"Dialog mezhdu Dve Izkustva" Dimitar Avramov. – an ingenious book by one of the premier art historians still living in Bulgaria; the book establishes a nexus between the Eastern and Western artistic traditions, especially their developments over the past century, with a focus on modern movements in art and some chapters on developments in contemporary Bulgarian art. I had the great pleasure of meeting the author this summer, who also knew Vladimir Dimitrov and has done much research on his art.

"Izkustvoto i Modernizma" Dimitar Avramov. – a long essay by the same author, this time with a slightly different focus, more intent on analyzing the development of "Modernism" in contemporary art and its many influences.

"Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora i Bulgarskata Kritika." (in honor of the 100 anniversary of the birth of the artist). National Press "Septemvri" Sofia, 1982. Author- Compiler Georgi St. Dimitrov; art director Toma Tomov –a very thorough, chronological compilation of all the articles, essays, reviews, and criticism published in

Bulgarian periodicals from about 1903 through the 1980s about Dimitrov, his art, his aesthetic, and his influence. This was especially helpful in providing me with a personal view into the way Dimitrov's contemporaries viewed his art and philosophy, and perhaps why they called his art "emblematic"

Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora. "Razgovori, Pisma, Spomeni." Publisher Bulgarski Hudozhnik. Sofia 1972. Assen Vassiliev, Vassil Stoilov, Georgi St. Dimitrov, Angel N. Angelov, Vuzkresia Angelova. – A compilation of the personal recounts of four artists who knew and worked with Dimitrov through the years, their correspondence, interviews with the artist; includes articles that Dimitrov wrote and his letters to the Ministry of National Enlightenment (Ministry of Education) from the late 30s through the 60s.

Catalogues of Dimitrov's Art:

The following are the catalogues that I used to examine Dimitrov's paintings and drawings:

Izlozhba Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora po sluchai 100-godishninata ot rozhdenieto mu.

February – Mart 1982. Izlozhbena Galleria. Shipka 6. Sofia. Komitet za Kultura Suyuz na Bulgarskite Hudozhnizi okruzhen Nroden Suvet – Kjustendil. Sustavitel – Dimitur Avramov

Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora 1920-1940. Nedko Kableshkov, Dicrector of the Gallery Vladimir Divitrov – Maistora, Kyustendil, Bulgaria. Copyright Borina Private Publishing Company, 1992 c/o Jusautor, Sofia; printed by Balkanpress

"Vladimir Dimitrov Maisotra." Hudozestvena Galleria Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora – Kyustendil. Catalogue 1959-1981. Tome I. Sofia 1982. Publisher "Bulgarski Hudoznik". Author: Nedko Kabaleshkov, director of the gallery "Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora" – Kyustendil. Compilers: Venko Petrov, Tzenka Bakurdjieva – curators from the gallery "Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora" – Kyustendil. Chief Editors: Prof. Assen Vassiliev, Prof. Dr. Atanas Bozhkov

"Zhivopis, Grafika, Skulptora." Hudozestvena Galleria Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora – Kyustendil. Catalogue 1959-1981. Tome II. Sofia 1983. Publisher "Bulgarski Hudoznik".Author: Nedko Kabaleshkov, director of the gallery "Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora" – Kyustendil. Compilers: Venko Petrov, Tzenka Bakurdjieva – curators from the gallery. "Vladimir Dimitrov Maistora" – Kyustendil. Chief Editors: Prof. Assen Vassiliev, Prof. Dr. Atanas Bozhkov