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Out from Behind the Fireplace. The Progress of Latvian National Emancipation in Art Life during the First World War

Keywords: Latvian art, First World War, exhibitions, art and politics, Russia, Germany, national emancipation.

What was not possible when there was peace and life followed its normal course has become possible in the present times of war and evacuation. The war has left an indelible impression on the destiny of our nation. It has, so to speak, forced it out from behind the habitual fireplace on to a broader track.¹

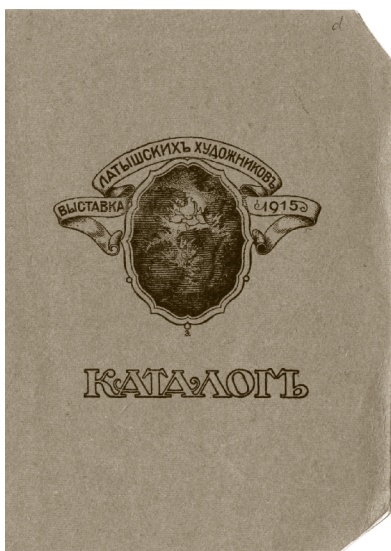
The reason why the artist Alberts Kronenbergs (1887–1958) wrote these lines in the Latvian magazine *Varavīksne* (The Rainbow) was to express his joy at the Exhibition of Latvian Art that opened on 23 September/6 October 1915 in the Nadezhda Dobichina Art Bureau in Petrograd.²

This first collective showing of Latvian art outside the homeland of most of the exhibitors (some of them, however, were not born in Latvia) took place in the context of events that could be described as an exodus of Latvian refugees. They were forced by the Imperial Russian authorities to flee from the advancing German troops that eventually seized the western governorate of Courland, covering the Zemgale and Kurzeme regions of present-day Latvia. The mass expulsion of country people from their homes coincided with the hectic evacuation of Riga institutions, offices and industrial enterprises, to prevent them from falling into the enemy's hands in the event of an occupation.³ At the same

¹ A. Kronenbergs, Latviešu mākslinieku izstāde Petrogradā (The Exhibition of Latvian Artists in Petrograd), *Varavīksne*, 1915, no. 33, p. 455.

² The opening date and the exhibition venue, at 7 Marsovo Pole, are mentioned in a number of newspaper announcements, but are not indicated in *Выставка латышских художников 1915. Каталог* (The Exhibition of Latvian Artists, 1915. Catalogue), Петроград, 1915.

³ For general information about and different interpretations of these events in English, see,



1. The cover of the catalogue for the Exhibition of Latvian Art in Petrograd, 1915

time, residents with German citizenship, who were called Imperial Germans (*Reichsdeutsche*), and who included the prominent Riga sculptor August Volz (1851–1926) and his family, were deported to remote parts of the Russian Empire.

These measures had both obvious (protective) and hidden (destructive) purposes, but we cannot fail to agree that they caused ‘the greatest flight of Latvians from their land that the nation had ever experienced’.⁴ In 1915, endless processions of trains and carts headed north and east to be dispersed throughout Russia. However, as the writer Jānis Akuraters (1876–1937) stated retrospectively, the tide of progress before the outbreak of the First World War had brought about so many spiritual achievements that the Latvians were able to march into exile as

a nation.⁵ Latvian rifle regiments were formed as separate national units within the Russian army, and the patriotic appeal ‘to rally under Latvian colours’ in order to reconquer and defend the piece of land that was eventually to become the Republic of Latvia had a tremendous success.⁶

For an overview of the whole artistic field during Latvia’s path to independence, declared in 1918, defended in the ensuing War of Liberation, and internationally recognised in 1921, it is recommended to study

among others: I. Butulis, *Latvia during the First World War*, *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*, Riga, 2006, part 2, chap 3, pp. 75–95; A. Spekke, *History of Latvia: An Outline*, Riga, 2006, pp. 292–307; A. Stranga, *Latvijai topot* (The Birth of Latvia), *Latvijai topot. No de facto līdz de iure: Māksla un laikmets* (The Birth of Latvia. From de Facto to de Iure: Art and the Age), ed. by A. Brasliņa, Riga, 2008, pp. 95–139.

⁴ A. Stranga, op. cit., p. 102.

⁵ J. Akuraters, *Dienu atspidumi: Revolūcijas atmiņu grāmata (1905–1908)* (Gleam of the Days: A Book of Memories of the Revolution. 1905–1908), Rīga, 1924, p. 116.

⁶ See: Spekke, op. cit., pp. 299–302; Butulis, op. cit., pp. 83–86.

the article ‘Conscripts of the Age. Eyewitnesses and Creators’⁷ by the art historian Aija Brasliņa, who curated the exhibition ‘From de Facto to de Iure’ at the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA) on the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Latvia (14 November 2008 to 4 January 2009) and who was also the editor of the exhibition catalogue. Revisiting the Latvian experience of the First World War, Brasliņa summarises it as follows:

The national drama of the war years provided Latvian artists with the great themes of riflemen and refugees. The depth of the experience and the innovative stylistic expression stimulated the inclusion of the finest achievements in both past and present canons of Latvian art. The visual evidence of these harsh times in works of art ranged in scope from observations on what had been experienced, reportage or laconic notes, to powerful, synthesising artistic generalisations full of expression.⁸

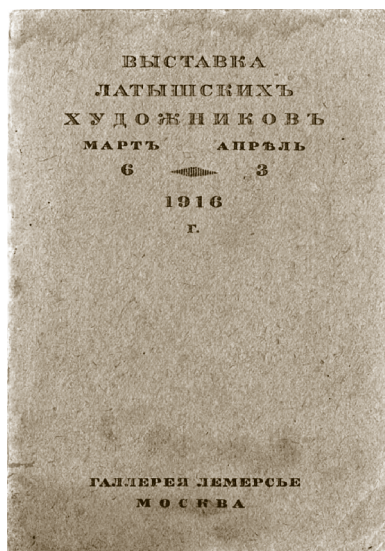
It seems indeed both self-evident and surprising that a large proportion of the national icons shortlisted as the Latvian Cultural Canon⁹ in the visual arts either date from the First World War, like the Riflemen series by the painter Jāzevs Grosvalds (1891–1920), discussed in the article by Eduards Kļaviņš, *Refugees* (1917, LNMA) by the painter Jēkabs Kazaks (1895–1920), the stone images of old Latvian country women (*Standing Mother*, 1915; *Sitting Mother*, 1916–1923; both LNMA) bearing the lot of the exile with silent dignity as sculptural symbols of sheltering homes by Teodors Zaļkalns (1876–1972), or remember its victims on a monumental scale, like the Riga Brethren Cemetery (1924–1936) by the sculptor Kārlis Zāle (1888–1942).¹⁰ Most of this selection highlights

⁷ A. Brasliņa, Laikmeta iesauktie. Aculiecinieki un radītāji (Conscripts of the Age. Eyewitnesses and Creators), *Latvijai topot*, pp. 19–79.

⁸ Brasliņa, op. cit., p. 23.

⁹ About this controversial national project (2007–2009) to compile ‘a treasure trove that contains the most important cultural achievements of all times’, see: <http://www.kulturaskanons.lv/en/1>.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.kulturaskanons.lv/en/1/5>. A critical analysis of features of the national identity expressed in the visual arts section of the Latvian Cultural Canon is published by Signe Grūbe, a PhD student in sociology at Riga Stradiņš University: S. Grūbe, Artwork – A Witness of Time (The Latvian Cultural Canon: Visual Art), *Art as Research: Acoustic Space No. 9*, ed. by



2. The cover of the catalogue for the Exhibition of Latvian Art in Moscow. 1916



3. The cover of the Latvian weekly *Varavīksne*, with Jāzeps Grosvalds' watercolour *Refugees*. 1915

the importance of the time when the new nation literally survived its baptism of fire in many fields of human activity, making the young Grosvalds exclaim in the journal *Revue Baltique* in 1919:

What an opportunity for the artists of the new Latvia! What an opportunity for people's art, to be born at the same time as the fatherland, which is rising strong and free out of the ashes of the past! If one did not know what to paint before 1914, the abundance and greatness of subjects is now huge. What a magnificent task for national art, to sing of the suffering, the ruin, the struggle and the triumph of one's nation and land!¹¹

R. Šmite, K. Mey and R. Šmits, Liepāja: MPLab; Rīga: RIXC, 2011, pp. 249-255. One of her conclusions is that national identity appears here 'focused around the idyll of rural life, a constant recollection of the sacrifices made to fortify the Latvian nation, and the image of the mother, who will always give shelter' (ibid., p. 255).

¹¹ J.G. (J. Grosvalds), L'art letton (les jeunes), *Revue Baltique*, 15 September/1 October 1919, p. 26.



4. Jānis Roberts Tillbergs. Patriotic postcard from a series for the Organisation Committee of Latvian Battalions. 1916

Now we have an opportunity to feel the powerful artistic energy of that time in recent comprehensive monographs about its protagonists and creators of Latvian modernism, most notably *Jēkabs Kazaks* (2007) by Dace Lamberga, and *Džo: Jāzepa Grosvalda dzīve un māksla* (2006) by Eduards Kļaviņš.¹² In fact, no story dealing with the evolution of the modernist idiom in Latvian art can do without the First World War, and Dace Lamberga's famous book 'Classical Modernism: Early 20th Century Latvian Painting' (2004), later published in French and Estonian, is also no exception.¹³ Furthermore, mention should be made of Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece's recently defended PhD dissertation 'Visual Art Life and the Latvian State (1918–1940)'¹⁴ (2011), in which the author makes well-grounded excursions into the wartime prehistory of her main subject, notably

in the discussion of the role of art in diplomacy.¹⁵ A valuable source publication is 'An Age in Letters. The Correspondence of Young Latvian

¹² E. Kļaviņš, *Džo: Jāzepa Grosvalda dzīve un māksla* (Joe: The Art and Life of Jāzeps Grosvalds), Rīga, 2006; D. Lamberga, *Jēkabs Kazaks*, Rīga, 2007.

¹³ D. Lamberga, *Klasiskais modernisms: Latvijas māksla 20. gadsimta sākumā* (Classical Modernism: Early 20th Century Latvian Painting), Rīga, 2004; D. Lamberga, *Le modernisme classique: La peinture lettone au début du XXème siècle*, Rīga, 2005; D. Lamberga, *Klassikaline modernism: Lāti maalikunst 20. sajandi alguses* (Classical Modernism: Early 20th Century Latvian Painting), Tallinn, 2009.

¹⁴ G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Tēlotājas mākslas dzīve un Latvijas valsts (1918–1940)* (Visual Art Life and the Latvian State. 1918–1940), Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija, 2011 (PhD dissertation). Bilingual Latvian-English summary available online at: <http://www.lma.lv/downloads/MakslasDzive-LV.pdf>.

¹⁵ Also see the article: G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un diplomātija Latvijas Republikā (1918–1928)* (Art and Diplomacy in the Republic of Latvia. 1918–1928), *Latvijai topot. No de facto līdz de iure: Māksla un laikmets* (The Birth of Latvia. From de facto to de iure: Art and the Age), pp. 155–179.

Artists: 1914–1920'¹⁶ (2004), edited by the art historian Aija Nodieva. These publications and research works elucidate many aspects of the First World War and the following period of the Latvian War of Independence in our art history. Nonetheless, the story of Latvian art leaving its humble shelter behind the native fireplace still contains some blank pages waiting to be filled, and thus my intention is to explore and discuss some events, developments and achievements in artistic life that have just been briefly mentioned by my colleagues but which can help to reconstruct the scene with greater accuracy.

Browsing through Russian metropolitan newspapers from the First World War period, I always feel confused at the constant necessity to switch between the column headings *театр войны* and *театр, искусство и музыка*, or 'theatre of war' and 'theatre, art and music'. In the terms of this stylised idiom, which seems to disguise the actual cruelty of warfare, it was in the 'theatre of war' that Latvian art enjoyed its international benefits in order to win acclaim for Latvian political and cultural aims.

Next to the Petrograd début at Dobichina's, a similar exhibition was organised by the Art Department of the Moscow-based Latvian Culture Bureau¹⁷ at the Lemerier Gallery (8 Saltikovskiy Pereulok) in Petrovka from 6/19 March to 3/16 April 1916,¹⁸ attracting 5,188 visitors.¹⁹ According to the public statement from its organising committee, chaired by the writer Kārlis Skalbe (1879–1945), it aimed to 'show the capacity and the achievements of our art and culture to the Russian intelligentsia

¹⁶ *Laikmets vēstulēs. Latviešu jauno mākslinieku sarakste: 1914–1920* (An Age in Letters. The Correspondence of Young Latvian Artists: 1914–1920), ed. by A. Nodieva, Rīga, 2004.

¹⁷ Short for: Culture Bureau of the Moscow Central Committee for the Relief of Latvian Refugees (*Maskavas Latviešu bēgļu apgādāšanas centrālkomitejas Kultūras birojs*).

¹⁸ *Выставка латышских художников. 6 март – 3 апрель 1916 г.* (Exhibition of Latvian Artists. 6 March – 3 April 1916. Catalogue), Москва: Галерея Лемерсье, 1916.

¹⁹ Maskavas L.B. Apg. C.K. Kultūras Biroja darbības pārskats no 1. marta līdz 1. maijam š. g. (Report on the work of the Culture Bureau of the Moscow Central Committee for the Relief of Latvian Refugees from 1 March to 1 May 1916), *Dzimtenes Atbalsis*, 1 June 1916. Latvian and Russian newspaper publications of the First World War period have old style (Julian) dates.



5. Jēkabs Kazaks. *Refugees*. 1917

and the Russian people',²⁰ thus promoting the claim of the Latvians to be an independent nation. For the first time, the relatively new notion of 'Latvian art' (or 'Lettish art', as it was commonly described in English at that time) resounded widely in the periodical press of the two imperial metropolises, and even beyond, when the prominent Russian art critic Pavel Ettinger (1866–1948) reviewed the event in Moscow in his regular Studio-Talk column.²¹ Latvian journalists were either unaware of the Muscovite identity of the critic, or they simply wanted to ignore it, because headings like 'The English on our Art'²² were certainly more impressive.

By the outbreak of the war, the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art (LSPA), which was established in 1911, had failed to organise travelling exhibitions to present the work of Latvian artists outside their homeland. In this respect, the Vilnius-based Lithuanian Society of Art, was more successful, staging an exhibition in Riga as early as 1910.²³ Most likely, the only non-Latvian

periodical in prewar St Petersburg that sometimes informed its readers about the activities of Latvian artists in Latvia was the liberal German *St. Petersburger Zeitung*, which collaborated with reporters from the

²⁰ L.K.B. Mākslas nodaļa (Art Department of the Latvian Culture Bureau), *Latviešu mākslinieku izstāde Maskavā* (Exhibition of Latvian Artists in Moscow). *Jauņākās Ziņas*, 15 February 1916.

²¹ P.E. (P. Ettinger), Studio-Talk, *The Studio*, Vol. 68, No. 281, August 1916, pp. 181–183.

²² Sch. Angļi par mūsu mākslu (The English on our Art), *Taurētājs*, 1916, No. 7, pp. 51–52; Angļi par mūsu mākslu (The English on our Art), *Lidums*, 13 November 1916.

²³ The exhibition had separate catalogues in Lithuanian, German and Latvian, a copy of the latter being recently discovered in a private collection: *Leišu Mākslas Biedrība. Leišu Mākslas Izstāde Rīgā 1910. gada aprīlī* (The Lithuanian Art Society. The Lithuanian Art Exhibition in Riga in April 1910), Riga, 1910.



6. Teodors Zāļkalns. *Sitting Mother*. 1916–1923

Baltic provinces.²⁴ Participating in exhibitions within the Russian Empire, artists were usually identified by their place of residence, and when they went abroad they were labelled as Russian, which certainly meant their citizenship and not their ethnic background. A typical example of this is the essay about the Latvian landscape painter Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945) in *The Studio* in 1905.²⁵ Since the 1890s, some Latvian critics had struggled to discern every Latvian element from the whole production of Baltic artists, that is, every unambiguous ‘fellow national’ (in Latvian *tautietis*, German *Volksgenosse*) from the possibly ambiguous multi-national ‘our compatriots’ (*unser Lands-*

mann, unsere Landsleute), which was the all-inclusive term widely used in the local German press with regard to every Baltic-born or Baltic-based individual, without specifying his or her ethnic identity.²⁶ Therefore, the emerging Latvian nation used every chance to show its autonomy and superiority in the constant rivalry with the local German culture.²⁷

²⁴ See, among others: M. Sawitzky, Riga. (Ausstellung lettischer Künstler), *St. Petersburger Zeitung*, 9/22 July 1910.

²⁵ M. Illyne, The Russian Painter W. Pourwit, *The Studio*, vol. 33, no. 142, January 1905, pp. 285–290.

²⁶ See, among others: T. Zeiferts, Baltijas vāciešu un latviešu kultūra (Baltic German and Latvian culture), *Dienas Lapa*, 23 July 1905; (T. Zeiferts), Mākslinieks Purvīts un vācieši (The Artist Purvītis and the Germans), *Dienas Lapa*, 27 August 1905.

²⁷ For more about the issue, see: K. Ābele, Tautieši un novadnieki: Nacionālais jautājums un

As a matter of chance, it was the course of the war that virtually pushed Latvian art on to the international stage and made it flicker under the metropolitan footlights. These exhibitions in Petrograd and Moscow could not be such carefully preplanned ‘self-portraits’, as official parades of the national art would later be seen in the Republic of Latvia. ‘For all our dreams the previous spring about exhibiting in Petrograd, everything has happened so suddenly and inconveniently,’ Jāzeps Grosvalds grumbled to his artist friend Konrāds Ubāns (1893–1981) during the first of the two events, and afterwards he informed him how critical Petrograd-based Latvian artists were about the idea of taking the exhibition to Moscow straight away, instead of postponing it for at least a year.²⁸ The virtue of these shows was perhaps a greater degree of sincerity than their organisers would have allowed themselves in a situation of free choice and unlimited means. Furthermore, the works of art exhibited, 155 pieces by 27 artists in Petrograd,²⁹ and 269 by 28 individual artists and two groups in Moscow,³⁰ covered a timespan of some 25 years, ranging from the early and mid-1890s, when Ādams Alksnis (1864–1897), the first *spiritus rector* of Latvian art students in St Petersburg, produced his drawings and watercolours with motifs from national folklore, history and peasant life, up to the topical issues of the day visualised in the Refugees series by Grosvalds, a contemporary of the oldest exhibits. If not comprehensive, it was an overview of a very important period of local artistic flourishing. It is hard to guess whether most non-Latvian visitors were able to get an adequate idea about the chronology, but the Latvian public was offered an unprecedented opportunity to revisit or learn anew much of their art’s past and present, as well as to reflect upon it in the light of unbiased outside views.

teritoriālā identitāte Latvijas mākslas dzīvē 19. gs. beigās un 20. gs. sākumā (Fellow Nationals and Compatriots: The National Question and Territorial Identity in the Art Life of Latvia in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century), *Māksla un politiskie konteksti: Rakstu krājums*, ed. by D. Lāce, Rīga, 2006, pp. 39–63.

²⁸ Jāzeps Grosvalds in letters to Konrāds Ubāns from 25 September 1915 and 11 January 1916. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, files 108, 122. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, pp. 53–54, 85.

²⁹ *Выставка латышских художников 1915. Каталог.*

³⁰ *Выставка латышских художников. 6 март – 3 апрель 1916 г.*

Generally, the Russian press welcomed Latvian exhibitions quite warmly. After mounting and opening the first exhibition at Dobichina's ('the rooms are very good, spacious halls on the corner of Marsovo Pole and Moika, where it was possible to arrange the paintings rather freely and conveniently'), Grosvalds put much of the welcome down to the political situation.³¹ Still, it was perhaps not just out of compassion for displaced persons that Nikolay Kravchenko (1867–1941) described the exhibitors in Petrograd as a 'talented family', and elsewhere as 'an interesting group of people' drawing on a good school and with a face of their own.³² Kravchenko had known quite a few of them from their contributions to St Petersburg exhibitions since the late 1890s, and so did Aleksandr Rostislavov (1860–1920). Referring to the preface to the exhibition catalogue, he stressed that Latvian art was still very young, and subsequently its national features had not yet become clearly pronounced; therefore, it would obviously be too early to consider Latvian artists as a unified national group.³³ The most critical of the identified Petrograders was the writer and artist Yeronim Yasinsky (1850–1931), in his, what is in fact not too inconsiderate, opinion that Latvian painting, young as it was, already seemed somewhat decadent and tired.³⁴ He found that the works of Latvian painters, with a few exceptions, gave the impression of being decorations, vignettes, wallpaper and textiles.³⁵ Yasinsky had, it seems, grasped something of that decorative aestheticism which was about to become a permanent tradition in Latvian art.

In Moscow, the show of Latvian art was preceded by another visiting exhibition with much greater power and influence. This event was

³¹ Jāzevs Grosvalds in a letter to Konrāds Ubāns of 25 September 1915. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, file 108. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, pp. 53–54.

³² Н. Кравченко, Выставка латышских художников (Exhibition of Latvian Artists), *Вечернее время*, 23 September 1915; Н. Кравченко, Выставка произведений латышских художников (Exhibition of Latvian Artists' Works), *Новое время*, 24 September 1915.

³³ А. Р-в. (А. Ростиславов), Выставка латышских художников (Exhibition of Latvian Artists), *Речь*, 6 October 1915.

³⁴ И. Ясинский, Латышская выставка картин (Latvian Exhibition of Paintings), *Биржевые ведомости*, 1 October 1915.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis' exhibition in the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (17/30 January to 27 February/11 March 1916).³⁶ The Latvian artist and critic Jūlijs Madernieks (1870–1955), a sincere admirer of Čiurlionis' work since 1910, could just give a deep sigh: 'Everybody knows that Latvians cannot yet boast of having such a peculiar pioneer of the new art as the Lithuanians have Čiurlionis. Since Čiurlionis' exhibition came before that of the Latvian artists, it came as no advantage to the latter. Russian artists, who were enthusiastic about this strong searcher for and lucky discoverer of a new world, found the Latvian exhibition epigonically dry and eclectically schmaltzy.'³⁷

The Latvian writer and critic Viktors Eglītis (1877–1945) found that the indisputable peak of the season was 'the Lithuanian genius Čiurlionis': 'With regard to us Latvians, the Russians required something astonishing [...] but they remained dissatisfied with our great reserve, Latvian seriousness and intimate sincerity. True, we do not yet have a Čiurlionis of our own, we do not yet have a national genius, but our direction is right: we have a school, individuality and seekers. The time is ripe for a Latvian genius.'³⁸

Madernieks' review of Čiurlionis ended on a high note, describing the idolised artist as being written into the short history of Lithuanian art as a bright beam of warm sunlight that would tone up not only the people of Lithuania but everybody who loves and needs art.³⁹ The radiance of this luminary, however, made Madernieks especially critical about the new pictorial fantasies of his own countryman Rūdolfs Pērle (1875–1917): 'In his *Nocturnal Riders* the painter has too literally followed the influence of Čiurlionis, so that it cannot yet be regarded as an original work.'⁴⁰

³⁶ A. Pliplys, Exhibitions of Čiurlionis' Works Outside Lithuania, *Čiurlionis: Painter and Composer. Collected Essays and Notes, 1906–1989*, ed. by S. Goštautas, Vilnius, 1994, pp. 483–485.

³⁷ J. Madernieks, Latviešu mākslas izstāde Maskavā (Exhibition of Latvian Art in Moscow), *Dzimtenes Atbals*, 23 March 1916.

³⁸ V. Eglītis (Eglītis), Kaut kas par Maskavas gleznu galerijām un šīs ziemas izstādēm (Something about Moscow Picture Galleries and Winter Exhibitions), *Dzimtenes Atbals*, 23 April 1916.

³⁹ J. Madernieks, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



7. Rūdolfs Pērle. *Nocturnal Riders*. 1916

This context highlighted the collective aspect of Latvian self-presentation. There were no artists among them to be promoted as international brand-names, although some, most notably Purvītis, had established a good reputation in Russian cities. The Latvians could rather portray themselves as many industrious ants building an anthill. Pavel Ettinger's estimation was: 'about a score in number, the oldest of them still in the prime of life, nearly all of them have attained a respectable standard of technical proficiency.'⁴¹ The Latvians, however, must have felt disappointed by the critic's judgement that 'the group appears to be lacking in any strongly marked individuality, nor do their paintings reveal any conspicuous national character.'⁴² With regard to the historic suppression

⁴¹ P. Ettinger, op. cit., p. 181.

⁴² Ibid.

of 'the Letts' by the 'dominant German classes of the Baltic provinces', he found that 'naturally enough this newly developed art [...] has been unable to escape the influence of German art,' showing itself 'even in the work of artists who have studied at the Petrograd Academy'.⁴³ Although he did not actually mean any harm by this unbiased statement, the Latvian reaction against any hints about their apparent Germanness was disapproving. The writer Akuraters retorted that 'the Latvians have derived their culture from Europe, and that is why the European influence can be observed in us.'⁴⁴ He meant that Russian critics, for the most part, mistook all non-Russian elements for German ones. Jūlijs Madernieks found the published accounts on Latvian Germanness quite justified, but he charged them with an extra load of critical attitude: 'Latvian art has not yet managed to shake itself free of the idly boastful, shallow and sentimentally philistine German influence, which has by its intrusiveness done much wrong to and greatly delayed the development of our independent art.'⁴⁵ Going into detail, Madernieks declared that the exhibited series of etchings 'What Latvian Forests Rustle' (1908–1911, LNMA) by the famous graphic artist Rihards Zariņš (1869–1939) (one of them was used as an illustration to Ettinger's review in *The Studio*), in their technically complicated heaviness and German sugarcoatedness, rustle more like German than Latvian forests.⁴⁶

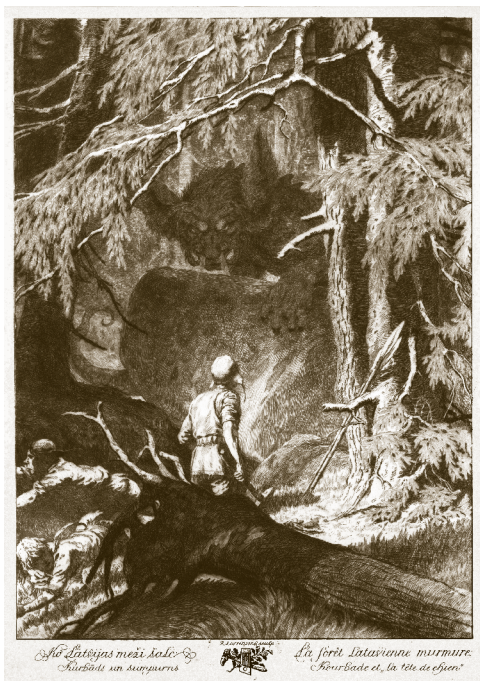
Something in these speculations is reminiscent of the way an adolescent sees his reflection in the mirror, grumbling about his ugly nose or any other apparently terrible inherited features. It may well be that a nation's coming of age and its efforts to construct its identity inevitably involve a certain amount of such irrational behaviour. The flight from their homeland, leaving behind an established network of previous social connections, certainly precipitated the fulfilment of the Latvian dream about a break with the German cultural heritage, or perhaps, more precisely,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ J.A. (A. Akuraters), Latviešu mākslinieku izstāde Maskavā (Exhibition of Latvian Artists in Moscow), *Lidums*, 16 March 1916.

⁴⁵ Madernieks, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.



8. Rihards Zariņš. *Kurbads and Dog-Head*. From the series of etchings ‘What Latvian Forests Rustle’. 1908–1911

they learned to think of themselves and their culture without much reference to their old ties. This disassociation helped the Latvians to clear an imaginary space to design their nation’s future, and the expected ‘renewal of cultural activity after returning to Latvia’⁴⁷ was a topical issue for detailed discussion at the meetings of the Central Committee for the Relief of Latvian Refugees, and a constant concern for numerous intellectuals.

To a certain extent, and for some time, the above-mentioned national disassociation was useful training, but it also involved chauvinistic bravado that alienated former supporters of Latvianness, who must have felt disappointed and hurt by such contradistinctions as Grosvalds’ statement about the difference between the Baltic Ger-

mans and the Latvians: ‘the first, half degenerate, real greenhouse plants, the last specimen of a vanishing species, the others, strong, sturdy, and capable of any development’.⁴⁸ Fortunately, it was impossible to burn all the bridges. Outbursts of anti-German scorn did not save Madernieks from becoming sentimental in front of Johann Walter’s (from 1906 Walter-Kurau, 1869–1932) early-20th-century autumnal *Palace in Courland*

⁴⁷ Heading of: L. Laicens, Kulturelās darbības atjaunošana Latvijā atgriežoties (Renewal of Cultural Activity after Returning to Latvia), *Dzimtenes Atbalss*, 16 January 1916.

⁴⁸ Jāzeps Grosvalds in a letter of September/October 1917 to an unidentified recipient. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, file 225. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, pp. 162–163.



9. Johann Walter (Walter-Kurau). *Kazdanga (Palace in Courland)*. 1904

(*Kazdanga*, 1904, LNMA).⁴⁹ Madernieks described it in the most flattering way, keeping silent about the fact that the painter of this stylised Art Nouveau landscape had worked since 1906 in Germany, where, among other things, he found refuge from the increasingly national confrontation that was especially oppressive for people of mixed nationality from the Baltic. Having broken with his homeland completely, Walter hardly knew about the presence of his works in these exhibitions of Latvian art.⁵⁰ Another black sheep of this herd of exhibitors in national terms was Jakob Belsen (Яков Белзэн, Jēkabs Belzēns, 1870–1937), the Russian-

⁴⁹ Madernieks, op. cit.

⁵⁰ For more about Walter, see: K. Ābele, *Johans Valters*, Rīga, 2009; K. Ābele, *Johann Walter (Walter-Kurau), 1869–1932: Summary of Doctoral Dissertation*, Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūts, 2010. Available online at: <http://www.lma.lv/eng/downloads/K-Abele-Summary-EN.pdf>.



10. Teodors Ūders. *Midday Rest*. Ca. 1910

born son of a Latvian chef and a Swedish woman, raised by a German stepmother, and married into a German family. By the outbreak of the war, this teacher from the Stieglitz Central School of Technical Drawing in St Petersburg was a prominent member of the Permanent German Artists' Committee (Ständiges Deutsches Künstlerkomité), and used his summer holidays to make study trips to Germany with Johann Walter.⁵¹

Ettinger summed it up: 'On the whole, this initial display left one with the conviction that Lettish art has made a good beginning, which justifies expectations of further success.'⁵² Still, the fairest wind for the Latvian journey was a review published in the paper *Русские ведомости* by Yakov Tugendhold (1888–1928), who identified the prevalence of a peculiar mood, 'a sort of pensiveness [...] not Russian, not lyrical, but rather more contemplative, overcast, permeated by the seaside air',⁵³ as

⁵¹ For more about Belsen, see: K. Ābele, Jēkaba Belzēna odiseja: 1870–1937 (The Odyssey of Jakob Belsen: 1870–1937), *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija*, no. 9, 2007, pp. 5–25.

⁵² P. Ettinger, op. cit., p. 183.

⁵³ Я. Т-д. (Я. Тугендхольд), Выставка латышских художников (The Exhibition of Latvian Artists), *Русские ведомости*, 10 March 1916.

well as pointing out a wider range of sources and influences, including Paris and Italy. Among his favourites were drawings by Teodors Ūders (1868–1915), described as being beautiful in their monumentality, and especially the refugee scenes by Jāzeps Grosvalds, ‘grasped by the young artist in a such a talented, sharp and expressive way, and at the same time such an architecturally monumental way, that they seem to resound like a [...] song about the destiny of the young, strong and fire-hardened people of Latvia’.⁵⁴ The flattered Grosvalds himself found this review by ‘the best Russian critic (next to Benois)’ in ‘the best and most serious Russian paper’ the most accurate evaluation that a Russian author could ever give to the Latvian exhibition, since ‘everybody is put in his proper place.’⁵⁵

Already returned to their owners or to locations for temporary storage in Russia, the exhibits were reportedly photographed again for use on special diplomatic missions. Drawing on the memoirs and biographies of Latvian politicians, our art history has mythologised a very limited deluxe edition of ornamented hand-bound books with photographic reproductions of Latvian works of art from the two exhibitions described above.⁵⁶ These exquisite pieces of craftsmanship were commissioned by the Latvian Provisional National Council in 1918 (or 1917–1918), for the purpose of convincing Western political elites about the young nation’s cultural maturity and its preparedness for statehood. Several sources give similar accounts of the process of compiling, designing and producing them, but they differ on the question of their number (two, three, six ...?) and their destinations. According to the memoirs of the diplomat Jānis Seskis (1877–1943), there were three copies in all, and they were to be sent to Paris, London and Washington, where Latvian envoys could use

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jāzeps Grosvalds in a letter to Konrāds Ubāns of 13/26 March 1916. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, file 122. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, pp. 104–106.

⁵⁶ See, among others: A. Brasliņa, *Laikmeta iesauktie. Aculiecinieki un radītāji* (Conscripts of the Age. Eyewitnesses and Creators), p. 32; G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un diplomātija Latvijas Republikā (1918–1928)* (Art and Diplomacy in the Republic of Latvia, 1918–1928), pp. 156–157; G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Tēlotājas mākslas dzīve un Latvijas valsts (1918–1940)*, pp. 97–98.

them for artistic propaganda.⁵⁷ This does not contradict Jāzeps Grosvalds' intention to illustrate his 1919 French article 'Latvian Art (The Young Ones)' for the *Revue Baltique* with a selection of plates from 'the big photographic art book, of which there is a copy available in the London and Paris legations here'.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, it is said that the National Council's accredited representative Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics (1887–1925) left for his first Western mission in the summer of 1918, to argue the case for a sovereign and indivisible Latvia, with six copies of the book in his luggage.⁵⁹ In the same place, we can read that the first recipients of the diplomatic gift were foreign embassies in Petrograd.⁶⁰ Obviously, not a single copy of the edition was kept by its producers themselves, to be preserved for Latvian history, and researchers have so far failed to find any of these books in Western collections, too.⁶¹ Therefore, no surviving copies are known to exist at the moment of writing this article, but that does not mean that they will not still turn up somewhere, as has been the case with other documents of Latvian art history that were reported as lost.

Seeing the Great War as being, in Ettinger's terms, 'responsible for many unforeseen effects in the domain of art',⁶² it is necessary to note that the background to these artistic débuts made outside the Baltic is closely associated with the preceding domestic activities of the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art (LSPA). Founded in 1911, it reached the peak of its success in the short period from the outbreak of the First World War to the summer of 1915, when Riga was emptied by mass evacuations.

⁵⁷ J. Seskis, *Latvijas valsts izcelšanās pasaules kara notikumu norisē. Atmiņas un apcerējumi. 1914.–1921. g.* (The Birth of the Latvian State in the Course of the Events of the World War. Memories and Essays, 1914–1921), Rīga, 1938, p. 102.

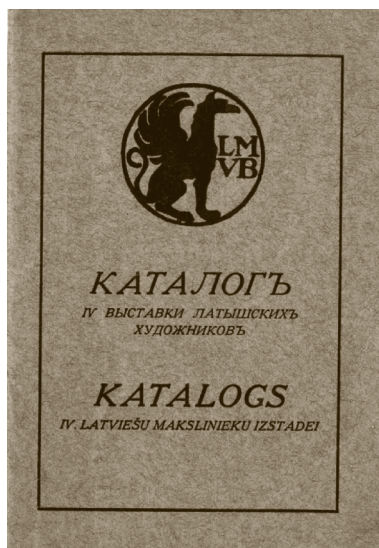
⁵⁸ Jāzeps Grosvalds in a letter to Konrāds Ubāns of 21 September 1919. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, file 124. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, pp. 180–181.

⁵⁹ A. Gulbis, *Atmiņas par Zigfrīdu Meierovicu* (Memoirs of Zigfrīds Meierovics), *Z. A. Meierovics: Latvijas pirmā ārlietu ministra darbības atcerei veltīts rakstu krājums*, ed. by E. Virza, Rīga, 1935, p. 217.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ The current state of research was discussed at Ginta Gerharde-Upeniec's dissertation defence at the Latvian Academy of Art on 10 June 2011.

⁶² P. Ettinger, *op. cit.*, p. 183.



11. The cover of the catalogue of the Fourth Exhibition of Latvian Art, organised by the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art in Riga, 1914–1915

Despite cautious expectations, the Society's Fourth Exhibition of Latvian Art (30 November/13 December 1914 to 18/31 January 1915) attracted around 11,000 visitors,⁶³ which was the largest attendance recorded at an art exhibition in Riga until then, and remained so for long afterwards. This interest proved the importance of the LSPA's genuine efforts (ethnocentric as they might seem from a 21st-century point of view) to wrest the Latvian ethnic yarn away from the mixed fabric of Baltic art and wind it into a separate ball.⁶⁴ By the end of 1914, the society had assembled a considerable number of works of art for its planned Museum of Latvian Art, and was about to publicise it in a series of postcards.⁶⁵ For a while around that time, the LSPA could boast of being the only Latvian organisation whose 'activity has not been slowed down by the war, but instead has even increased, expanding on a larger

scale'.⁶⁶ In the spring of 1915, only four of the 34 planned reproductions could appear in print, and their publisher was given as the Latvian Assistance Committee (Latviešu palīdzības biedrība).⁶⁷ Later that year, the

⁶³ *Latviešu mākslas veicināšanas biedrība 1914. g.* (The Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art in 1914), Rīga, 1915, p. 23.

⁶⁴ A reference to the pioneering LSPA lecture by the writer, critic and artist Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962) 'Latvian art' (1912), as an effort to 'wind the dispersed yarn of our art into a ball' A. (H. Asars), *Latviešu māksla* [Latvian Art], *Jaunā Dienas Lapa*, 10/23 October 1912).

⁶⁵ *Latviešu mākslas veicināšanas biedrība 1914. g.*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ *Latviešu Mākslas Veicināšanas Biedrības valdes sēde* (The Board Meeting of the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art), *Latvija*, 13 May 1915.

⁶⁷ The result of the postcard publishing project was established definitely thanks to the librarian Inguna Mīlgrāve (Misiņš Library, Riga), the collector Laimonis Osis (Riga), and the art dealer Raitis Cinks (Riga). The author of this article thanks them all for their continuous help in her quest for all kinds of printed ephemera from the period under discussion.

LSPA's art collection was moved to Petrograd, for numerous works from this source to be included in the two above-mentioned exhibitions. Only in 1923 did the LSPA contrive to recover its collection for Latvia,⁶⁸ which in the meantime had emerged on the map of Europe as a new state. The contents of this Noah's Ark of national art found a permanent home first as long-term loans in the new Latvian State Museum of Art,⁶⁹ and has survived to our day, with very few losses, in the possession of what is now the Latvian National Museum of Art.

The art historian Oļģerds Grosvalds (1884–1962) remembered the success of the 1914/1915 exhibition in Riga as 'the last flash of our art life' at home before the evacuation 'when art life died out entirely'.⁷⁰ Certainly, it is generally true that during the First World War in Latvia, 'both Latvian art life and the activities of Baltic German artists experienced a downturn.'⁷¹ At the same time, we may ask whether the war-torn country really was a totally abandoned wasteland in terms of artistic pursuits and events. In those years, art had to retreat from the public scene in Riga to the privacy of apartments and studios, most notably in the former rooms of the Riga Art School in Jacob's Barracks (Jēkaba kazarmas), legally occupied by a group of art students, Jāzevs Grosvalds' friends, who had returned to the Baltic with the intention of volunteering for the Latvian Rifle Battalions,⁷² and planned to organise in Riga a 'War Exhibition' of works by young Latvian soldier artists in 1917.⁷³ This exhibition did not take place, and the city was occupied by German forces on 21 August/

⁶⁸ J.S. (J. Siliņš), *Latviešu Mākslas Veicināšanas biedrības darbības pārskats* (no 27. nov. 1921. g. līdz 1. jūlijam 1924. g.) (Report on the Activities of the Latvian Society for the Promotion of Art from 27 November 1921 to 1 July 1924), *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts*, 1924, no. 7, p. 67.

⁶⁹ *Vadonis pa Latvijas valsts mākslas muzeju* (A Guide Through the Latvian State Museum of Art), ed. D. Vecaukums, Rīga, 1926, p. IX.

⁷⁰ O. Grosvalds, *Atskats uz latviešu mākslas dzīvi kara laikā* (A Retrospective of Latvian Art Life during the War), *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 16 November 1918.

⁷¹ A. Brasliņa, *Laikmeta iesauktie. Aculiecinieki un radītāji* (Conscripts of the Age. Eyewitnesses and Creators), p. 32.

⁷² For details, see: *ibid.*, pp. 34–37.

⁷³ Jāzevs Grosvalds in a letter to Konrāds Ubāns of 22 February 1917. Latvian State Archives, coll. 769, reg. 1, file 123. Published in: *Laikmets vēstulēs*, p. 152.

3 September 1917, to stay under their control until 3 January 1919, when a short but destructive episode of Soviet rule began.⁷⁴ The year 1918, between these dates, brought about a revival in the cultural life of Riga Germans, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk enabled people of Baltic origin to leave Bolshevik Russia for their homeland. During this period, attempts were made to create the United Baltic Duchy (das Vereinigte Baltische Herzogtum) as a protectorate of the German Empire. At about the same time that Latvian artists were decorating their linen-bound books with French inscriptions and captions for the international representation of the emerging nation-state of their dreams, there were two large-scale propaganda exhibitions held in Germany to promote the idea of the United Duchy, and to inform German society about Courland (Kurland-Ausstellung, 1917), Livonia and Estonia (Livland-Estland-Ausstellung, 1918).⁷⁵ Both of them had special art sections, and even though the essays by the exhibition guides do not allow us to recreate them with absolute accuracy, some of the key figures represented there were the same as in the Petrograd and Moscow exhibitions of Latvian art.

Neither the anonymous writer about Courland (a rather badly informed foreigner, judging by his reference to the Lithuanian Petras Kalpokas as an ethnic Latvian painter⁷⁶), nor the prominent art historian Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), the director of the Riga City Art Museum, in his overview of the development of art in the Baltic provinces since the late 18th century,⁷⁷ omitted special praise for several turn-of-the-century Latvian artists. As was pointed out in the editor's foreword to the voluminous 'introduction to the working areas' of Livland-Estland-Ausstellung, 'a complete picture of the cultural situation in the country

⁷⁴ For a detailed timeline of history and art, see: Nozīmīgāko notikumu hronika (Chronology of Major Events), compiled by A. Brasliņa and A. Stranga, *Latvijai topot*, pp. 215–230.

⁷⁵ See, among others: *Führer durch die Kurland Wander-Ausstellung des Deutschen Auslandmuseums und Instituts Stuttgart*, München, 1917; *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung: Zur Einführung in die Arbeitsgebiete der Ausstellung*, hg. von E. Stieda, Berlin, 1918.

⁷⁶ Neue kurländische Kunst, *Führer durch die Kurland Wander-Ausstellung des Deutschen Auslandmuseums und Instituts Stuttgart*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ W. Neumann, Malerei und Plastik, *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung*, pp. 193–208.

can be achieved only by simultaneously representing what the Latvians and the Estonians have produced on their own, too.’⁷⁸ Be that as it may, the art of Vilhelms Purvītis, Janis Rozentāls (1866–1916), Rihards Zariņš and the already-mentioned Berlin-based Johann Walter was ‘mobilised’ to fight for two radically different and competing projects in Latvia’s geopolitical future that could meet only at the point of their common anti-Bolshevism. The plan for the German-dominated monarchist duchy was destined to fail with the collapse of the German Empire (thank goodness!), but its efforts towards creating a multicultural vision of the Baltic art scene, for all the reluctance and unwitting arrogance, should be given due recognition by academic compatriots who are now attempting to create ‘a complete picture of the cultural situation in the country’ as it was about a century ago.

⁷⁸ E. Stieda, Zur Einleitung, *ibid.*, p. XIII.

Kristiāna Ābele

Už namų židinio. Latviškumo įsitvirtinimas dailės gyvenime
Pirmojo pasaulinio karo metais*Santrauka*

„Tai, kas buvo neįmanoma taikos metu, kai gyvenimas tekėjo įprastine vaga, tapo įmanoma šiais karo ir evakuacijos laikais. Karas padarė neišdildomą poveikį mūsų tautos likimui. Galima sakyti, kad karas išstūmė dailę iš už įprastinio namų židinio į platesnį kelią,“ – taip rašė dailininkas Alberts Kronenbergs džiaugdamasis latvių meno paroda, surengta 1915 m. Peterburge. 1916 m. panaši paroda buvo surengta Maskvoje. Ji turėjo pademonstruoti „mūsų dailės galimybes ir pasiekimus rusų inteligentijai ir rusų liaudžiai“, taip skatindama latvių kaip nepriklausomos tautos įsitvirtinimą. Būtent „karo teatre“ latvių menas pelnė tarptautinį įvertinimą, siekdamas laimėti latvių kultūrinių ir politinių tikslų pripažinimą. Pirmą sykį antraštė „latvių menas“ skambėjo abiejų Rusijos metropolijų periodinėje spaudoje ir už jų ribų, kai Pavelas Ettingeris parašė apie Maskvos parodą anglų *The Studio* žurnale. Ettingeris teigė, kad istoriškai „dominuojantys vokiški Baltijos provincijų sluoksniai“ engė „latvius“, ir darė išvadą, kad „naujasis latvių menas [...] natūraliai negalėjo išvengti vokiečių meno įtakos“, kuria pasižymėjo „net dailininkų, studijavusių Petrogrado dailės akademijoje, kūriniai“. Jakovas Tugendholdas žurnale *Русские ведомости* nustatė specifinės nuotaikos dominavimą – „liūdnos [...], ne rusiškos, ne lyriškos, bet greičiau kontempliatyvios, rūškanos, persmelktos pajūrio oro“.

Šie latvių debiutai už Baltijos krašto ribų susiję su Latvijos dailės skatinimo draugijos veikla. Įkurta 1911 m. Rygoje, ji pasiekė savo veiklos viršūnę tarp Pirmojo pasaulinio karo pradžios ir 1915 m., kai Ryga ištuštėjo dėl evakuacijos ir artėjančio fronto. 1914 m. pabaigoje draugija surinko nemažai kūrinių planuojamam Latvių meno muziejui. 1915 m. kolekcija buvo perkelta į Petrogradą, daugelis jos darbų buvo parodyti minėtose parodose. Tik 1923 m. ji sugrįžo Latviją, kuri tuo metu jau atsirado Europos žemėlapyje kaip nauja valstybė.

Kai kurių latvių dailininkų kūriniai buvo „mobilizuoti“ kovai už du priešingus, tarpusavyje kovojančius Latvijos geopolitinės ateities projektus, nes jų kūriniai parodyti ir minėtose Rusijos parodose, ir ekspozicijose *Kurland-Ausstellung* (1917) bei *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung* (1918). Šios parodos buvo surengtos Vokietijoje ir turėjo propaguoti monarchistinę provokišką *Suvienytos Baltijos kunigaikštystės (das Vereinigte Baltische Herzogtum)* idėją.