

Laima Laučkaitė

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute

The House of Creativity in Palanga: A Structured Utopia

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Since the end of the 19th century in the European tradition the artists' colony was conceived as a place where members of the artistic community would live and create together, in the vicinity of nature. The Soviets adapted this idea to their politics of culture with the aim of the ideological engagement of the artists. Artists' residences – called “artists' houses of creativity and recreation” – sprouted up after World War II in the Soviet Union. There were several of them; the first was opened in Senezh near Moscow in 1945. Other residences were established in different Soviet republics: Latvia's “Dzintars” in Jurmala in 1945; Ukraine's facilities in Gurzuf near Yalta (Crimea) in 1947 and Russia's Khosta near Sochi in 1960; and Lithuania's “Palanga” in 1950. Little research has been done on these artists' houses of creativity and recreation, so the main goal of this article is to present the history, founding and functioning of the Palanga artists' residence.

Artists' houses of creativity and recreation were founded in picturesque locations at seaside resorts on the Baltic and Black Seas. Their functions were based on regulations laid out in the “Statute of the Art Foundation of the USSR”, ratified in 1957 by the Artists' Union of the USSR. The statute stated that the main tasks of a house of creativity were:

- promotion of artists' creative and ideological growth,
- perfection of their professional mastery,
- propaganda of art at the place, where the house is located by organizing reporting and mobile exhibitions,

– artists' exchange of creative experiences alongside with recreation and medical treatment of the artists.¹

Only members of the Artists' Union had the privilege to work in the residences, and every member had the right to spend two months a year there.

As soon as Lithuania was incorporated into the USSR in 1940, the Lithuanian Artists' Union was abolished and replaced with the newly established Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR, which was subordinated to Moscow. Immediately efforts were taken to found an artists' residence. In 1940, correspondence between the Artists' Union and official institutions concerned two questions: the transfer of the Tyszkiewicz Palace in Užutrakis (near Trakai) for artistic needs, and the search for a villa in Palanga for artists' summer holidays.² An ideological contrast with the interwar period became immediately manifest: in the interwar period, the Lithuanian Artists' Union had been funded solely by members' fees and artists could not even dream of a residence, whereas now, Soviet authorities showed their "concern" by granting these artists a professional residence. Its chosen location was not in the middle of nowhere, but near the historical Trakai Castle and beautiful lakes, in a magnificent palace that had belonged to Lithuania's richest aristocratic family and been nationalized by the Soviets. Putting artists' organizations in charge of nationalized palaces was common practice in the Soviet period.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War prevented the realization of that idea. In 1950 another location was assigned to the residence of the Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR – the Tyszkiewicz Palace at the seaside resort of Palanga on the Baltic Sea (fig. 1). The head of the Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR, the leftist artist Liuda Vaineikytė, invested great effort in securing this special place. The history of the Palanga resort, which was and still is one of the best known resorts in Lithuania, dates back to the first half of the 19th century. Having bought the Palanga manor in 1824, the family of Count

¹ Standard Regulation of the Artists' Houses of Creativity and Recreation, 1957, Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art (further – LLMA), f. 350, ap. 1, b. 297, l. 1.

² Correspondence of the Artists' Union of the USSR, 1940, LLMA, f. 146, ap. 1, b. 84, l. 4.



1. Group of artists at the House of Creativity in Palanga, Tyszkiewicz Palace. 1961

Tyszkiewicz converted it into a residence with a park, built several villas, and established a public resort that flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³ In the interwar period Palanga was the most important resort of independent republic of Lithuania, frequented by a well-off audience of public officials and artists from Kaunas, which was the capital at that time. Palanga retained its significance in the Soviet period, and numerous public offices, factories and organizations held their so-called “holiday retreats” there. In the Soviet period other creative associations had their departmental villas in Palanga, but the residence assigned to the Artists’ Union was the most prestigious.

³ M. Omilanowska, *Nadbałtyckie Zakopane. Połaga w czasach Tyszkiewiczów* [Baltic Zakopane. Palanga during Tyszkiewicz period], Warszawa, 2011.

After the Second World War, Tyszkiewicz Palace was abandoned and neglected, but as of 1952 it was renovated and adapted to artists' needs⁴. Throughout the Soviet period, the residence's renovation and maintenance was funded by the Art Foundation of the USSR⁵, the organization responsible for the material supply of artistic activity. Thus, the funding for the Palanga artists' residence came from Moscow. The Palanga residence began to receive groups of artists in 1957. The interior was designed by Lithuanian architect Simonas Ramunis in 1959. The house could accommodate from thirty to sixty artists and had twenty studio rooms, a canteen, and exhibition spaces. The first group of artists from Soviet republics gathered in January of 1957, headed by the Lithuanian painter Antanas Žmuidzinavičius. In his memoirs he wrote:

The premises and equipment of the residence are just excellent. Let's take the rooms for work and rest. The workshops are equipped with easels, stools and portable partitions. There is a small but well-equipped bookshop, with good art books and magazines, a reading room, and a billiard room with a first-rate billiard table. A hall with a grand piano from the "Estonia" company; besides, a radio set of the latest model. The floor of all the premises is covered with parquet, and curtains on the windows are made from light silk or a thicker Lithuanian-made fabric. Furniture is first-rate. Excellent bedrooms. I think even the American president doesn't have such beds: they are soft and very comfortable. So it goes without saying that some artists, having arrived at this palace of work, commented that these premises were fit for throwing parties rather than making paintings.

However, the best conditions for creative work itself were created there. Artists were provided with paints, canvases and paintbrushes. Easels, plein air umbrellas and stretchers were prepared for painters, and clay, plasticine, stands etc. – for sculptors.⁶

⁴ Reports, drafts and plans of the Palanga House of Creativity, 1952–1956, LLMA, f. 146, ap. 1, b. 84, l. 6; f. 350, ap. 1, b. 105, 122.

⁵ The Art Foundation of the USSR was established in 1940 to improve the material and domestic conditions of the members of the Artists' Union. The foundation had creative studios, production houses, shop-salons, and artists' residences. Artists received state commissions to create new works and design exhibitions, public interiors etc. through the Art Foundation. Branches of the Art Foundation operated under the Artists' Unions of the Soviet republics.

⁶ A. Žmuidzinavičius, *Paletė ir gyvenimas* [Palette and Life], Vilnius, 1961, p. 342.



2. Artists' House of Creativity in Palanga, Daukano Street 34. 1966

Žmuidzinavičius also described traditions initiated in the Palanga artists' residence: newly arrived artists first of all had to climb Birutė Hill in the park⁷ and bow to the Baltic Sea, thus paying homage to this place “in the pagan style”. On Saturday evenings dance parties were held, musical pieces performed, and the halls adorned with caricatures drawn by the artists. The first groups of Palanga artists encountered certain problems. For example, at drawing sessions held in the evenings with live models, local inhabitants refused to sit nude and treated the models invited from Vilnius with hostility. The artists were accused of “amorality” and “drawings of nudities”, but relations between the locals and the artists gradually improved.⁸

Ten years later, in 1967, a new, modern residence building was erected near the same park at Daukanto Street 35 (fig. 2). It was based on a architectural template designed in Moscow and used in other artists' residences, for example in Gurzuf. In 1967 the Tyszkiewicz Palace was

⁷ Birutė Hill is a dune in the Palanga park near the Baltic sea, where the Birutė chapel is situated. A legend goes that Birutė, a pagan priestess who became the wife of Grand Duke of Lithuania Kęstutis, was buried on that site.

⁸ A. Žmuidzinavičius, *op. cit.*, p. 343–345.

transferred to the Lithuanian Art Museum and converted into the Amber Museum now operating there. The new building offered residential artists good living conditions: rooms accommodating two people each with balconies, painting studios, a spacious canteen. The proximity of the sea and park made the residence a real “dream” in action.

How did this Soviet “utopia” function? Moscow prepared the annual calendar of stays by different groups of artists. Functionaries of the Artists’ Union of the USSR and their families occupied the residence for the three summer months. The rest of the time was assigned (mainly in two-month intervals) to artists’ groups from all over the Soviet Union according to genres of art.⁹ There were, for example, a group of painters (each year they produced works on ideological topics – sport, agriculture, military themes), of printmakers (book and poster artists; e.g. in 1971, illustrators created works for the Leipzig Book Fair¹⁰, in 1972 for Bologna children’s book fair¹¹, in 1977 for the exhibition of illustrations in Moscow¹²) and others. Many artists in the Soviet Union applied for a stay in Palanga. Soviet intellectuals and artists regarded Lithuania as a kind of Soviet “West” with a European lifestyle, architectural environment and traditions. Therefore artists wanting to come to Lithuania outnumbered the limited vacancies in Palanga’s artists’ house and the selection issue was quite sensitive. Groups consisted only of chosen artists: the Executive Board of the Artists’ Union of the USSR sent out personal invitations to artists on the basis of competition topics, thus excluding ideologically or artistically “unwanted” or “disloyal” creators. Artists were also subject to a system of control: along with their application to work

⁹ In 1965 it cost the Art Foundation 757,000 roubles to maintain all artists’ residences of the USSR (LLMA, f. 350, ap. 1, b. 296, l. 34), which accommodated 1,392 artists during nine months of 1966 (LLMA, f. 350, ap. 1, b. 296, l. 167).

¹⁰ Letter of Jonas Kuzminskis to Petras Tarabilda from 1970 02 25, LLMA, f. 146, ap. 1, b. 535, l. 29.

¹¹ *Otchetnaja vystavka tvorcheskoj gruppy, Palanga janvar’-fevral’ 1972 g.* [The Exhibition of the Group of Artists, Palanga January, February 1972]. Klaipėda, 1972.

¹² *Otchetnaja vystavka tvorcheskoj gruppy doma tvorcestva «Palanga» dekabr’ 76- janvar’ 77. Katalog* [The Exhibition of the Group of Artists of the House of Creativity “Palanga”. December 76 – January 77]. Kretinga, 1977.

in the residence, they had to present a work plan and photos of the pieces they planned to work on.¹³

In comparison with other Soviet artists, Lithuanians were privileged – they had the right to send one group each year. This group held an array of artists – painters, sculptors, graphic artists, artists of theatre and applied arts working in various genres and styles – and even included an art critic. To be included in the group, artists sent in their applications; then the Administrative Board of the Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR chose the participants according to their productivity, participation in exhibitions and acclaim.¹⁴ An artist without a steady job could work in a creative group for two months. Others stayed for a month and were replaced by colleagues, which gave more artists a chance to create at the Palanga residence. The heads of the separate sections of the Artists' Union (Painting, Sculpture, Graphic Art) assisted the members of their branches, trying to help them and send them to artists' residences; Jonas Švažas, the chairman of the Painting Section, was particularly distinguished in this respect.¹⁵ The majority of the members of the Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR – both those loyal to the Soviet system and the opposition-minded – stayed at the Palanga artists' residence at some point during its existence. The group was headed by a politically “reliable” artist who was paid an allowance to perform certain duties.¹⁶ The group's activity would end with a public exhibition in Palanga attended by an official Vilnius Artists' Union commission comprised of “merited” artists who assessed the works created during the residency. The head of the group prepared an official report on each participant's creative work

¹³ Resolution of the Artists' Union of SSSR on the artist's groups from 1966 06 08, LLMA, f. 350, ap. 1, b. 295, p. 2.

¹⁴ The archive of the Artists' Union contains a rejection sent to artist Gražina Didelytė in 1972 stating that because she had worked in the group the previous year, according to the principle of rotation she had to yield her place to another (LLMA, f. 350, ap. 1, b. 535).

¹⁵ For this and other information the author is grateful to Vilija Jurėnienė, a long-time employee of the Artists' Union of the Lithuanian SSR. The interview was held in Vilnius on 19 August 2016.

¹⁶ E.g. Konstantinas Bogdanas was the head of the group in 1970, Petras Rauduvė in 1973, Boleslovas Klova in 1975, and Aloyzas Stasiulevičius in 1981.



3. Eduardas Jurėnas. *Park in Palanga*. 1978

in the Lithuanian and Russian languages for the Artists' Unions of the Lithuanian SSR and USSR, so all artists were under observe and control.

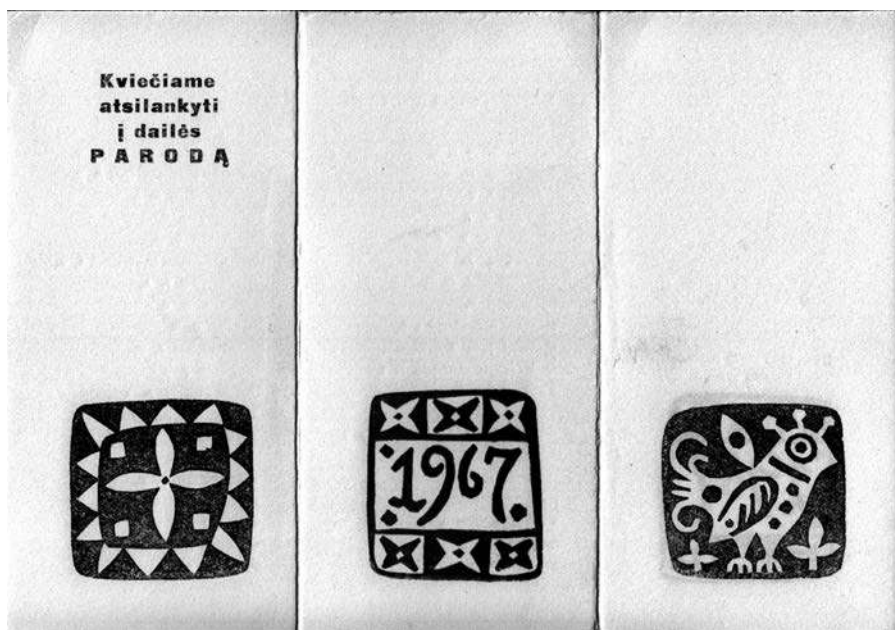
The group worked without programmatic goals or stylistic and artistic unity. As their reports stated, creation at the Palanga artists' residence was motivated by a need to prepare for upcoming important exhibitions – for example the 1975 exhibition commemorating the 30th

anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, the exhibition entitled “Long Live Work!” or the Baltic Triennial of Painting – and, for sculptors, to create projects for sculptures in public spaces of Klaipėda and Vilnius.¹⁷ Thus, unlike traditional artists’ colonies, Soviet artists’ residences produced no distinctive artistic phenomena. Certainly artists painted the nature of Palanga and its environs, and were particularly fond of the motifs of the sea and the park, depicted in the watercolours of Kazys Abramavičius (Plate VIII), Boleslovas Motuza, etchings of Eduardas Jurėnas (fig. 3), views of Palanga in the paintings of Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, Bronė Jacevičiūtė (Plate VII) and many others. Nevertheless, these paintings did not become a significant programmatic statement or convey an iconic view of local nature typical of the oeuvre of artistic colonies.

The residence was a tool with which the Soviet system “bought” artists, granted exceptional privileges to the artists as the workers of “ideological front”. In exchange for good creative conditions, artists were obligated to be loyal to Soviet ideology and the requirements of the socialist realism. However, the ideological environment in the residence varied across different periods. Such differences are revealed by comparing the visual aspect of the residence catalogues from the period of Khrushchev’s Thaw in the 1960s and the era of stagnation under Brezhnev in the 1970s. The catalogue of the exhibition of 1967 is ideologically neutral, decorated with folksy handmade prints by graphic artist Aspazija Surgailienė (fig. 4). The catalogue of the exhibition of 1975 is an offset print containing images of victory in the Second World War with a heavy ideological emphasis (fig. 5). In the 1980s the atmosphere of the Lithuanian group was becoming more liberal. In the evenings young artists, having had a glass or two of wine, even created collective surrealist works of automatic drawing with elements of eroticism and political irony. Such works could not be shown publicly, however.¹⁸ In the 1980s, artists at the Palanga residence

¹⁷ *Lietuvos TSR dailininkų kūrybinės grupės darbų parodos katalogas* [Catalogue of the Exhibition of the Group of Artists of Lithuanian SSR], Klaipėda, 1975.

¹⁸ These drawings still exist in the private collections of the artists, e.g. Mindaugas Skudutis.



4. Catalogue-invitation to the Exhibition of the Group of Artists of the Lithuanian SSR, 1967. Designed by Aspazija Surgailienė

lived a double life: an official one about which they were sceptical, despite adapting to it; and a private one that contained much more personal and artistic freedom.

Everything about the artists' residence – travel expenses, accommodation and meals – was free of charge; sometimes the artists could even use materials and sitters for free. Full material maintenance was vital to artists, many of whom had hard time making a living, and the well-organized daily life created excellent conditions for creative work. Thus the artists greatly appreciated the opportunity to work at the Palanga residence.

Obligatory meetings held with local residents – workers, schoolchildren, kolkhoz workers – ensured that processes of interaction and socialization took place, but they were purely formal. By contrast, meetings the Palanga artists arranged with the company of the Klaipėda dramatic theatre at the residence in the 1960s resulted in important, enduring relations between like-minded artists, actors and artistic directors. Special tours were



5. Cover of the Catalogue of the Exhibition of the Group of Artists of the Lithuanian SSR, 1975

organized for the artists; they visited the environs and travelled around Žemaitija or Samogitia (fig. 7). In this way, artists aware of the “Myth of Samogitia” (see the article by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė) from pre-war Lithuanian painters retained the link with interwar traditions. In a photo from 1960s, the painter Leopoldas Surgailis sits in a churchyard in Samogitia in the pose of “The Pensive Christ”, playfully representing both an iconic motif of local religious and folk art, and a motif in his own paintings (fig. 6).

The director of the residence¹⁹ was responsible for general order and the functioning of the institution. Daily routine was subject to a schedule. Meals were served three times a day in the residence’s canteen, which was similar to a restaurant: waiters served the food, and every day each artist chose his or her next day’s meals from a menu. In addition to

¹⁹ From 1963 to 1970 the director of the Palanga artists’ residence was Bronius Oškiniis, a Lithuanian glider pilot and builder who contributed considerably to the construction of the new building of the residence in 1966.

6. Painter Leopoldas Surgailis in a churchyard in Samogitia/
Žemaitija, 1960s



creative work, artists had leisure time at the residence. While living in the same space for two months, people engaged in various interpersonal relations; naturally, affairs happened. An informal atmosphere reigned in chats over wine and conversations in corridors and lobbies (figs. 8, 9). Caricatures depicting colourful figures of the artists were usually drawn by someone of the group (fig. 11). The finishing touch after the closing exhibition was a party arranged by the artists themselves. A poster from 1967 represents a merry closing



7. Artists at the stone of Barstyčiai during their tour in Samogitia/Žemaitija, 1960s



8. Group of Lithuanian artists at the lobby of the House of Creativity in Palanga. 1960s. From left to right: Jonas Švažas, Antanas Krištopaitis, Leonardas Tuleikis, Marija Dūdienė, Eduardas Jurėnas, Leopoldas Surgailis, unknown

9. Bottom photo. From left to right: Galina Petrova, unknown, Sofija Veiverytė, Marija Cvirkienė, Domicelė Tarabildienė, Silvestras Džiaugžtas, Jonas Švažas



10. Poster "Today: After the Party – Evening-Masquerade". 1967

party with food and a masquerade, continuing the tradition of artists' carnivals from the first half of the 20th century (fig. 10).

It was not only artists who worked in the residence: as of the 1970s, a group of art critics and art historians also stayed there each autumn. Celebrated Soviet art theoreticians loved going to Palanga. During the day they wrote their texts, and in the afternoons they offered seminars on topical issues in Soviet art and gave presentations. The majority of them were Russian art historians from Moscow or Leningrad, and each republic's Artists' Union sent several representatives as well.²⁰ There were both functionaries and opposition figures among them, which made for intriguing and ardent discussions.

After the fall of Soviet Union the Palanga residence was given over to the Lithuanian Artists' Union. The building was renovated in 2004 and now functions as the "Palangos daile" hotel, which offers discounts to artists. Due to lack of financing, it rarely houses permanent groups of working artists.

In the Soviet period, the Palanga artists' residence was a great help to artists with low income. On the other hand, it was also a part of the

²⁰ E.g. in 1986 and 1988 the group comprised Moscow art historians and critics Grigorij Sternin, Karl Kantor, Anatolij Kantor, Vladimir Tolstoj, Zinovij Fogel, Aleksandr Jakimovicz, Leonid Bazhanov, Vitalij Manin, Galina Pletneva and others; also Genrich Igitian and Nona Stepanian from Armenia; Laima Slava from Latvia; and Nijolė Tumėnienė, Gytis Vaitkūnas and the author of this article from Lithuania.



11. Nikolai Ustinov. Caricature on artists residing in the Palanga House of Creativity. 1972.

institutional, economic and ideological environment of Soviet art. The Palanga artists' residence represented an ideologized, bureaucratized, structured utopia – which, once it was realized, ceased to be a utopia. Meanwhile, and as in Soviet artistic life in general, ideas about freer lifestyles and creative work were evolving there. Artists from the various Soviet republics, including Lithuanian artists who took part in the groups of the Palanga House of Creativity, today remember the residence with great nostalgia. Having gained the aura of specific place, the Palanga House of Creativity ranks as an important Soviet artistic colony.

Translated by Aušra Simanavičiūtė

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L a i m a L a u č k a i t ė

Palangos dailininkų kūrybos namai: struktūruota utopija

Santrauka

Straipsnis analizuoja sovietinį menininkų kolonijų atvejį – Dailininkų kūrybos namus Palangoje, įkurtus 1950 m. Baltijos jūros kurorte. Dailininkų rezidencijos, vadinamos „kūrybos ir poilsio namais“, atsirado Sovietų Sąjungoje po Antrojo pasaulinio karo. Jų buvo keletas įvairiose respublikose: Seneže prie Maskvos, Jurmaloje (Latvija), Gurzufė (Krymas), Chostoje (Krasnodaro kraštas), Palangoje (Lietuva). Kūrybos namai priklausė SSRS Dailininkų sąjungai ir buvo finansuojami SSRS Dailės fondo, veikusio Maskvoje, lėšomis. Straipsnyje nušviečiama Dailininkų kūrybos namų Palangoje istorija, jų įkūrimas, vieta, funkcionavimas, finansavimas, kūrybinių grupių sudarymo tvarka, atrankos principai, meninė produkcija. Palangos dailininkų kūrybos namai buvo sovietinio meno institucinės ir ekonominės terpės dalis, kuri menininkų kolonijos utopiją pavertė ideologizuota, biurokratizuota struktūra.