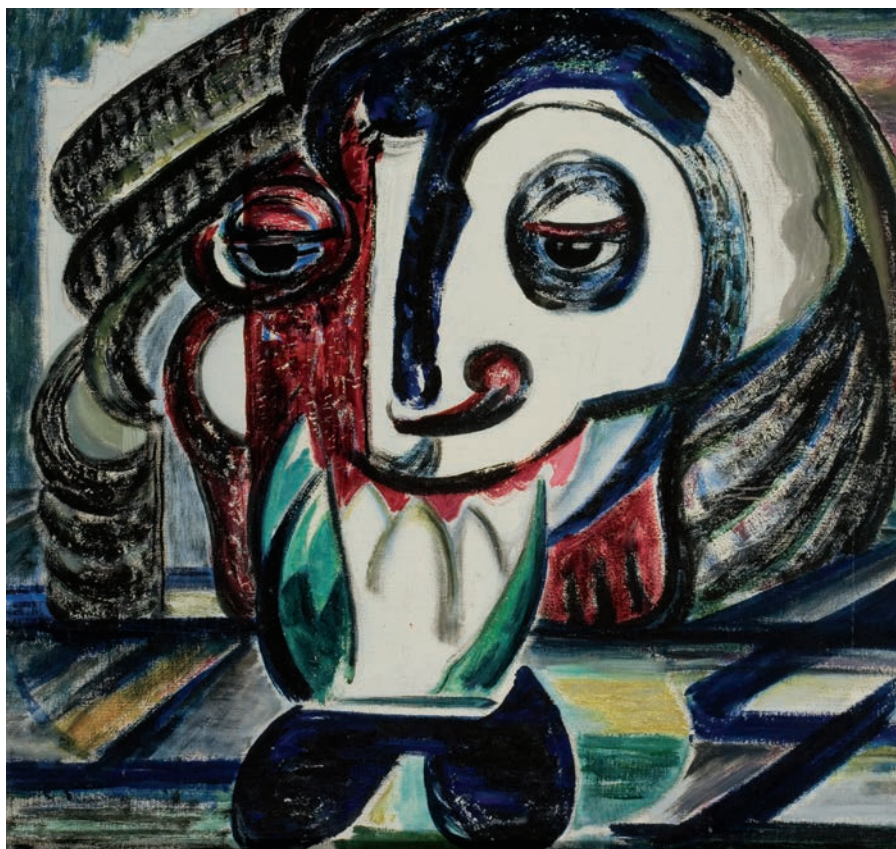




I. Tibor Boromisza. *Fair at Baia Mare*. 1914



II. Adomas Galdikas. *Maiden's Head and Water Lily*. 1920s



III. Antanas Gudaitis. *Bridge over the Pakalupis River*. 1933



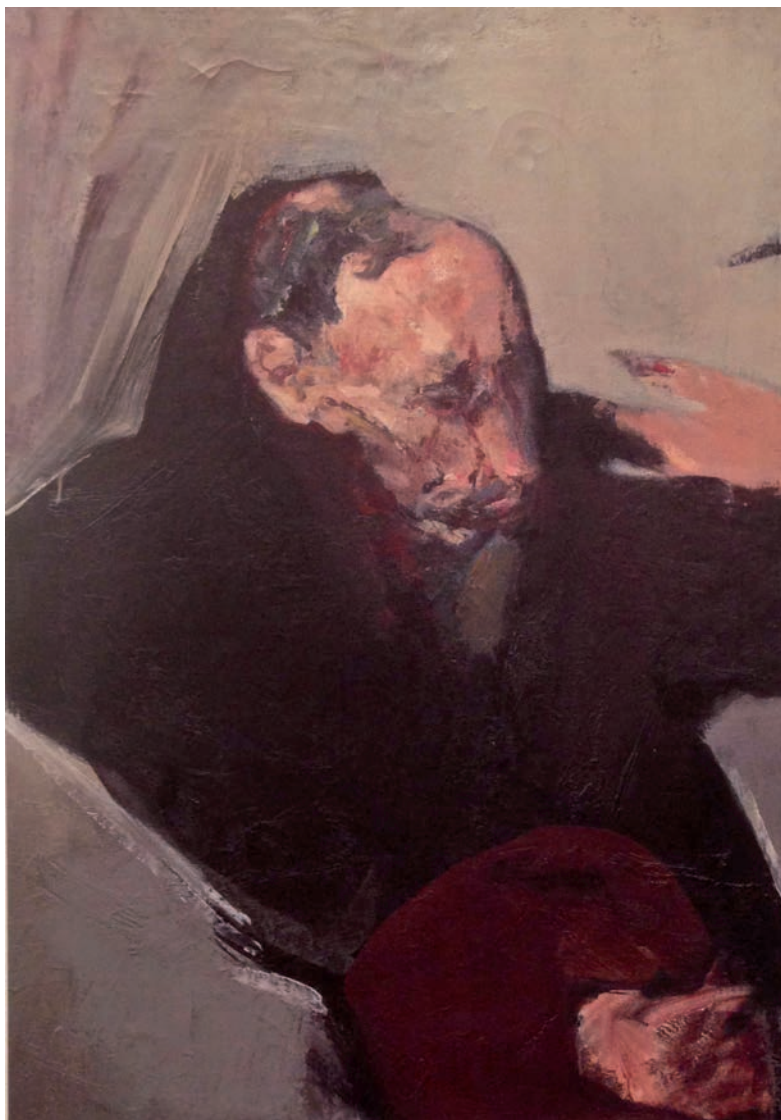


IV. Antanas Gudaitis. *The Wooden Spoon Maker (Old Craftsman)*. 1939

V. Eugenijus Varkulevičius. *The Way of the Cross of Beržoras*. 1986







VI. Arūnas Vaitkūnas. *Portrait of Justinas Mikutis*. 1984





VII. Bronė Jacevičiūtė. *River Ronžė in Spring*. 1966



VIII. Kazys Abramavičius. *Baltic Sea*. 1977



Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

Vilnius Academy of Arts

## The Myth of Samogitia in Lithuanian Visual Art of the 20th Century

Keywords: memory, myth, national identity, painting, Samogitia.

Samogitia (Žemaitija in Lithuanian; Žemaitėjė in Samogitian), located in the northwestern part of modern Lithuania, is one of that country's five ethnographic regions.<sup>1</sup> To the north Samogitia is bounded by Latvia, to the east by the Nevėžis River, to the south by the Nemunas River and to the west by the Baltic Sea. Historically the region of Samogitia, first mentioned in written sources in 1219, was significantly larger.

However, here the history of the region is not as important as a myth that developed during the 19th century and took hold of the historical imagination and the formation of the modern Lithuanian identity in the 20th century. Samogitia, like all mythical areas, was described as an extraordinary place whose remarkable inhabitants historically resisted enemy attacks and defended their unique values – their customs, language and lifestyle. The glory of this secluded and mysterious land was an outcome of continuous wars that had pushed people into hard-to-reach places and hindered the creation of cities. Even nowadays Samogitia is a land of individual farmsteads, hamlets, villages, small towns, cultivated fields and dense forests.

The roots of the Samogitian myth can be traced back to the 16th century. In 1589, in his memoirs about his journeys to Russia and Scandinavia, Johann David Wunderer (ca. 1570–1622) wrote that in Samogitia he met people who not only worshipped animals, including snakes,

<sup>1</sup> The 1990 saw the rise of a temporarily well-known movement for Samogitian autonomy, distribution of Samogitian passports, and press in the Samogitian language, which differs significantly from standard Lithuanian.

but could also turn themselves into wolves and bears.<sup>2</sup> Polish Romantic literature is another source of the widespread image of the strange Samogitian and his incredible land. For example, the extremely popular novels of Maria Rodziewiczówna (1864–1944) were heavily influential at the turn of the 20th century. Her most famous work, “Dievajtis” (1888), whose action takes place in Samogitia, was considered a masterpiece for many years. The Samogitian characters in that novel were archotypically assertive and quiet, and attached to their traditions – proud, honest patriots that loved their motherland with all their hearts. Polish historian Krzysztof Buchowski (b. 1969), who analyzed Lithuanian and Polish prejudices towards each other, found that some ideas of the 19th-century ethnographers differed little from descriptions of discoveries made by the travelers in distant and exotic lands.<sup>3</sup> Twentieth-century Lithuanian literary works set in Samogitia are nonetheless exotic.

Samogitia retained its image as a land of inexplicable attraction, and of strong and individualistic people living in mystical harmony with nature, until the end of the 20th century. In other words, Samogitia was perceived and presented as an utopian space. Works of art conveyed this idea and also strongly influenced the establishment and dissemination of

<sup>2</sup> In 1589/90 Wunderer, a Calvinist student from Rostock, got into trouble with the Jesuits in northern Poland and had to flee to the wilderness near the border between Livonia and Lithuania. The well-read Wunderer knew what to expect from the inhabitants of that land: ‘Then we came to *Samogitia*, through vast, uncanny wildernesses, where horrendous visions and spectres are seen, even in the bright of the day. Scholars believe that all this is caused by the inhabitants who, even nowadays, live like beasts without faith or religion. Not only do they adore animals and serpentine monsters, but they also use devilish arts to transform themselves into the shape of wolves and bears. Satan is thus very powerful among them. In the shape of various beasts they appear to travellers, and are able to attack and slay them in the shape of a wolf’. S. Donecker, *The Lion, the Witch and the Walrus. Images of the Sorcerous North in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, *Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, Februar 2010, no. 17; [www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/4-5/4-5\\_donecker.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/4-5/4-5_donecker.htm)).

<sup>3</sup> K. Buchowski, *Litvomanai ir polonizuotojai. Mitai, abipusės nuostatos ir stereotipai lenkų ir lietuvių santykiuose pirmoje XX amžiaus pusėje* [Lithuanians and Polonisers. Myths, mutual perceptions and stereotypes in Polish-Lithuanian relations in the first half of the twentieth century], Vilnius, 2012, p. 39–53 (Original title: K. Buchowski, *Litvomanai i polonizatorzy. Mity, wzajemne postrzeganie i stereotypy w stosunkach polsko-litewskich w pierwszej połowie XX wieku*), Białystok, 2006).

the Samogitian myth. In the 19th century and at the outset of the 20th, this myth excited the imagination of writers in particular, but after the First World War it had a stronger influence on visual artists. The myth was reborn in fine arts and photography in the late 1950s under Soviet occupation and flourished in the late 1980s when the Soviet period was coming to an end.

Based on the known manifestations of the Samogitian myth in painting, graphics and photography, this article seeks to answer three questions: (1) how and why Samogitia attracted and fascinated modernist artists throughout the 20th century despite many changes in culture, politics, lifestyle and values; (2) how the pilgrimage of artists to Samogitia developed, and how its separate stages differ from one another and; (3) how Samogitia was perceived and portrayed in visual arts and photography, and what message these images managed to convey.

### Why Samogitia?

Before we try to answer these questions, it should be noted the era was one of loss of statehood as well as the formation of nation-states.<sup>4</sup> The changing political reality constantly forced residents to reassess their identity and rebuild the construct of their self-image on new foundations that would help them adequately assess the historical reality and project future goals. In the 20th century, Lithuania believed in the project of the modern nation-state, and the majority of its citizens regarded it as an aspirational ideal. Consequently, they searched for events and places that symbolized the idea of national statehood and Lithuanian-ness, its roots in the past and its vitality. Samogitia became one of those places. As rapid urbanization after the Second World War destroyed the traditional agrarian society and its culture, loss of this significant historical element

<sup>4</sup> Lithuania was part of the Russian Empire (as its so-called Northwest Province) from the very end of the 18th century (1795) until the First World War. Its independence was proclaimed on 16 February 1918. Lithuania remained an independent republic for two decades but then was occupied by the Soviets on 15 June 1940, followed by Nazi occupation and, immediately thereafter, a second Soviet occupation that lasted until the declaration of independence on 11 March 1990.



stimulated nostalgia and interest in it as a waning part of the heritage. Samogitia was one of the most interesting regions of traditional ethnic culture because it still had a lot of rural cultural assets – farmhouses, individual farmsteads, religious monuments. After the First World War Samogitia thus became a mythological land for Lithuanians, as the Puszta Steppe was for Hungarians, villages in Bretagne for French symbolists, the Alps for the Swiss, and Zakopane and the Carpathians for the Poles.

In Samogitia, admirers of the ancients sought and found traces of pagan Lithuania, and primitive culture enthusiasts revelled in local religious customs and the exceptional rural Baroque architecture of wooden Catholic churches with ornamented altars; shrines with polychrome statues of saints that the locals decorated with knitwear, ribbons and beads, and carved wooden crosses; and wayside shrines near farmsteads and cemeteries. It was all considered something authentic, old, unique and treasured that had to be shown to others. This heritage, people believed, embodied and preserved the spirit of the nation, signs of which were also observable in the local landscape, character of the people, and customs – objects that could only be experienced directly, in their natural habitat. This encouraged the pilgrimage to Samogitia. In its simplest form it was an ethnographic expedition, but the trips soon involved other types of travel needed for journeys to specific places where travellers would spend some time with locals. Ethnographic pilgrimage prompted the establishment of two museums: Aušra in Šiauliai in 1923 and the Samogitian Museum Alka in Telšiai in 1932. The second, more involved form of pilgrimage encouraged a fruitful output of artworks but did not lead to any artist colonies, as it did in other countries. It was precisely through ethnography that some artists became acquainted with Samogitia. For instance, all students of Kaunas Art School were required to attend ethnographical expeditions and collect folk art, at least during their first years in the school. For some, this experience – especially when tied to certain personal memories – left a huge impression that influenced their creative work.

In this case, however, we are interested in one small, specific group: inveterate admirers of Samogitia searching for the foundations of modern national art. Formed in the 1920s, reborn in the late 1950s and

existing until the 1990s, the group comprises several generations of artists. Although separated by different generations, these artists were united by common objectives of artistic creation; a declared adherence to principles formulated by the 1930s modern art group *Ars*; and a common belief in the Samogitian myth, which they cherished and spread in their visual works, texts and way of life. All of them were driven to find the primary sources of the myth, so they travelled in Samogitia and spent time there, trying to represent their experience in landscapes, portraits of local people, and cultural objects. The Soviet period was furthermore marked by discoveries of local talent, mainly amateur painters. Several unique personalities also emerged, such as the medical doctor Vaclovas Intas (1925–2007), who in 1957 established a stone museum in Mosėdis; or Vilius Orvidas (1952–1992), a descendant of a stonemason who turned his family's homestead in Gargždelė near Salantai into a gigantic open-air installation.

According to Orvidas, he wanted to save Samogitian relicts from Soviet land reclamation. During this process, granite boulders were usually buried or broken, and old oak trees were chopped down and their stumps uprooted, burned or left to rot. In the 1970s the Orvidas farmstead became a central attraction for artists and young people looking for the meaning of life, and for modernists from Lithuania and all across the Soviet Union. In 1980 the acclaimed Moscow art critic Leonid Bazhanov (b. 1945) even filmed the documentary movie "Farmstead" (in Russian, *Xymop*) about this place. In Lithuania, the Orvidas phenomenon garnered further publicity as of 1989. Films were made<sup>5</sup>, books were published<sup>6</sup>, and when the installation faced the threat of destruction after its creator's death, the global avant-garde authority and filmmaker Jonas Mekas (b. 1922) suggested it should be designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

<sup>5</sup> *Čia mano nieko nėra* [There Is Nothing of Mine], 1989, director Henrikas Šablevičius; *Akmenorius* [Stone Maker] 1994, director Antanas Maciulevičius; *Vilius Orvidas*, 2001, director Vytautas V. Landsbergis.

<sup>6</sup> D. Parulskienė (ed.), *Kitoks Vilius Orvidas* [A Different Vilius Orvidas], Vilnius, 2003; V. V. Landsbergis, *Orvido knyga / The Book of Vilius Orvidas*, Vilnius, 2008.

## Pilgrims and Their Destinations

Lithuanian artists continued to traverse Samogitia throughout the 20th century, but they were never drawn to a specific place of like-minded people, despite sharing the motivations that inspired the artists' colonies of Pont-Aven or Worpswede – the desire to escape the shackles of city routine and the influence of money and careerism, to experience life close to nature, to learn about simple things and the crude art of local masters, and later to use this knowledge in work that would persuasively and passionately speak about the essentials, representing the new culture of a modern nation oriented towards the future but rooted in the past.

The modern image of Samogitia was reinforced by the Lithuanian fine art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, executed by the national genius Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), among others. He had spent a few years in Plungė manor in Samogitia in his adolescence, but he did not feel true love for the region until meeting (in 1907) and subsequently becoming engaged to the Lithuanian writer Sofija Kymantaitė (1886–1958). In January 1909 Čiurlionis married her in the heartland of Samogitia, at a church in Šateikiai whose priest was the bride's uncle Vincentas Jarulaitis (1859–1939). That same summer in Plungė, Čiurlionis painted several paintings, of which “Samogitian Crosses” (in Lithuanian *Žemaičių koplytstulpiai*) and especially “Lithuanian Cemetery” (*Lietuviškos kapinės*) can safely be called iconic images of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Lithuanian art (fig. 1). Reproductions of these works are countless, and in Lithuania they are understood and valued even by people without connections to the world of art, as though no explanation is necessary.

The Samogitian myth acquired new connotations in the art of independent Lithuania after the First World War. Čiurlionis' charming works are part of an ethnographic phase in the understanding of Lithuanian heritage. They convey the joy of discovery and an aesthetic fascination with newly found national treasures – works by nameless craftsmen from villages who had expressed their ideas in the same forms for decades and centuries. Meanwhile, a younger painter, the graphic artist and teacher Adomas Galdikas (1893–1969), treated Samogitia as an object of modern





1. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. *Lithuanian Cemetery*. 1909

mythology. For Galdikas, it was never enough to simply capture its landscapes; he aimed also to give them greater significance. Galdikas peopled the Samogitian rivers, bogs and forests with creatures from ancient myths, often linking nymphs and Pans to Scandinavian and Baltic myths and turning them into the mermaids or meadow and tree spirits that were more familiar in these latitudes (Plate II). The artist's imagination

was influenced by the work of the Russian symbolist group World of Art (*Mir iskusstva*) and creations by the Finnish art nouveau artist Axel Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) in particular. Galdikas came into contact with these inspirations before the First World War while studying in the Central School of Technical Painting (now Saint Petersburg's Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design), established with a grant from Baron Alexander von Stieglitz (1814–1884). Galdikas graduated in etching in 1917, but not until the 1920s and especially the 1930s did his artistic visions take their true visual form.

Contemporaries ardently admired the expressive gesture with which Galdikas painted the hilly landscapes of Samogitia with their groves of mighty trees, empty autumn fields and windswept wooden churches. His romantic, majestic, excited imagination recalled modernists' art in other countries yet at the same time seemed very authentic and Lithuanian. This impression was reinforced by the artist's reticence about the influence of Finish artists or Russian symbolism, and his eagerness to associate these images with his childhood memories. 'My father's lands were surrounded by woods and marshes. Oaks, birches, ash trees, and aspens guarded us from the nose of the world and wide roads never led to us. [...]. The forest of Šarkė was down there, a bit further – the Apuolė mound, woven in fairy tales and ghosts. Everything could be seen from the Būras mountain where a dilapidated cross still stood. [...]. Marshes with their scattered black stumps, slush bogholes, ducks and other water birds attracted me with their scary secrets,' Galdikas told journalists.<sup>7</sup>

Galdikas strove to arouse love of Samogitia in his students. In 1926 he became the head of the Graphic Arts Studio at Lithuania's lone art school, located in Kaunas. There he enjoyed success as an authority who was known to be a liberal, progressive-minded teacher. Students were fascinated by his enthusiastic admiration of German Expressionism, especially the paintings of the Die Brücke group. A shared interest in an expressionistic art program and expressionistic ways of expression united Galdikas with

<sup>7</sup> P. Andriušis, *Audrų sūnus* – Adomas Galdikas [Son of Storms. Adomas Galdikas], *Žiburėlis*, 1944, no. 1/2, p. 4.

young Lithuanian art reformers who in 1932 created a group called Ars.<sup>8</sup> Two of the group's six members – namely, the painters Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989) and Viktoras Vizgirda (1904–1993) – succumbed to Galdikas's stories about Samogitia and moved to the places their teacher was praising. While in Samogitia, Vizgirda painted several great landscapes but did not give in to the call of Samogitia (and may not even have heard it).

Gudaitis, on the other hand, found his Pont-Aven there. Seized by tempestuous excitement, he painted peasant huts, streamlets, shrubs and foliage-covered little towns with vigorous movements (“The Landscape”, 1933; “Bridge over the Pakalupis River”, 1933; “Beržoras Village”, 1939; Plate III). Around 1939, his expressionistic excitement and passion started to cool, and his works acquired the quietude and monumentality typical of Neo-classicism. Gudaitis started to portray Samogitians as Lithuanian ethnic types *par excellence* (e.g. “Davatka” or “Woman with a Book of Prayers, Ready to Attend Mass”; “Old Craftsman” also known as “The Wooden Spoon Maker”; Plate IV). Both the critics and his audience received these portraits more favourably than his landscapes, immediately recognizing them as exemplars of a modern national art. Ethnic types, adapted to represent the image of the country for locals, became the identity symbols of the state-supported official style of the independent Republic of Lithuania. Interestingly, they acquired a similar meaning and status in the late 1960s in Soviet Lithuania. On opening the album “Lithuanian Painting”<sup>9</sup> – edited in Lithuania, published (according to the typical standard of luxury at the time) in the German Democratic Republic in 1976, and treasured as a must-have art book in every Soviet Lithuanian intellectual's home – one will find a small collection of masterpieces by Ars group members, including portraits of Lithuanian ethnic

<sup>8</sup> For more information see J. Mulevičiūtė, *Modernizmo link: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940* [Towards Modernism. Artistic Life in the Lithuanian Republic, 1918–1940], Kaunas, 2001, p. 131–150; G. Jankevičiūtė, Žydų dailininkai tarpukario Lietuvos meninėje kultūroje [Jewish Artists on the Art Scene of Interwar Lithuania], in *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, vol. 8: Abipusis pažinimas: lietuvių ir žydų kultūriniai saitai, ed. by J. Verbickienė, Vilnius, 2010, p. 69–102.

<sup>9</sup> P. Gudynas (ed.), *Lietuvos tapyba* [Lithuanian Painting], Vilnius, 1976.



types – “Davatka” and “The Wooden Spoon Maker” – that Gudaitis had painted in Samogitia in 1939.

Analogous processes reactualizing the artistic legacy of the interwar period also took place in Latvia and Estonia. According to the historian Arūnas Streikus (b. 1973), Soviet ideologists supported ethnic consciousness and tried to maintain it throughout the Soviet Union as a means of diverting cultural figures’ attention from political questions and the idea of national statehood, which posed an existential threat to the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Soviet Lithuanian modernists, however, maintain that these works by Gudaitis were chiefly inspired by German Expressionism and the École de Paris, which was the reason they were so important as a symbol of modernism in the interwar period, when Lithuania enjoyed independence. These works evinced the maturity and Westernisation of the independent national state; therefore, at least in the eyes of artists who cherished modernistic aspirations, Gudaitis’s legacy transcended any declaration of ethnic consciousness. Professors and students at the Lithuanian SSR’s State Art Institute tried to cement the legacy of Gudaitis’s symbolic heritage: instead of reproducing examples of the classic art that was so popular in the era of academies, they reproduced the heritage of Ars.<sup>11</sup> In other words, it was pointless to offer explanations of the value of the heritage of artists belonging to the Ars group, because the absolute majority of artists already recognized it as a part of national history and national mythology – and more as the latter, perhaps, as Ars existed more as a legend than an object of research and knowledge. Its legend was spread by oral tradition, given that all the group’s members except Gudaitis were inaccessible, having either died or emigrated from Lithuania after the Second World War.

<sup>10</sup> A. Streikus, Sovietų režimo pastangos pakeisti Lietuvos gyventojų tautinį identitetą [The Soviet Regime’s Attempts to Change the National Identity of Lithuanian Citizens], *Genocidas ir rezistencija*, 2007, no. 1, p. 7–30.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in 1973 Mindaugas Skudutis (b. 1948), under the direction of the painting teacher Vladas Karatajus (1925–2014), created a copy (VDI F–38) of Antanas Gudaitis’s 1939 composition “The Old Craftsman”, stored in the museum of the Vilnius Academy of Arts. I am thankful to painter Arvydas Šaltenis for this information about the painting.

Thus the past dominated the presence as a myth. As the prominent German historical theorist Jörn Rüsen (b. 1938) put it, ‘The identity in historical consciousness is forming irrespective of events with normative power as well as of individual and social memories of them. When they are relevant to human world and his life in general, they can be located to the other side of the horizon, where people live their lives. In this case, the event has a “mythical” nature’.<sup>12</sup> Again, there was no need to rationally justify why it was important to firmly establish the legacy of Ars and maintain its relevance. For most Soviet Lithuanian artists it was enough that memory should encouraging practices transfused with shamanistic features; for example, it was considered important to visit places that had been meaningful in the lives and creativity of the group’s members. Of course, it was impossible to visit Paris under the Soviet regime, so generation after generation of young Lithuanian artists visited Kaunas, where Ars members had lived and created during the years of their prosperity (i.e. 1932–1936).

Some paths led also to Samogitia. It was impossible to go there in the war’s aftermath, when Lithuania endured partisan warfare and artists were fettered by fear of repression, which kept them from overstepping the boundaries of the doctrine of socialist realism. But Nikita Khrushchev’s liberalization ushered in a sense of freedom, and by the end of the 1960s the pilgrimage had become possible. Gudaitis also contributed to it. As a prominent artist and Art Institute professor, he built his own villa in Palanga, a Lithuanian resort on the shore of the Baltic Sea, and travelled from there, along with family members, colleagues and friends, to visit places of his youth.<sup>13</sup> His famous painting “Three Petronėlės I” (1964) was influenced by a primitivist sculptural gravestone he saw in Plungė Cemetery, and his composition “Idyll” (1966) embodies reminiscences and impressions from his youth, mixing his memories of Samogitian summers with the theories of the interwar Lithuanian philosopher

<sup>12</sup> J. Rüsen, *Istorika. Istorikos darbų rinktinė* [History. Selected Writings on the Theory of History], Z. Norkus (ed.), Vilnius, 2007, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> T. Sakalauskas, *Antanas Gudaitis. Septyni vakarai su dailininku* [Antanas Gudaitis. Seven Evenings with the Artist], Vilnius, 1989, p. 138–139.

Vydūnas (Wilhelm Storosta, 1868–1953), a vegetarian with an interest in theosophy who propagated a kind of national pantheism that left its mark on the memory of the painter.

After the so-called Thaw, a succession of several generations of Lithuanian artists travelled to Samogitia, treating it as a treasury of authentic heritage under the open sky. A deluge of Samogitian motifs emerged in the period from the late 1960s through the 1970s. The art pilgrims' collection of these impressions was accompanied by accumulation of traditional folk-art works intended to supplement the artists' private collections. They also were looking for fresh talent nurtured by the magical land of Samogitia. And indeed, the individuality of Samogitian autodidacts' art stood out from works by amateurs in other regions. In the eyes of Lithuanian artists, this made the myth of Samogitia even more compelling. Since the 1980s, though, art revivalists have been attracted to Samogitia by Ars's past, and pilgrims try to visit places admired and painted by Galdikas, Vizgirda and above all Gudaitis. The generation of the 1990s gained an influential messenger who firmly combined Samogitian and Ars mythology. This was the self-educated philosopher Justinas Mikutis (1922–1988).

### Samogitia according to Justinas Mikutis

Born in Samogitia, Justinas Mikutis displayed extraordinary abilities in childhood and adolescence. In 1942 he enrolled in Kaunas University, but after one year the Nazis closed the school, so he had to return to his parents' home. He worked as a teacher in a few schools in Samogitian villages until 1945, when he was arrested, convicted of anti-Soviet activities, and imprisoned in the Uchta and Vorkuta concentration camps. In 1956 he was rehabilitated and went back to Lithuania. He worked as a translator of technical texts, as a lift operator in a factory and, starting in 1957, as a model at the Lithuanian SSR's State Art Institute and Vilnius Art School. His broad knowledge of culture and his way of speaking in metaphors were seen as exceptional and fascinating, especially during those harsh years under the Soviet regime. He knew several foreign languages,

could recite poems by French and German modernist poets, and quoted Nietzsche and Maritain, whose works he knew by heart.

Mikutis became a symbol of non-conformist culture. He was welcome at all gatherings of intellectuals and artists who were hostile to the Soviet regime, in whose homes he met careful listeners and also found food and lodging. Mikutis gladly accepted offers of shelter, as he no longer had any relatives and was sensitive and exhausted. Besides the physical torments he had endured in Stalin's gulag, he had been forced to undergo Soviet psychiatric treatment and now suffered from its consequences. In the 1980s, Mikutis assembled a small group of student painters and became their spiritual leader. Following Mikutis, Vaidotas Žukas (b. 1956), who had been expelled from the Art Institute; his contemporaries Algimanta Stankutė (b. 1958), Arūnas Vaitkūnas (1956–2005), Eugenijus Varkulevičius (b. 1956), and Eglė Velaniškytė (b. 1958); and a few younger artists like Audrius Naujokaitis (1961–2012) also left for Samogitia. Žukas, whose parents lived in Vilnius (his father was a university professor and his mother a prominent Lithuanian literature teacher), nonetheless settled with his wife in Samogitia for a while. They lived in various rented homes, had children, raised their family, authored paintings, and collected worn, neglected, archaic liturgical accessories and ecclesiastical art. Žukas then radically changed his hippy attitude, turning to Catholicism and living and behaving as a missionary preacher, artist and ethnographer in one person. Of course such a turn also changed his individual style of art. Instead of the aggressive, brightly coloured works he once had executed in an openly political, hyperrealistic style, Žukas began to work with watercolour fades and tempera, painting compositions of Christian iconography. Often he simply mended church books he admired and wooden statues of saints carved by unknown folk craftsman. Following Italian Renaissance examples and even trying to adapt old technologies, he started to create murals.

Other Mikutis followers wandered the relatively small Samogitian territory, trying to stay close to Plateliai Lake, the most beautiful part of the region. Today the area is a national park that features charming examples of wooden Baroque as well as impressive monuments from the Cold War period, such as the Plokštinė Missile Base. A Museum of the



Cold War opened at the site in 2012, showing how rapidly utopia can turn into dystopia. But the young artists of the 1980s did not want to know anything about the Soviet missile base; rather, they tried to seal themselves within the reality of the myth. The status of pilgrim suited the identity of the modernist artist of the 1980s generation. This was a time when young people tried to dissociate themselves from the artistic establishment by consciously choosing a marginal position. Mikutis's chaste innamorata Stankutė settled in a Samogitian village, married, and had children. She still lives in Samogitia today, in Telšiai. Stankutė's schoolmate Eglė Velaniškytė left her parents' luxurious apartment in an art deco house in central Kaunas and moved to a remote edge of Lithuania close to the border with Latvia and Belarus. She spent fifteen years on a modest, wooded farm near the village of Salakas, where she married a talented local sculptor and had three children with him. Later she left her husband and went back to Kaunas, taking their children with her. Šarūnas Sauka (b. 1958), considered one of the most striking talents of his generation, followed Velaniškytė's example, settling with his family in the small town of Dusetos in northeastern Lithuania, where he still resides. All these artists sought a place that would be as far as possible from the Soviet regime and its control mechanisms, where they would have freedom to be what they were and to create as they wished.

As for Samogitia, Eugenijus Varkulevičius stayed there longer than any other follower of Mikutis save Žukas. Varkulevičius chose Beržoras, a little town with a wooden church of exceptional beauty, and set to creating paintings full of furious energy. Inspired by local examples, he mainly chose the motif of the Way of the Cross (Plate V). His contemporaries and art critics treated him as a composite of Emil Nolde (1867–1956), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) and Mikutis's favourite French expressionist Georges Rouault (1871–1958).

Varkulevičius's paintings of religious scenes gained relevance under the radical atheization policies implemented in Samogitia. For example, the major Christian pilgrimage centre Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary), featuring 17th-century Stations of the Cross built by Dominicans, was renamed Varduva, and various attempts were made to prohibit



6. From left: Eugenijus Varkulevičius, Justinas Mikutis and Arūnas Vaitkūnas in Beržoras. 1983

believers from gathering for their traditional observances and organizing processions. Wooden crosses from the mid-19th century traditionally erected on the so-called Hill of Crosses in nearby Šiauliai, were destroyed, clandestinely replaced, and destroyed again, one after another. But contrary to the government's expectations, the prohibitions and repressions strengthened the symbolic meaning of these places and increased interest in them. In such a context, any public demonstration of Christian religiosity acquired special significance. Varkulevičius's religious paintings had no chance of being shown in exhibitions, but they were well known and circulated in a private space. Works being created by the artist in Beržoras today are considered the finest examples of his art. When Lithuania's borders opened, Varkulevičius moved

to New York City and lived for more than a decade in a local colony of Lithuanian artists who flocked to the renowned Lithuanian-born international avant-garde artist Jonas Mekas. Though he weathered the initial culture shock, Varkulevičius was apparently unprepared to fully adapt himself to this new setting and ultimately returned to Lithuania.

The painter Arūnas Vaitkūnas went to Beržoras to visit Varkulevičius (fig. 6) and spent several months there in 1984 and 1985. Art critic Raminta Jurėnaitė (b. 1953), in her book on Vaitkūnas, described this period as follows: "There was no money nor space for painting. [...] Arūnas lived in Kaunas in his mother's apartment [...] The studio assigned to him by



8. Pilgrimage to Samogitia by members of the artists' group 24. From left: Mindaugas Skudutis, Leonardas Gutauskas and Arvydas Šaltenis in Alsėdžiai. 1991

the Artists' Union was so tiny, that the large size canvases didn't fit inside. [...] With his fellow painters Algė Stankutė and Eugenijus Varkulevičius, Vaitkūnas worked in the former country house of the painter couple Didžiokas at Dovainonys near Kaunas. [...] Occasionally he spent time in Palanga at the Artists' Union house where Lithuanian artists were allowed to come during the off season. In 1984 he started wandering around Samogitia. He visited Pavandenė, Sakelis Lake, Žadeikiai Chapel, often sleeping in the open air'.<sup>14</sup>

But the inspiration behind Vaitkūnas's works was less the Samogitian village or the local marvels of ecclesiastical art than it was Mikutis himself. Vaitkūnas emerged from Samogitia with several Mikutis portraits

<sup>14</sup> R. Jurėnaitė, *Arūnas Vaitkūnas. Tapyba* [Arūnas Vaitkūnas. Paintings], Vilnius, 2012, p. 14.



9. Arūnas Baltėnas All Saints Day in Salantai cemetery chapel. 2012. Private collection

painted with an extraordinary psychological perception and suggestion. Mikutis was very much liked by artists and was painted by a number of Lithuanian modernists, but undoubtedly the best portraits of him were painted by Vaitkūnas (Plate VI).

In 1991, in honour of the luminaries of Ars and Justinas Mikutis, who by then had been dead for several years, Leonardas Gutauskas (b. 1938), Mindaugas Skudutis (b. 1948) and Arvydas Šaltenis (b. 1944) – three members of 24, the first artists' group in Soviet Lithuania, founded in 1989 – visited Samogitia. Their trip, which was photodocumented (the photos are kept by Šaltenis, who shared those images with the author of this article), symbolically ended the reflections of Samogitian myth in Lithuanian art (fig. 8).





10. Arūnas Baltėnas. The Church of Beržoras. 2013. Private collection

After 1991, the Lithuanian political, economic, social and cultural reality started to change rapidly, as did the contexts, discourses, themes and motives of visual art. Samogitia became an object of anthropological studies and nostalgia, rather than a mythical place. Its new look is perfectly conveyed in albums of coloured pictures of wooden architecture, publications devoted to Rural Baroque, and series of anthropological photography, among which the works by Arūnas Baltėnas (figs. 9–10) stand out.<sup>15</sup> Nobody goes to Samogitia just to paint any more. Beržoras and Alsėdžiai have become tourism centres competing with Plokštinė, which offers travellers access to the intriguing modern Cold War relict of the Soviet missile base, which in 2012 underwent reconstruction and became the Museum of the Cold War.

<sup>15</sup> A. Baltėnas, V. Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, *Žemaičiai. Gyvenimai ir šventės* [Samogitians. Lives and Feasts], Vilnius, 2012.

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Giedrė Jankevičiūtė

## Žemaitijos mitas 20 a. Lietuvos vizualiajame mene

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje analizuojamas Žemaitijos mito fenomenas ir jo įtaka 20 a. modernistinei tapybai. Tema plėtojama susitelkus į tris jos aspektus: 1) kaip ir kodėl Žemaitija traukė ir žavėjo dailininkus modernistus visą 20 a., nepaisant Lietuvos politinių, kultūrinių, gyvenimo būdo ir vertybių permainų; 2) kaip plėtojosi dailininkų piligrimystės į Žemaitiją ir kuo skyrėsi atskiros jų fazės; 3) kaip Žemaitija buvo suvokiama ir interpretuojama dailės kūriniuose bei fotografijoje ir kokią prasmę šie vaizdai turėjo amžininkams bei vėlesnėms kartoms. Žemaitijos mito reikšmė ir poveikis 20 a. modernistinei Lietuvos dalei ir fotografijai siejamas su nacionalinės tapatybės ieškojimais (visą laikotarpį) bei siekiais kurti alternatyvą oficialiajai kultūrai (ypač sovietmečiu). Prieinama prie išvados, kad Žemaitijos mitas buvo reikšmingas, formuojant Lietuvos nacionalinės dailės pagrindus (Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis), reaktualizuojant nacionalinį paveldą tarpukario Lietuvos Respublikoje (Adomo Galdiko ir grupuotės „Ars“ narių, ypač Antano Gudaičio, kūryba) ir ieškant atsparos sovietizacijai 20 a. antroje pusėje, ypač septintame–devintame dešimtmečiuose (tarp kitų pavyzdžių aptariamas Viliaus Orvido fenomenas bei savamokslio filosofo Justino Mikučio idėjų poveikis tapytojams Arūnui Vaitkūnui, Eugenijui Varkulevičiui, Vaidotui Žukui). Nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje Žemaitijos mitas nustojo stimuliuoti menininkų ir visuomenės vaizduotę, šis Lietuvos regionas virto etnologų ir antropologų tyrimo bei vadinamosios antropinės fotografijos objektu (kaip pavyzdys pateikiama Arūno Baltėno fotografija).