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## Christian Altarpiece Painters in Soviet Latvia from 1945 to 1990

During the Soviet era (1945–1990), Latvia, like other occupied states, experienced anti-religious reforms and the suppression of local churches and Christian communities. This repression also hindered the development of church buildings and interiors. This study explores the hypothesis that, despite these challenges, sacred art from the Soviet period represents a unique and meaningful part of the Christian artistic tradition. It identifies and analyzes the main altarpiece artists, examines their creative activities in Latvia, and contextualizes the number of altarpiece paintings in comparison with the situation in Lithuania<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** altarpieces, Soviet Latvia, Christian art, anti-religious policy, painting

Due to the anti-religious policies of the Soviet period, a prevailing impression among Latvian art historians was that the number of sacred artworks from this era that are worthy of analysis and documentation was small and largely insignificant. However, the findings, elaborated in the author's bachelor's<sup>2</sup> and master's<sup>3</sup> theses, suggest that a significant number of such works exist in Latvia and Lithuania. Many of the artists who created these works received professional art education, and therefore, these pieces can be considered products of professional artistic activity rather than examples of naïve art.

The relevance of the study is maintained by the fact that Soviet era altar paintings often remain in altars for a relatively short period; following the restoration of independence, these works are gradually being replaced, raising concerns that, without timely research and documentation, it will no longer be possible to reconstruct these sacred interiors.

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<sup>2</sup> Balode (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Petrauska (2024).

In this article, altarpieces refer to paintings located in the altars of Catholic and Lutheran churches and chapels in Latvia. It also includes paintings originally intended for an altar that are no longer there for various reasons, such as being replaced by another painting.

The study employed contextual and comparative analysis, as well as formal and iconographic analysis of artworks, along with research of historical documents relevant to the subject.

To provide contextual background, this article also includes references to the situation of sacred art in Lithuania, which has been studied in more depth in the author's master's thesis.<sup>4</sup> The article specifically analyzes the situation within the dominant Catholic and Lutheran denominations in Latvia. The Orthodox denomination is not examined due to its distinct status during the Soviet period and the challenges related to dating icons.

### The Soviet period and its impact on the Christian Church

The historical period following the Second World War was not conducive to the development of sacred art or to the overall situation of the church in the Baltic States. Under the ideological and materialistic perspective of the Soviet regime, the church and religion were considered delusions that needed to be eradicated from public consciousness and replaced with a worldview grounded in Marxist theory. By the mid-1940s, Soviet power had already accumulated over 20 years of experience in dismantling the religious system and fostering an atheist society, strategies that were actively applied in the newly occupied territories.<sup>5</sup> According to the Lithuanian historian Arūnas Streikus (1973–), the anti-religious policies in the Soviet Union were driven by two key factors. The first was the belief that religion was merely a tool for social control, leading to the conclusion that it would vanish once the capitalist system was abolished. The second factor was the desire to consolidate power in the newly occupied territories.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Lithuanian scholars' studies that used to adopt a comparative approach are listed and described in additional sources at the end of the bibliography and can be found in the author's master's thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Streikus (2002), 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

Before the occupation of Latvia, the dominant religious denomination was Evangelical Lutheranism, which accounted for 55% of the population according to the 1935 census, while Roman Catholics made up 24%.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviet regime considered the Roman Catholic Church to be the most dangerous because of its connections with the Vatican, which was outside the territory of the USSR.<sup>8</sup> In the first soviet years, this perception was also influenced by the restoration of the Russian Orthodox Church's position, which regarded the Catholic Church as a rival.<sup>9</sup>

On July 13, 1949, Pope Pius XII issued a decree condemning Catholic collaboration with communists. This document triggered hysteria in Soviet propaganda against the Vatican and revived the idea among the authorities of establishing an autonomous national Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> Although these plans in both Latvia<sup>11</sup> and Lithuania ultimately failed, the local Catholic Church was isolated from the universal Church, and communication with the Vatican was tightly controlled.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet policy during the "first occupation" in 1940 and 1941 was relatively moderate. While churches were restricted to devotional activities, the hierarchies continued to operate. However, the policy became stricter during the "second occupation".<sup>13</sup> From 1945 to 1990, the Soviet authorities employed various methods in their efforts against the Catholic Church in Latvia and Lithuania. These methods were influenced by changes in the regime's political leadership, the intensity of believers' resistance in certain republics, and ongoing foreign policy developments. The authorities used both open violence and propaganda, as well as economic restrictions and administrative penalties, to suppress religious activities.

The first significant resistance to the anti-religious policy in Latvia emerged only in the 1980s, associated with the activities of Lutheran

<sup>7</sup> Salnītis (1936), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Viksne (2017), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Kent (2002), 67.

<sup>10</sup> Streikus (2002), 86–87.

<sup>11</sup> Viksne (2017), 58.

<sup>12</sup> Streikus (2002), 88.

<sup>13</sup> Kent (2002), 72.

pastors, which led to the founding of the *Rebirth and Renewal* movement in 1987.<sup>14</sup> The number of Lutherans had dramatically decreased by 97%, from 1,075,641 in 1935 to just 33,983 in 1982.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the number of pastors fell from 224 in 1937 to 72 in 1980. The Catholic population also saw a significant decline, with a 56% drop from 476,963 in 1935<sup>16</sup> to 208,466 in 1982. The number of priests declined from 223 in 1940 to 111 in 1982.<sup>17</sup>

### The Soviet period and its impact on the sacred art

During the Soviet era, sacred art was not censored because it was undesirable *per se*, without the need to examine its form or content. Consequently, it did not have to meet the same standards that applied to other art forms. Unlike figurative and narrative painting, which had to adhere to the “socialist realism program,” sacred art was free from such requirements.<sup>18</sup>

Artists’ unions played a vital role in organizing and supporting artistic life, but they also began to serve as institutions for supervising and re-educating artists. Those who resisted control were either expelled from the Union or not admitted, while those who conformed to the regime’s demands were offered career opportunities. In fact, there were virtually no professional artists outside of this organization. One of the primary methods used to guide artists toward the *correct* stylistic and ideological direction was the state commission system. “Through the Art Fund, artists could secure local and union-wide contracts, receive offers for state purchases, obtain creative grants, and get travel assignments. This system encouraged artists to join the union.”<sup>19</sup>

Artists were contracted in advance to create specific works for major exhibitions, with the state, represented by the Ministry of Culture, committing to purchase them. Commissions were awarded based on initial sketches and were overseen by exhibition committees. These committees typically included members from both the Ministry and the Artists’ Union,

<sup>14</sup> Rozentāls (2023).

<sup>15</sup> Zālīte (2000), 372.

<sup>16</sup> Salnītis (1936), 71.

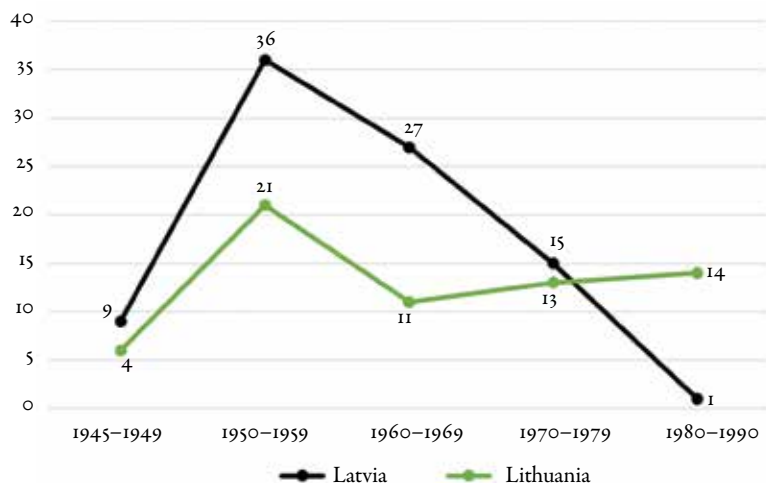
<sup>17</sup> Čakuls (2000), 378.

<sup>18</sup> *Latvijas mākslas vēsture* (2003), 385.

<sup>19</sup> *Latvijas mākslas vēsture* (2003), 350.

who had the authority to inspect progress in studios or during collaborative reviews to approve the final works.<sup>20</sup>

To enforce socialist realism, artists faced significant psychological pressure, including criticism during Union meetings, restricted access to art supplies, and mandatory attendance at Marxist “evening universities.” This environment fostered self-censorship among creators.<sup>21</sup> Non-members were legally barred from purchasing paints or canvases or obtaining studio space<sup>22</sup>, which severely limited those who wanted to create church art during the USSR’s anti-religious campaign when sanctions were imposed even for creating minor symbolic Christian references or postcards.<sup>23</sup>



1. Number of Altarpieces in Latvia and Lithuania from 1945 to 1990, based on the author’s calculations.<sup>24</sup>

The analysis of the dynamics of altarpiece numbers (Fig. 1) indicates that Latvia experienced a steady decline in the creation of new altarpieces

<sup>20</sup> Pleikienė (2007), 106.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> Pētersone (2018).

<sup>23</sup> Jakas (2014), 16–17.

<sup>24</sup> A list of artists, titles of artworks, and images can be found in the author’s bachelor’s and master’s theses; links are provided in the bibliography.

starting in the 1960s. By the 1980s, it became difficult to identify any trends due to a lack of reliable examples. In contrast, Lithuania saw a decline in the number of new altarpieces during the 1960s, but the numbers remained stable through the 1990s.

Churches required new paintings to repair the damage caused to their interiors during the war and in subsequent years by regime activists. Local church priests sometimes approached artists based on certain indications that they might agree to take on the task.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, some clergy members could also create altarpieces themselves. In the Catholic Church, certain artists were centrally commissioned with the knowledge and approval of bishops Pēteris Strods (1892–1960) and Jānis Cakuls (1926–2022), to fulfill larger orders for multiple churches.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1940s, artists faced pivotal choices between official careers and resistance to the artistic directives imposed by the regime. The years 1945 to 1949 were a transitional period during which the Soviet regime strengthened its control over church activities and completed the registration of congregations. This era was characterized by post-war Stalinism and political repression, including the deportation of priests. As a result, few artworks were created during this time, as congregations prioritized essential survival needs over commissioning new altar paintings. Overall, only 15 works from this decade have been identified—nine in Latvian and six in Lithuanian churches. In Latvia, artworks were created for five different churches.

In the 1950s, the number of altarpieces increased compared to the previous period, with at least 57 altarpieces painted—36 in Latvia and 21 in Lithuania. An examination of the works from this period reveals greater iconographic diversity, as the paintings were designed not only for high altars but also for other altars. While most of the works were copies of famous paintings, some of them were of less commonly depicted saints, and there are instances of more unusual interpretations of traditional themes. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, it was particularly popular to copy the works of renowned old masters such

<sup>25</sup> Balode (2020), 40.

<sup>26</sup> Painting Exhibition at Krustpils Castle, 2015, LMA IC, b. P87 l. Marianna Peilāne.

as Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682), Carlo Dolci (1616–1686), and Guido Reni (1575–1642) in the sacred painting of Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>27</sup> This trend continued into the second half of the twentieth century.

In the Baltic region, copies of sacred art were prevalent because of practical and theological reasons. Poor congregations preferred affordable reproductions instead of expensive originals, and conformity with liturgical traditions took precedence over artistic originality. Frequently copied works included famous paintings well known for their quality and easily recognizable to the educated public. These reproductions often drew inspiration from prints rather than the original artworks, leading to a blend of various sources that blurred the distinction between copy and creation. Since copying styles allowed for variation, many works turned into reinterpretations rather than strict replicas.<sup>28</sup>

The increase in art thefts began in the 1960s, particularly among the youth groups who vandalized and looted churches. These actions were tacitly encouraged by the government: no investigations were initiated, and when they were, the penalties were insignificant.<sup>29</sup> In many cases, churches were not only robbed but also vandalized, with paintings and sculptures damaged and church inventories destroyed. It cannot be ruled out that, in some instances, the vandalism was organized by the Soviet authorities.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the number of thefts continued to rise.<sup>31</sup> In response to the thefts, at least 38 new altarpieces were painted during this period—27 in Latvia and 11 in Lithuania.

In the 1960s, Christian art showed a trend toward sentimentality, often characterized by rosy pastel tones. This trend is exemplified by Jadviga Žilvinska's (1918–2010) paintings, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Fig. 2) and *Our Lady of Fatima* (Fig. 3), created for St. Mary Magdalene Church in Riga. This approach was aimed at resonating with a wider audience within the congregation.

<sup>27</sup> Smilingytė-Žeimienė (2009), 182–184.

<sup>28</sup> Lumberg-Paramonova (2023), 3–4.

<sup>29</sup> Cakuls (2001), 218.

<sup>30</sup> Streikus (2002), 294.

<sup>31</sup> Cakuls (2001), 380.



2. Jadviga Žilvinska. *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*. 1960s.

Canvas, oil. St. Mary Magdalene Church, Riga. Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2025



3. Jadviga Žilvinska. *Our Lady of Fatima*.

Canvas, oil. St Mary Magdalene Church, Riga. Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2025

In the 1970s, the production of altarpieces in Latvia continued to decline. Artists increasingly followed the holy card iconography or copied the works of old masters. From the 1980s, only one altarpiece was clearly identified—*Sacred Heart* by Marianna Peilāne (1915–1996)—which makes it challenging to assess broader trends during this period.

### The painters

Pāvils Glaudāns (1915–1968) was a prominent Latvian landscape painter, born in Krāslava to a family of hairdressers.<sup>32</sup> He studied under Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945), the founder of the Latvian Academy of Arts. During the war, Glaudāns was drafted into the Latvian Legion and worked as a war correspondent.<sup>33</sup> He was a member of the Artists' Union from 1946 until 1950, when he was expelled for “immoral behavior and drinking”. Following this, he was imprisoned in Kemerovo from 1953 to 1956 for defacing a bust of Stalin by placing a hat made of excrement on its head.<sup>34</sup> He was reinstated to the Artists' Union membership list only in 1964.<sup>35</sup> After his expulsion, Glaudāns focused on creating altarpieces, producing at least 15 during the Soviet period.

The first known painting of him is *The Miraculous Virgin of Aglona* (1951, Fig. 4), which was originally placed on the altar of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Sigulda. It is currently held by Riga Metropolitan Roman Catholic Curia. In addition, four more altarpieces: *St. Albert the Great* (Fig. 5), *St. Teresa* (1956–1960), *Portiuncula* (Fig. 6), and *Holy Family* (both 1957–1960), are located in St. Albert's Catholic Church in Riga. Previously, smaller paintings titled *St. Stanislaus Receiving Communion during Illness* and *St. Aloysius* (1957–1960)<sup>36</sup> were displayed above the altars in this church. However, these were replaced with stained glass during the church renovation after 2020.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Belēvičs (2008).

<sup>33</sup> Kalnačs (2002), 59.

<sup>34</sup> Belēvičs (2008).

<sup>35</sup> The characterization of painter Pāvils Glaudāns by the Chairman of the Artists' Union Board, Edgars Iltners, 1968, The Information Center of the Art Academy of Latvia (further LMA IC), I. Pāvils Glaudāns.

<sup>36</sup> Cakuls (1997), 710.

<sup>37</sup> *Rīgas Sv. Alberta Romas katoļu draudze* (2022).



4. Pāvils Gludāns. *The Miraculous Virgin of Aglona*. 1951. Canvas, oil.  
Rīga Metropolitan Roman Catholic Curia. Photograph of Aivars Līcis, 2025



5. Pāvils Gludāns. *St. Albert the Great*. 1956–1960. Canvas, oil. St. Albert's Church, Riga.  
Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2025

Glaudāns was an artist known for his ability to create complex figurative compositions and high-quality copies of works by renowned sacred artists, characteristic of the Baltic sacral art space. His paintings, *Portiuncula* and *Holy Family* (Figs. 6 and 7), are inspired by the works of Murillo. As a student of Purvītis, Glaudāns skillfully captured subtle emotional nuances in both his portrayals of people and the background landscapes.

When viewing his altarpieces, it is clear why Glaudāns was recognized as a leading portrait artist of his time.<sup>38</sup> For example, the expressive and vivid portrayal of Saint Albert the Great highlights the theological passion of the Dominican monk and thinker. Additionally, the meticulously painted details of the garments demonstrate a refined understanding of color.

Another notable Latvian painter is Silva (Silvija) Linarte (1939–2018), renowned for her contemplative, nature-infused compositions. Her works are represented in both public and private collections in Latvia and abroad, including the United States, Sweden, Canada, and Germany.<sup>39</sup> Born into educators family in Likсна Parish, Linarte and her family were deported to Siberia in 1941. Despite the harsh conditions, she managed to attend school. In 1957, under legislation that allowed orphaned underage children to return to Latvia, she was permitted to repatriate. In Latvia, Linarte graduated from the Riga Secondary School of Applied Arts in 1961 and earned teaching and painting qualifications at the Latvian State Academy of Art in 1977.<sup>40</sup> Her aunt, Tekla Dubrovska, who had emigrated to Canada with the help of the Red Cross, had learned of Linarte's return to Latvia and enrollment in school. Concerned for her niece's well-being, Dubrovska contacted a priest, Antons Geriņš (1916–1990) of Nīcgale, whom she knew, asking him to reach out to Linarte and offer support.<sup>41</sup>

Geriņš was ordained in 1945 and collaborated with the KGB after 1949. He provided information on partisan Augusts Simsons that led to the arrest of several monks and a housekeeper at the Skaistkalne monastery.<sup>42</sup> At Dubrovska's request, Geriņš invited Linarte to visit during the holidays.

<sup>38</sup> *Galerija Romas dārzis* (2019).

<sup>39</sup> *Zēgnere* (2024).

<sup>40</sup> *Melāne* (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Conversation with Silva Linarte's daughter Dace, 30 April 2020.

<sup>42</sup> *Dreimane* (2002), 244.



6. Pāvils Gludāns. *Portiuncula*. 1957–1960. Canvas, oil. St. Albert's Church, Riga.  
Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2025

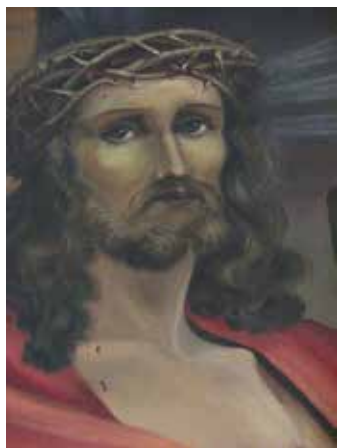


7. Pāvils Glaudāns. *Holy Family*. 1963–1968. Canvas, oil. St. Ludwig's Church, Krāslava. Photograph of Krāslava Museum, 2019



8. Silva Linarte. *Ecce Homo*. 1958–1959. Canvas, oil. Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Niçgale. Photograph of Dace Stirāne, 2025

Around 1958–1959, she painted the altarpiece titled *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 8) for the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Nīcgale, inscribed in Latgalian with the words “*Raug cylvaks!*” (“Behold the man!”). The



9. Silva Linarte. *Ecce Homo* (fragment). 1958–1959. Canvas, oil. Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Nīcgale. Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2020

circumstances surrounding the creation of the painting remain unclear. Linarte later expressed her surprise at the invitation, as she had been unaware of the Church in Siberia; however, she did not retain any negative memories of the priest.<sup>43</sup>

In the altarpiece, Christ is depicted not only as a figure of suffering but also as emaciated by hunger, featuring sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, and sharply protruding collarbones (Fig. 9). This depiction reflects a human form the young artist was intimately familiar with due to her own experiences in the harsh conditions of Siberia, which equipped her to render it skillfully.

One intriguing aspect of the composition is the artist’s approach to drapery, which resembles the leaves of a plant rather than traditional fabric. This characteristic is also reflected in the depiction of the human figure. The red cloak worn by Christ, painted in muted grey-brown tones, serves as the main visual

focus. Linarte’s distinctive style is recognizable when comparing her still lifes and floral paintings, in which she employs similar formal strategies and expressive techniques.

Jēkabs Bīne (1895–1955) was a Latvian artist who worked in both the monumental and applied arts. He is best known for his works in the national romanticism style. Bīne explored themes of archaeology, ethnography, and folklore, creating not only paintings but also designs and sketches for various objects, including vessels, textiles, jewelry, and furniture.

Bīne was born in Riga into a well-to-do family. He studied at Riga City Art School from 1913 until World War I necessitated its evacuation in 1915. After relocating to Kharkiv, he entered the Kharkiv Art School

<sup>43</sup> Melāne (2018).

in 1916. However, the Revolution and subsequent civil war disrupted his studies. In 1920, he returned to Riga and enrolled in the newly founded Latvian Academy of Art<sup>44</sup>, graduating in 1926 with his diploma work titled *The Resurrection*.<sup>45</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the neopagan revival movement known as *Dievturība* emerged in independent Latvia. This movement was led by antiquities researcher Ernests Brašņiņš (1892–1942), who officially registered the congregation in 1927.<sup>46</sup> Several artists joined the movement, including Bīne, who was Brašņiņš's deputy.<sup>47</sup> *Dievturība* did not aim to reform Christianity; instead, it promoted a new religion<sup>48</sup> rooted in folklore and national spiritual identity.<sup>49</sup>

The elements of *Dievturība* inspired the national romanticism evident in one of Bīne's early altarpieces, *Christ on the Cross* (1924), in the Cesvaine Lutheran church. In this painting, Saint John is depicted with blond hair and dressed in a traditional ancient Latvian shirt, while the Virgin Mary is wearing the traditional footwear known as *pastalas*.<sup>50</sup> However, Bīne's later altarpieces do not showcase the fusion of styles.

In his 1933 essay *Religion and Art*,<sup>51</sup> Bīne argued that Christianity obstructed Latvian identity and was incompatible with Latvian art. It may explain his later return to conventional Christian imagery in altarpieces.

Bīne's connection to *Dievturība* ideas placed him on a 1940 arrest list alongside Brašņiņš. However, he managed to avoid capture by hiding in Tukums.<sup>52</sup> According to his daughter, a sympathetic Soviet officer later intervened to prevent his arrest.<sup>53</sup> Although he was admitted to the Artists' Union in 1945<sup>54</sup>, the ideological climate remained hostile. As a result, his

<sup>44</sup> Gritāne (2020), 10–16.

<sup>45</sup> Lesničenoka (2025).

<sup>46</sup> Ozoliņš (2019).

<sup>47</sup> Berga (1994), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Mišāne (2005), 102–103.

<sup>49</sup> Peļše (2008), 163–164.

<sup>50</sup> Gritāne (2015), 59–60.

<sup>51</sup> Bīne (1933).

<sup>52</sup> Brancis (1995), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Liepiņš (2008).

<sup>54</sup> Vilsons (1995), 43.



10. Jēkabs Bīne. *Resurrection*. 1948.  
Canvas, oil. Martin Luther Cathedral,  
Daugavpils. Photograph of Agita Gritāne, 2019

works, like those of other disfavored artists, were placed in the museum's restricted collection.<sup>55</sup>

From 1946 to 1951, Bīne worked at the Kuldīga School of Applied Arts. However, he was dismissed for leading an ethnographic study group.<sup>56</sup> During this time, he painted the altarpiece titled *The Resurrection* (1948, Fig. 10) for the Berķenele Lutheran church, which is now housed in Martin Luther Cathedral in Daugavpils.<sup>57</sup> This work repeated the composition he had created for Vecsaule church in 1927.

*The Resurrection* is a multi-figure composition arranged in an elliptical layout. This work follows the tradition of realist painting, featuring a smoothly rendered surface with subtly visible brushstrokes. The expressiveness of the figures is enhanced by their gestures. While the figures themselves are illuminated, the surrounding space is shrouded in semi-darkness. In this composition,

the primary sources of light are the figures of Christ and the angel.

The artist Peilāne holds the record for the most church paintings created during the Soviet era, with approximately 40 works in total. Of these, 30 paintings with identifiable subjects can be found in 20 Catholic churches throughout Latvia. The subjects of seven additional works

<sup>55</sup> Konstants (2000), 159.

<sup>56</sup> Brancis (1995), 8–9.

<sup>57</sup> Rūta Kaminska's report on the Berķenele Lutheran church, 25 September 2008. National Cultural Heritage Board archive (NKMP), the Berķenele Lutheran church, f. 9194 b. 6282. l. 2.



11. Marianna Peilāne. *Pietà*. 1957–1961. Canvas, oil. Our Lady of Sorrows Church, Šķilbēni. National Cultural Heritage Board photo, 2019

remain unknown, and three paintings were created for churches outside Latvia: two in St. Petersburg and one in Khmelnytskyi, Ukraine.<sup>58</sup>

Peilāne was born in Vilkukrogs, Mārciena Parish, into a shoemaker's family. She trained as a teacher at the State Daugavpils Teacher Training Institute from 1935 to 1937. Peilāne later worked at Raipole primary school, where she met the artist Vladislavs Šveide (1915–1984), who eventually became her partner.<sup>59</sup> Drawn to art, she enrolled at the Latvian Academy of Art in 1940 but graduated only after the war, in 1950, with a diploma for her work titled *Planting a Fruit Orchard in a Kolkhoz*.<sup>60</sup> She was not accepted into the Artists' Union of Latvia until 1968.<sup>61</sup>

Starting in the mid-1950s, Peilāne lived in Saulkrasti with her husband, Šveide. His Catholic connections introduced her to Bishops Strods and Cakuls. Working in churches required

careful consideration, but allowed her to travel in Latgale, where she created and restored many works of art.<sup>62</sup> She believed that painting was about “putting emotion into color,” with the face and gaze of Christ being the most important elements.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Peilāns (1998), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Gurtiņa (2018).

<sup>60</sup> Valnere R., To Be Welcome in One's Own Region, Stars, 14 April 1984, LMA IC, b. P87 l. Marianna Peilāne.

<sup>61</sup> Gurtiņa (2018).

<sup>62</sup> Painting Exhibition at Krustpils Castle, 2015, LMA IC, b. P87 l. Marianna Peilāne.

<sup>63</sup> Gurtiņa (2018).



12. Marianna Peilāne. *Pietà*. Second half of the twentieth century. Canvas, oil. Our Lady of Sorrows Church, Atašiene. Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2019

Aside from her church commissions, Peilāne mainly focused on painting flowers and landscapes.<sup>64</sup> Her figurative paintings are characterized by a unique approach to drapery. Instead of falling in deep, free folds with pronounced shadows, the drapery often consists of simple drawn lines that give the impression of pleated fabric. This stylistic feature is particularly evident in her representations of the Virgin Mary's wimple, as seen in the *Pietà* located in both the Atašiene and Šķilbēni Catholic churches (Figs. 11 and 12).

Her forms are generally rendered in a solid, structured manner. The painting technique varies between impasto and smooth surfaces, often placing a strong emphasis on drawing. The color palette is light, featuring carefully balanced accents. Landscape elements, which were a specialty of Peilāne, frequently appear in the background.

Indulis Ojārs Ranka (1934–2017), primarily recognized as a sculptor, graduated from the Painting Department of the Latvian Academy of Art in 1959 with the diploma work *Excavator Operators*<sup>65</sup> and joined the Artists' Union of Latvia in 1962.<sup>66</sup>

Facing the ideological demands of the Soviet regime, Ranka felt he could not continue painting, calling it “a mockery.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, he

<sup>64</sup> Painting Exhibition at Krustpils Castle, 2015, LMA IC, b. P87 l. Marianna Peilāne.

<sup>65</sup> Diploma Works by Art Academy Graduates, LMA IC, l. Indulis Ranka.

<sup>66</sup> *Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmija* (2007).

<sup>67</sup> Conversation with Sculptor Indulis Ranka and His Family, Latvijas Luterānis, 16 May 1997, LMA IC, l. Indulis Ranka.



13. Ojārs Indulis Ranka. *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*. 1953. Canvas, oil. Bērze Lutheran church. Photograph of Krista Petrauska, 2019

shifted his focus to sculpture starting in 1966.<sup>68</sup> However, early in his career, he painted two altarpieces.

The altarpiece *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (1953, Fig. 13), created for the Bērze Lutheran church, is based on a postcard image. It was commissioned while the artist was in Kandava for a plein air session.<sup>69</sup> The church, which was heavily damaged during World War II, was restored between 1949 and 1958 under the leadership of pastor Alfons Vecmanis (1906–1999), who lived and served in Kandava<sup>70</sup> and likely facilitated the commission.

The other altarpiece, *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*, also known as *Jesus Walking on Water* (1958, Fig. 14),<sup>71</sup> was painted for the Vecgulbene Lutheran church. During the war, the church tower was blown up, and the falling debris damaged the original altarpiece.<sup>72</sup>

The artist reflected in his memories, writing:

Unfortunately, it happened so long ago, and many events have taken place since then, so I no longer remember anything clearly. However, I do recall that while I was staying at the Artists' House on the Daugava embankment, two men approached me one day and asked me to paint a large altarpiece based on a small reproduction. I agreed immediately for several reasons: First, I had been baptized in that church and had visited it many times as a child—I retained very beautiful, dreamlike memories of it (dreamlike in the sense of being vague

<sup>68</sup> *Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmija* (2007).

<sup>69</sup> Conversation with a parish chairman Jānis Baucis, Summer 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Bērzes parish archive (without arrangement or numbering).

<sup>71</sup> Vecgulbenes parish archive (without arrangement or numbering).

<sup>72</sup> *Gulbenes draudze*.



14. Ojārs Indulis Ranka. *Christ on the Sea of Galilee/ Christ Walking on Water*. 1958. Canvas, oil. Vecgulgbene Lutheran church. Photograph of Iveta Zvirgzdiņa, 2025

yet extraordinarily vivid). Second, I have always stood in solidarity with the humiliated, the oppressed, the mocked, and the despised. Third, I harbored a deep resentment toward the existing regime, and this was a way for me to express my protest. Fourth, it allowed me to apply the realist painting skills I had just acquired. Lastly, the payment offered for the painting was excellent for a young artist.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Ranka (1990).

The motivations outlined by Ranka can be seen as reflective of those shared by many other artists who, during this period, engaged in the painting of altarpieces.

The altarpiece in Bērze church reveals the student's struggle with complexity. It features postcard-like simplifications, such as a flat, single-plane composition, a dark-blue sky adorned with white stars, a large tear at the corner of Jesus' eye, and clearly separated local colors. In contrast, the altarpiece in Vecgulbene church demonstrates a more refined tonal approach, with the landscape shaping the overall emotional atmosphere.

### Conclusions

From 1945 to 1990, sacred art was largely created in a realistic style, often repeating established motifs with little room for innovation. However, some altarpieces did reflect national sentiments. Altarpiece painting sometimes served as a subtle form of protest against the regime and its anti-religious propaganda. While artists might collaborate with the authorities in some respects, they might also resist in other ways. Exclusion from the Artists' Union, which effectively ended their official careers, often pushed these artists to work for churches more openly, driven by both conviction and the need for livelihood. Although the Soviet era was not marked by significant artistic achievements, sacred art remains a noteworthy cultural and historical phenomenon and an important part of the Christian art tradition.

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<sup>74</sup> This section lists the main Lithuanian sources that were not cited in the article but were used to adopt a comparative approach and draw conclusions in the author's master's thesis. A link to the thesis is provided in the bibliography, which includes a complete list of sources, artists' names, artworks, and photos of artworks. The research also involved visits to particular churches and direct communication with local researchers, including Birutė Kabašinskienė from the Church Heritage Museum in Vilnius, Darius Žukauskas from the Church Art Museum of Kaunas Archdiocese, Dalia Vasiliūnienė from the Department of Sacral Art Heritage of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, and Lijana Birškytė-Klimienė from the Department of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture.

Krista Petrauska

## Krikščioniškų altorinių paveikslų tapytojai Sovietų Latvijoje (1945–1990)

### *Santrauka*

Sovietmečiu Latvijoje ir Lietuvoje sakralinis menas vystėsi itin priešiškomis sąlygomis, nes valdžia vykdė antireliginę politiką ir siekė išstumti tikėjimą iš viešojo gyvenimo. Nors ilgą laiką manyta, kad tuo laikotarpiu sukurta nedaug reikšmingų darbų, tyrimai rodo, kad altorinių paveikslų buvo nutapyta gana daug, o daugumą jų sukūrė menininkai profesionalai. Šie kūriniai yra istoriškai svarbūs, tačiau, iki atkuriant nepriklausomybę, daugelis jų jau buvo pakeisti ar pašalinti, todėl būtina kuo skubiau juos dokumentuoti.

Kad užgniaužtų religines bendruomenes, sovietų valdžia naudojo smurtą, propagandą ir administracinius apribojimus, ypač persekiojo Katalikų bažnyčią, baimindamasi šios institucijos ryšių su Vatikanu, nors Latvijoje gausiausiai buvo liuteronų (antireliginei politikai aktyviau pasipriešinta tik devintajame dešimtmetyje). Nors tikinčiųjų ir dvasininkų mažėjo, bažnyčioms vis tiek reikėjo naujų altorinių paveikslų, kad būtų pakeisti karo ar vandalizmo metu sunaikinti interjerai. Menininkus slapta kvietė kunigai ir vyskupai, o kartais altorinius kūrinius tapydavo patys dvasininkai.

Altorinių paveikslų raida turėjo aiškias tendencijas. 1940-aisiais jų buvo nutapoma nedaug dėl karo ir represijų. Penktajame dešimtmetyje tokių paveikslų pagausėjo, atsirado daugiau ikonografinės įvairovės, nors dauguma jų buvo senųjų meistrų kopijos. Kopijuojama buvo visą laikotarpį, nes bendruomenės norėjo, kad paveikslai būtų atpažįstami ir atitiktų liturgiją. Šeštajame ir septintajame dešimtmėčiais krikščioniškame mene ėmė rasti sentimentalių, pastelinių tonų, bet užsakymų Latvijoje mažėjo ir aštuntajame dešimtmetyje jų beveik nebeliko. Lietuvoje altorinių paveikslų kūryba buvo stabilesnė.

Nuo šeštojo dešimtmėčio vis daugėjo bažnyčių plėšimų ir vandalizmo aktų, kuriuos valdžia tyliai toleravo. Tačiau vis tiek keli menininkai paliko ryškų pėdsaką. Pāvils Glaudāns (1915–1968) nutapė bent 15 altorinių paveikslų, dažnai remdamasis Murillo kūrinių. Silva Linarte (1939–2018), patyrusi Sibiro tremtį, sukūrė paveikslą „Ecce Homo“ Nicgalei, perteikdama Kristaus kančią per asmenines badmečio patirtis. Jēkabs Bīne (1895–1955), susijęs su latvių neopagonišku atgimimu „Dievturība“, sukūrė „Prisikėlimą“ ir kitų darbų, kuriuose atsispindi tautinio romantizmo bruožai. Marianna Peilāne (1915–1996) buvo produktyviausia – ji sukūrė apie 40 paveikslų įvairioms Latvijos bažnyčioms. Skulptorius Indulis Ranka (1934–2017) XX a. šeštuoju dešimtmėčiu nutapė du altorinius paveikslus, juos suvokdamas ir kaip asmeninį veiksma, ir kaip vidinę protesto formą.

Stilistiniu požiūriu sovietmečio sakralinis menas rėmėsi realizmu, tradicine ikonografija ir pakartotiniais motyvais. Nors nepasižymėjo meninėmis inovacijomis, šie kūriniai turi didelę kultūrinę ir istorinę reikšmę. Kai kuriems menininkams altorinių paveikslų tapyba buvo slapta protesto forma – jie derino prisitaikymą prie režimo vienoje srityje su tarnyste Bažnyčiai kitoje. Pašalinimas iš oficialių struktūrų dažnai skatindavo dar labiau atsigręžti į bažnytinius užsakymus, taip užtikrinant religinės vizualinės kultūros tęstinumą.

Galiausiai sovietmečio altoriniai paveiksai turi būti laikomi platesnės krikščioniškojo meno tradicijos dalimi Baltijos šalyse. Be liturginės funkcijos, jie liudija tikinčiųjų bendruomenių ištvėrmę ir pastangas išlaikyti sakralinę dailę, nors sistema tam ir priešinosi.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: altoriniai paveiksai, Sovietų Latvija, krikščioniškasis menas, antireliginė politika, tapyba