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# Creating the Discipline: Facts, Stories and Sources of Latvian Art History

STELLA PELŠE

The article reflects on the main personalities, phases and achievements (such as major monographs and surveys) of art-historical research in Latvia, outlining the dominant ideas and institutional developments. While interest in art-related issues already emerged in Baltic German circles in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the late 1910s and early 1920s that the story of national art emerged as an important lacuna to be filled in the cultural consciousness of the newly founded nation-state. The construction of an uninterrupted line of artistic development from prehistoric times to the present came to the fore, inscribing the local heritage in the wider processes of the development of art. The Soviet period replaced the story of national art with the story of realist art produced on the territory of Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic; still the gradual entropy of imposed sociological method has largely encouraged a turn towards the autonomous artwork, examining it in a spectrum of aspects, such as regional routes of migration and influences, and genealogies of iconographic and stylistic traits. A loose empirical pluralistic and even eclectic approach seems to best describe the current situation in Latvian art history.

It could be argued that the discipline of art history has been in a state of uncertainty and flux since its very beginning. The Eastern European context, particularly that of the Baltic states, further complicates the present situation. In the twentieth century there has appeared a cascade of critical rewritings in that region, largely related to political upheavals and, to paraphrase Ernst Gombrich, stories of art abound. The story of national art, which aimed to promote and assert a nation's cultural potential, was overwritten by the Soviet story of realist art, which culminated in socialist realism and was found to be completely inadequate following the political collapse of that regime. At the same time, it has proved impossible in most cases to return directly to pre-war narratives. At best, such narratives may serve as points of departure for further reassessment and development. Moreover, the humanities in the West have further complicated the choice of means appropriate for these purposes by contesting that assumptions about 'art', 'quality', 'modernism', 'canon' etc. may be provisional,

ideological, constructed and, at worst, in the service of class-based interests, hegemonomies and other profoundly problematic aspects of Western culture. Perhaps the very idea of art history and the possibility of any distinction between art and non-art belong to a bygone era and now await replacement by something more appropriate? Leaving that question aside for the moment, this article aims to look into the complex patterns of art-historical thought that have developed in Latvia.

## Prologue: from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century

In most other European countries the universities and museums had already begun to take a role in forming art history as part of national identity during the nineteenth century, whereas in Latvia the process began much later. In Latvia, it was not until the 1920s that the first art historians with an academic education (obtained in either Russia or Western Europe) began to play a significant role in building a national culture to rival that of the older European nations. However, the activities of first art historians and their attempts to write the histories of art and architecture in Latvian territory precede the foundation of the independent nation-state and the emergence of the idea of national art. As art historian Elita Grosmane has pointed out in her genealogical overview,<sup>1</sup> Enlightenment ideas and related interest in aesthetics, art and antiquity entered the syllabus of the Riga cathedral school, the Royal (Swedish) Lyceum and the *Academia Petrina* in Jelgava already during the eighteenth century. The Kurzeme Society for Literature and Art (*Kurländische Gesellschaft für Literatur und Kunst*), founded in 1816, demonstrates the fascination with the local history of art and architecture. From 1819 to 1936 the society issued collected articles on a regular basis, its most prolific author on fine arts being artist and art historian Julius Döring (1818–1898). Other, related, interests were also on the rise; for example, the Society for the History and Antiquity of the Baltic Provinces of Russia (*Gesellschaft für Geschichte und Altertumskunde der Ostseeprovinzen Russlands*) was established in 1834.<sup>2</sup> Baltic Germans such as Wilhelm Bockslaff (1858–1945), Karl von Löwis of Menar (1855–1930) and especially Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), provided a distinctive impetus to the local study of art.

Neumann is particularly noteworthy for his survey of fine arts and crafts of the Baltic provinces (Livonia, Kurland and the Governorate of Estonia, i.e. contemporary Latvia and Estonia) from the late twelfth to the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>3</sup> which was the first book about the history of Baltic art. Neumann received his doctorate in philology and art from the University of Leipzig in 1892, and he may have presented the book as his doctoral thesis (it remains unclear whether that is true). The influential,

1 E. Grosmane, Kur meklējami mākslas vēstures pirmsākumi Latvijā? [What was the genesis of art history in Latvia?]. – Latvijas mākslas un mākslas vēstures likteņgaitas [The destiny of Latvian art and art history]. Ed. R. Kaminska. Riga: Neputns, 2001, pp. 7–15.

2 Its yearbook *Sitzungsberichte der Gesellschaft für Geschichte und Altertumskunde der Ostseeprovinzen Russlands* was issued regularly since 1873.

3 W. Neumann, *Grundriss einer Geschichte der bildenden Künste und des Kunstgewerbes in Liv-, Est- und Kurland vom Ende des 12. bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Reval: Kluge, 1887.

though later contested, story of the belated introduction of historical styles to Latvia is derived from his work. From today's perspective, the book, which was greatly influenced by Franz Kugler's and Wilhelm Lübke's art-historical works, seems limited and narrow in its scope. Nonetheless, its comparative methodology and tendency towards objective, fact-based research laid the foundations for subsequent studies, for the preservation and registration of monuments, for museum work and for art education. For the first time the art of the Baltic region emerged as a subject worthy of attention and preservation. However, one still had to wait for the story of national art to unfold – the activities of Baltic Germans were largely confined to a circle of educated elite.<sup>4</sup>

Latvians began to be emancipated from the peasant class only during the second half of the nineteenth century; and the national-awakening movement, while extolling the values of education (something that had long been regarded as identical with Germanisation) and material wealth, did not hold either art or the study of art to be of major importance. Nonetheless, in around 1900, Latvian writers began to disseminate various elements of art history, theory and criticism, largely in an attempt to acquaint the local public with foreign art, to outline a future for Latvian art and to introduce art-historical ideas.

One of the first Latvians to receive a higher education in art history was Oļģerds Grosvalds (1884–1962), a descendant of a wealthy and reputable family (his brother Jāzevs was among the pioneers of Latvian modernist painting). Grosvalds studied art history at Tartu and Paris universities, and graduated from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Munich in 1912 with a dissertation on eighteenth-century copperplate engravings of Augsburg and Nuremberg. His writings mostly consisted of art criticism extolling a somewhat modernised national content while opposing the realist tradition and art's subservience to politics. He also published numerous informative surveys of art life in St. Petersburg and Munich in local periodicals, as well as a series of essays on classic European artists, which drew heavily from Heinrich Wölfflin, Jacob Burckhardt, Bernard Berenson and other prominent authors. Aside from his art criticism, Grosvalds pursued a career in diplomatic service, promoting Latvia politically.

Figures engaged in the wider sphere of cultural activities also demonstrated remarkable competence in the art-historical and theoretical sources of the time; for example, the writer and politician Miķelis Valters (1874–1968). Valters published two volumes of collected essays on various issues in art history, theory and criticism.<sup>5</sup> To counter the Marxist conception, his arguments were mainly derived from German aestheticians Max Dessoir and Theodor Lipps, but he also analysed works by Wilhelm Wundt, Karl Woermann and other authorities of the time. According to Valters, the history of art corresponds to the immanent evolution of artistic form, the diversity of which does not allow its reduction to social conditions. He saw art as an independent

4 Research by Baltic Germans is also available in a series of yearbooks: the eight issues of *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*, published from 1907 to 1926.

5 M. Valters, *Latviešu kritika mākslas un zinību jautājumos* [Latvian criticism in art and science issues]. Riga: Jaunu rakstu apgādiens, 1908; M. Valters, *Florence. Studija iz mākslas vēstures un mākslas teorijas* [In Florence: a study in art history and art theory]. Riga: Jaunu rakstu apgādiens, 1909.

sphere of spiritual culture that deserves to be studied for its own sake and not because of external reasons.

### **The story of national art – personalities and definitions of identity**

On closer inspection, the dominant narrative of the inter-war period, which concentrates on the output of ethnic Latvian artists, reveals nuances that are positioned differently with regard to the trends and movements of the period. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century the story of national art emerged as an important lacuna in the cultural consciousness of the newly founded nation-state and needed to be filled. Latvian art and its major protagonists were completely unknown abroad and, alongside art historians, artists sometimes attempted to correct the situation. Modernist painter, designer and theoretician Romans Suta's (1896–1944) short survey *60 Jahre lettischer Kunst* (fig. 1) was published in Leipzig in 1923. Beginning with the first Latvian-born artists who had been influenced by the nineteenth-century academic and realist traditions of Russian and German art schools, and concluding with his modernist contemporaries, Suta declared: 'The synthetic spirit of the new art is surely closer to the Latvian nation than frivolous, aestheticised impressionism, because Latvians have retained the prudence of their folksongs and the consequent desire for synthesis, inner vision, simple lucidity and clear formulations.'<sup>6</sup> This is an obvious example, typical of avant-garde impulses current in the early 1920s, of the latest geometric trends being deliberately allied with ethnographic heritage.

Published in 1925, art historian Jānis Dombrovskis's (1885–1953) *Latvian Art* was the next survey history of national art (fig. 2). Dombrovskis named the earliest phases of national painting after the most famous protagonists: 'Alksnis-Baumanis's epoch' was the period of academic realism and 'Rožentāls-Purvītis's epoch' was that of impressionism, symbolism and art nouveau, followed by the 'post-war epoch' of the most recent modernist trends, which the author categorised exclusively as 'leftist'. Although reminiscent of a mosaic, with its short biographies illustrated with just one or two reproductions, the whole story is an ethnocentric narrative concerning the rise of a Latvian national school of art, which, until its final emergence in the international art scene during the late nineteenth century, had previously been buried for centuries by oppressive foreign powers. The survey is divided into sections about painting, print-making, sculpture and applied arts, and also includes short passages on exhibitions, galleries and art associations. Dombrovskis's passionate search for local specificity is nonetheless vague, suggesting a kind of creative fusion of old, prehistoric traditions of handicrafts and the latest 'leftist' search for a contemporary artistic language. His most specific hypothesis – about a nationally distinct range of colours – has not stood the test of time: his theory was that the predominance of blue-rose-violet tones is a re-

6 R. Suta, *60 Jahre lettischer Kunst*. Leipzig: Pandora, 1923, p. 22.

flection of the largely forested landscape of Latvia,<sup>7</sup> but this quickly loses its persuasive power when one considers a broader spectrum of phenomena.

The nationally oriented art-historical narrative was further developed by some of the most significant local art historians of the 1920s and 1930s. Considering the emphasis on a single ethnicity, it is interesting that the most influential scholar of art in inter-war Latvia was Boriss Vipers (also known as Boris Vipper, 1888–1967; fig. 3), a Russian-born art historian who graduated from the History and Philology Department of Moscow University in 1911. Vipers perfected his skills in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, and in 1920 he defended his thesis on the problematic and development of still-life, largely influenced by Heinrich Wölfflin. From 1924 to 1941, Vipers worked in Riga as docent and professor of art history at the Latvian Academy of Art and the University of Latvia. He added his own version to the stories of Latvian national art with the survey *Latvian Art*, published in 1927. Whereas Dombrovskis's search for the specific formal traits of Latvian art did not prove particularly successful, Vipers set out from a different and more psychological perspective, stressing that while the Latvian artist is a cautious realist in his aims and methods he is simultaneously a dreamer in his emotional life.<sup>8</sup> Vipers's version of the 'Latvian artistic worldview' (clearly derived from the German *Weltanschauung*) as 'legendary realism' has had a long life, and it sometimes reappears even in the most recent art-historical texts. Still, his ideas and conclusions were not entirely original insights, being instead quite skilful adaptations of widespread ideas and attitudes to the local context. Among the broad range of his interests (Vipers wrote monographs on Giotto di Bondone<sup>9</sup> and Jāzeps Grosvalds<sup>10</sup>, and theoretical reflections on the evolution of art<sup>11</sup>), he is notable for his views on stylistic evolution as a sign of differing conceptions of space (he was especially attracted to the ideas of Austrian art historian Dagobert Frey) and on the theory of 'rusticalisation', proposed by Czech art historian Václav Vilém Štech at the Congress of Art History in Stockholm in 1933. It had been argued that a 'reduction of sophistication and acquisition of a certain coarseness in comparison to their sources in the artistic contexts of France and Italy'<sup>12</sup> was evident in Czech art. Similarly, Vipers's study of baroque art in Latvia (fig. 4) argued that traditions and elements of style had migrated from one nation to another and from one social group to another, creating a truly original, naive Latvian baroque with simplified and flattened forms, and reflected the specificity of the peasant-based national spirit. This view corresponded with a contemporary tendency to evaluate other traditions, especially the local ethnographic and largely self-contained traditions, as equal if not superior to the traditions of the Christian high

7 J. Dombrovskis, *Latvju māksla. Gleznniecības, grafikas, tēlniecības un lietišķās mākslas attīstības vēsturisks apskats* [Latvian art: brief overview of the historical development of painting, graphic art, sculpture and applied art]. Riga: Valters un Rapa, 1925, p. 163. The book was also translated into French: J. Dombrovskis, *L'Art letton: rapide aperçu historique sur l'évolution de la peinture, de la sculpture, des arts graphiques et des arts appliqués*. Riga: Valters un Rapa, 1926.

8 B. Vippers, *Latvju māksla. Iss pārskats* [Latvian art: short overview]. Riga: Leta, 1927, p. 23.

9 B. Vipers, *Džoto* [Giotto]. Riga: A. Gulbis, 1938.

10 B. Vipers, *Jāzeps Grosvalds*. Riga: Valters un Rapa, 1938.

11 B. Vipers, *Mākslas likteņi un vērtības* [Art's fortunes and values]. Riga: Grāmatu Zieds, 1940.

12 M. Bartlová, *The Search for Deep Roots: Medieval Art in the Historiographies of the Central European Nations. – The Construction and Deconstruction of National Histories in Slavic Eurasia*. Ed. T. Hayashi. Sapporo: Hokkaido University, Slavic Research Centre, 2003, p. 162.

culture that had been imported into the Latvian territories by German crusaders during the thirteenth century. Vipers writes: 'There is no reason to consider the monuments of art created in Latvia in the Baroque period only as a colonial reflection of German art. [...] ...perhaps a still more important part in this period belonged to the Dutch, Danish, Polish, and Swedish influences. All these influences transformed the local stylistic conception to a greater or lesser extent, imbibing not so much an urban and aristocratic as a rural spirit of culture.'<sup>13</sup> Apart from arguing that the sources of influence were more diverse than had previously been thought, this story was clearly opposed to Neumann's art-historical survey: it attempted to heal the rupture brought about by the 'dark ages' of national subjugation and traced an uninterrupted line of the development of national art from prehistoric times to its contemporary flourishing under the protection of the nation-state. However, recent research has shown Vipers's thesis of the Latvian baroque to be unsound in the light of certain concrete evidence: for example, while local classical works may exhibit a lower degree of technical skill and there is evident weakness in conveying the illusion of three dimensions, this is not a proof that such works were produced by artists or craftsmen of an ethnic Latvian or otherwise local origin. In 1941, Vipers moved to Russia where his last years of work included extensive, detailed studies of Italian and Dutch art, already strongly influenced by Soviet ideology.

Art historian and painter Jānis Siliņš (1896–1991) was the second most prominent figure of the inter-war period and after. Siliņš studied art history and theory at Moscow (1917) and Kazan (1919–1921) universities, in addition he studied painting at Ilya Mashkov's studio in Moscow and at Kazan Art School. In 1929 he graduated from the University of Latvia, Department of Philology and Philosophy, with a diploma work on Kant's theory of space and time. In 1943 he defended his doctoral thesis on August Schmarsow's art theory; then in 1944, like thousands of other Latvians fleeing from the approaching Red Army, Siliņš escaped to Germany and later to the USA. In the United States he wrote a historical survey of Latvian art in five volumes;<sup>14</sup> it is his most significant work – a vivid study that also raises many questions as he was unable to access much of the necessary material while in exile. The most evident influence on that study is the generational theory of German art historian Wilhelm Pinder: Siliņš structured his survey according to the idea that the 'common spiritual aims' of each generation result in changing forms of artistic vision. However, the succession of generations did not always coincide with the cycle of styles. For example, within a single generation Siliņš detected stylistic and psychological differences (traditionalists, bohemians, individualists-dreamers), and academic traditionalism was evident in the most recent generation. While attempting to describe the contributions of individual artists, Siliņš focused on the idea that 'the world of forms acquires its most essential and deepest sense in the expression of the national spirit';<sup>15</sup> and he repeatedly stressed that Latvian-ness equals 'symbolic realism' – a unique fusion of realism and

13 B. Vipers, *Baroque Art in Latvia*. Riga: Valters un Rapa, 1939, pp. 276–277.

14 J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla 1800–1914* [Art of Latvia, 1800–1914]. 2 vols. Stockholm: Daugava, 1979, 1980; J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla 1915–1940* [Art of Latvia, 1915–1940]. 3 vols. Stockholm: Daugava, 1988, 1990, 1993.

15 J. Siliņš, *Latviešu māksla 19. un 20. gadsimtenī* [Latvian art in the 19th and 20th century]. – *Vēstures atziņas un tēlojumi* [Conclusions and sketches on history]. Ed. F. Balodis. Riga: Izglītības Ministrija, 1937, p. 268.

symbolism, rationality and intuition, which also offered a guiding principle for artistic creation. As his numerous monographs on artists and contributions to various publications demonstrate, Siliņš constructed a story of national art that was not especially modernist (i.e. dismissive of all influence except the new), nor was it distinctly traditional or supportive of meticulous realism (the latter was propagated by many authors who adopted a conservative position during the 1930s). Instead, the story is a panorama of the coexisting and interacting tendencies of individual and collective psychology.

Kristaps Eliass (1886–1963; fig. 5) was probably the third most important figure of the period. However, his position was more like that of a dissident, and he was marginalised for political reasons. Eliass was involved in the revolutionary events of 1905 and he fled from tsarist persecution to Western Europe – first to Copenhagen and then to Brussels, where he studied art history at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the Free University of Brussels from 1909 to 1914. Following the onset of World War I, Eliass returned to Latvia, and from 1920 to 1934 he pursued a political career as a deputy of the parliament, defending social democracy and an atheistic worldview. The German art historians Richard Muther and Julius Meier-Graefe were particularly important in shaping his views on the evolution of art; and he also drew upon the ideas of Alois Riegl, Wilhelm Worringer and Hermann von Helmholtz as a counter to the established naturalist norms, balancing the role of self-expressive artist with the progressive spirit of an epoch culminating in Marxist class struggle. Eliass fell out of favour with the local authoritarian regime in the 1930s because of his leftist political orientation. During the post-war Soviet occupation he was dismissed from his position and put on trial, and in 1951 he was deported to Siberia. His books on modern French painting<sup>16</sup>, Dutch old masters<sup>17</sup> and Honoré Daumier<sup>18</sup> are among the few comprehensive studies of Western European art that were published in Latvian during the twentieth century. In contrast with his articles for periodicals, the educational and informative influence of his books has extended far beyond his contemporary audience.

Besides the activities of various individuals, during the inter-war period there was also a collective project to write a general history of art from prehistoric times to the present (fig. 6).<sup>19</sup> Because there had previously been no comprehensive information available in Latvian language, the project's primary role was educational. Art historian Visvaldis Peņģerots (1897–1938) supervised a group of art historians, architects and artists who were each to prepare separate articles concerning the periods, styles and phenomena in which they were most competent. The first volume dealt with architecture and sculpture, the second dealt with painting, graphic arts and caricature, and the third dealt with applied arts. The periodic division of the material was based on both chronological and stylistic principles, and the survey included Latvia and the

16 K. Eliass, Ģ. Eliass, *Franču jaunlaiku glezniecība: apcerējumi par tās attīstību un ievērojamākiem meistariem no Davida līdz mūsu dienām* [Contemporary French painting: essays on its development and most prominent masters from David until present day]. Rīga: Mākslas apgādniecība, 1940.

17 K. Eliass, *Holandiešu vecmeistari: apcerējumi par Holandes glezniecību tās ziedu laikā* [Dutch old masters: essays on the golden age of Dutch painting]. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1957.

18 K. Eliass, *Onorē Domjē un viņa laikmets* [Honoré Daumier and his time]. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1960.

19 *Mākslas vēsture* [Art history]. 3 vols. Ed. V. Purvītis. Rīga: Grāmatu draugs, 1934, 1935, 1936.





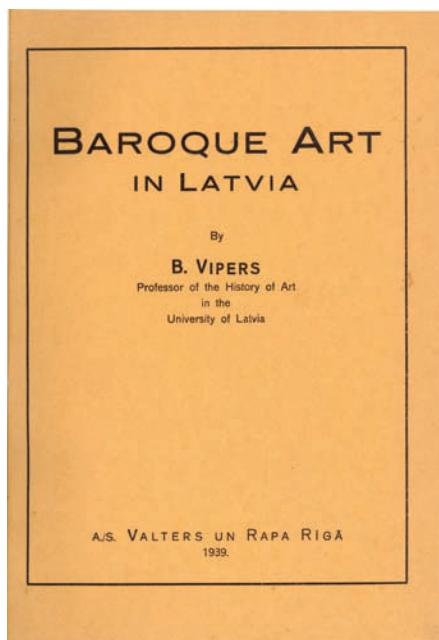
1. Bookcover of *60 Jahre lettischer Kunst* by Romans Suta. Leipzig, 1923.



2. Bookcover of *Latvian Art: Brief Overview of the Historical Development of Painting, Graphic Art, Sculpture and Applied Art* by Jānis Dombrovskis. Riga, 1925.



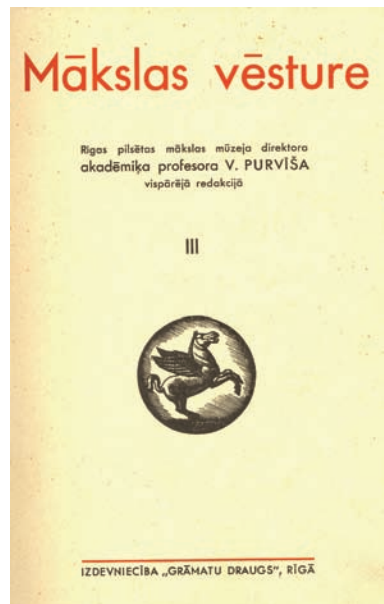
3. Art historian Boriss Vipers in the 1920s.  
Photo: Information Centre of the Latvian Academy of Art, Riga.



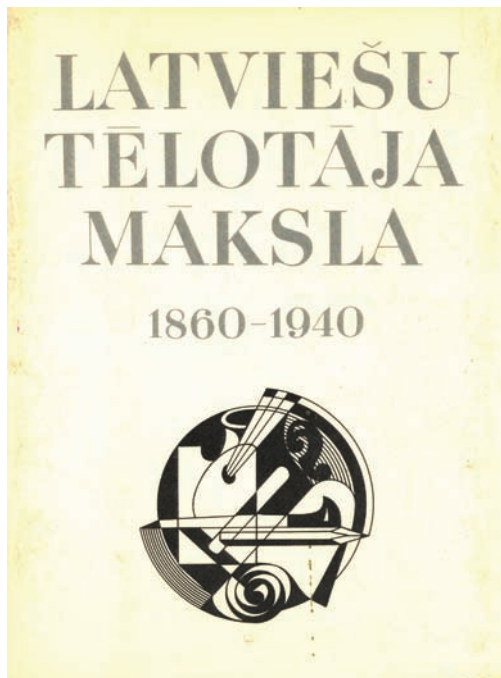
4. Title page of *Baroque Art in Latvia* by Boriss Vipers. Riga, 1939.



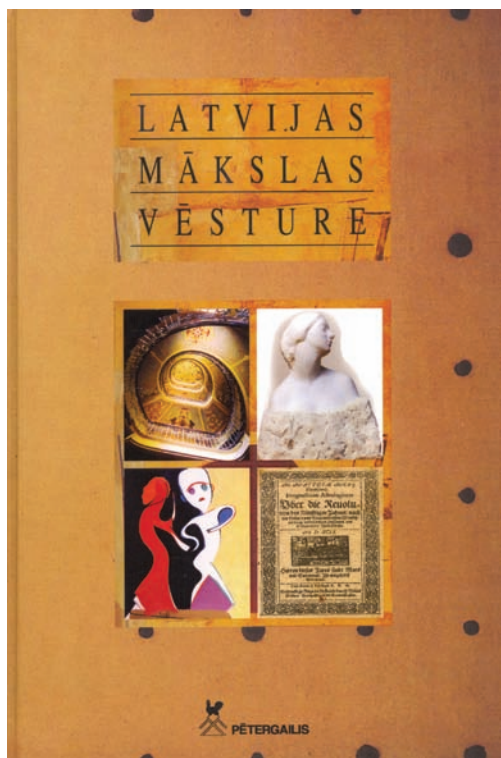
5. Art historian Kristaps Eliass in the 1940s.  
Photo: Literature, Theatre and Music Museum, Riga.



6. Title page of the third volume of *Art History*, edited by Vilhelms Purvītis. Riga, 1936.



7.  
Bookcover of *Latvian Fine Arts, 1860-1940*,  
edited by Skaidrite Cielava. Riga, 1986.



8.  
Bookcover of *History of Latvian Art*  
by Laila Bremša and others. Riga, 2003.

neighbouring Baltic states as equals alongside the 'older' European cultures. Works of art were described as a fusion of the individual artist's style with the style of the epoch and the style of the nation. The specificity of the medium was also emphasised: for example, the essence of painting was described in terms of its engagement with form, space, movement, composition and lighting.

### **The story of realist art and transformation in the Soviet era**

The Soviet era brought about a number of significant changes in the discipline of art history: it became more institutionalised (which, in a way, helped foster its further development), and it was subjected to ideological control (which, on the other hand, severely reduced the range of subjects and methods available to scholars). It marked the end of an era defined by the interests and initiatives of individual researchers. The first Soviet decade (the late 1940s–1950s) saw an urgent need to inculcate the 'correct' interpretation of the history of art, culminating in socialist realism. To that end, the role of the theoretical disciplines at the Latvian Academy of Art increased in importance. However, it was far from easy to implement the new policy because two of the most influential figures in local art history – Vipers and Siliņš – had already left Latvia. During the inter-war period training at the Academy had focused on artistic practice, and art history classes played only a secondary role in the curriculum, in providing artists with essential background knowledge; but now it became necessary to educate art historians according to the new ideological requirements. A similar motivation for developing an ideologically perfect science of art was also evident in the establishment of institutions of art-historical research, beginning with the Art Department (founded in 1968) of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian Academy of Sciences. The Art History Department at the Institute was established in 1975.

In accordance with Soviet ideology, the task of art-historical work was divided generally as follows: art theory was to focus on the mutating idea of socialist realism; art criticism was to compare actual artistic practice against that (perpetually fluctuating) standard; and art history was primarily to be concerned with filtering through the 'democratic', 'progressive', 'healthy' and 'realist' tendencies (a supposed influence of the contact with the 'great' Russian culture, already before the institution of state socialism), while dismissing all 'decadent', 'bourgeois', 'modernist' and 'formalist' trends (all largely derived from the West) as backward and harmful. In general, the story of national art was to be replaced by the story of realist art as created in the territory of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. Nonetheless, if one considers the whole span of the several decades then important changes and shifts in attitude are evident. Increasingly, the idea of socialist realism came to be interpreted not simply as a total dismissal of the past, but rather as the culmination of long-term historical development where each period, with its particular achievements, deserved its place in the course of that evolutionary process. One must admit that acceptance of the Soviet-era methodology certainly created a well-ordered and rational view of historical develop-

ment (irrespective of whether it was accepted as a strategy of adaptation and survival or as an author's sincere conviction regarding the course of events).

The most important contribution to local art history during the Soviet occupation was an extensive volume on Latvian art from 1860 to 1940 (fig. 7),<sup>20</sup> which was co-authored by a collective of the most prominent scholars – Dzidra Blūma, Skaidrīte Cielava, Ruta Čaupova, Veronika Kučinska, Zaiga Kuple, Rasma Lāce, Velta Lapacinska, Ināra Novadniece. By the time the volume was published, in the mid-1980s, most pre-Soviet Latvian artists had already been accepted into the grand narrative of the ascent of realism and even their avant-garde ‘mistakes’ were included in the historical narrative, providing that they had been subsumed in the general ‘return to order’ and realist idiom of the 1930s. This inclusive survey of visual and applied arts, architecture and stage design, is still in use today, although from today's perspective it contains many traces of Soviet ideology, the quality of reproductions is poor and the chronological periodisation of the chapters was derived from socio-political changes in either tsarist Russia or the USSR.

By the late 1980s, materials had already been collected for further volumes and the next volume was ready for publication. However, due to the transformation of political conditions in the country – regaining national independence and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 – the book remained unpublished: there were no longer sufficient financial resources for publication and Soviet-era interpretation of Latvian art was now considered completely obsolete. Some of these studies were published during 1986 to 1989 as a series of collected articles dealing with the oldest monuments and artefacts – from archaeological materials through to the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> They testify to the growing interest in empirical and fact-based study during the late-Soviet period when ideological pressure had almost disappeared from art-historical research.

## The plurality of the present

One might think that the demise of oppressive Soviet power would restore the national story of art to its former rightful place, but much has changed since the 1930s. Initially conceived as a reaction against the sociological approach of the Soviet era, the desire to return to the artwork and to an autonomous art history has evolved to elucidate phenomena from a wide range of perspectives in which regional routes of migration and influence, and genealogies of iconographic and stylistic traits all play a crucial role. The earlier ideas of evaluating works of art according to either national or realist features have been replaced with the analytical search for particular local and stylistic traits, and the criterion of art as distinct from non-art is largely related to innovation as a sign of creativity. The early post-Soviet years were also notable for the restoration of full authority to the avant-garde aspirations of the early twentieth century. In contrast with the predominant view during the authoritarian 1930s that regarded the avant-

20 *Latviešu tēlotāja māksla 1860–1940* [Latvian fine arts, 1860–1940]. Gen. ed. S. Cielava. Rīga: Zinātne, 1986.

21 *Materiāli feodālisma posma Latvijas mākslas vēsturei* [Materials for the Latvian art history of the period of feudalism]. 4 vols. Rīga: Zinātne, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989.

garde as 'alien' and 'leftist', and in contrast with the post-war Soviet era denunciation of the avant-garde as a 'bourgeois' and 'formalist' deviation from the 'true course', today they are accepted as fully-fledged artistic achievements.<sup>22</sup>

Research activity has increased considerably during the last two decades, involving several institutions, including major museums – the Latvian National Museum of Art, the Rundāle Palace Museum, and the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art; but the Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art (founded in 2002) continues to play the major role in art-historical research, focusing on the history of Latvian architecture, art and art theory, from prehistoric times up to the present.<sup>23</sup> Besides specialised and case studies, the writing of a comprehensive survey of local artistic phenomena remains among the primary tasks of the discipline. Recently, there has been an attempt to create an up-to-date short history of Latvian art based on the traditional stylistic divisions and analysis of distinct kinds of art (fig. 8),<sup>24</sup> but although widely used, it remains a rather cursory introduction to the subject. One of the Institute's current long-term projects involves an internet-based history of Latvian art, adapting to the more image-oriented specificity of the internet. The aim is to create something like a canon of Latvian art, but not so much a catalogue of the greatest achievements as a display of phenomena typical of a given period. The main task is to provide a synthesis of previous empirical researches, to complement them and interpret the phenomena in the context of overall development, as well as to detect relationships with other regions and national schools of art.

To construct a canon instead of questioning the canon might seem anachronistic, an essentially conservative strategy, and some younger critics have indeed pointed to the pitfalls of this approach: for example, with reference to the curatorial practice of museum expositions.<sup>25</sup> However, there is an alternating logic of creation and deconstruction at work – before the new round of questioning occurs, a positive construction needs to be worked out, because past narratives of national or realist art are no longer sufficiently authoritative to warrant serious criticism.

One of the most important changes in the discipline concerns the internationalisation of research, which requires, among other things, that the relationship between local artistic heritage and the major developments of Western art be questioned. If Eastern European art has often been regarded marginal in relation to art production in the centres of Western Europe, then this attitude also concerns Latvia. Local artists have not created any style or movement, and this greatly affects the axiological aspect of an art historian's work: does it mean that these artists are all merely imitators, followers, of lesser importance than the Western Europeans who inspired them?

22 Apart from several inclusive monographs, the book by art historian Dace Lamberga deserves special mention: D. Lamberga, *Klasiskais modernisms. Latvijas glezniecība 20. gadsimta sākumā* [Classical modernism: early 20th century Latvian painting]. Rīga: Neputns, 2004. See also D. Lamberga, *Le Modernisme classique: la peinture lettone au début du XXème siècle*. Ex. cat. Rīga: Neputns, 2005.

23 Research results are available in editions of collected articles from the series *Materiāli Latvijas mākslas vēsturei / Materials for Latvian Art History* (since 1994) and the journal *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija / Art History and Theory* (since 2003).

24 *Latvijas mākslas vēsture* [History of art of Latvia]. Gen. ed. A. Rožkalne. Rīga: Pētergailis, 2003.

25 M. Traumane, *Kanona valdzinājums?* [Attraction of the canon?] – *Studija: Vizuālo mākslu žurnāls / Visual Arts Magazine* 2006, no. 46 (1), pp. 53–55.

Perhaps the most productive contribution of the former Soviet territories to the wider art-historical canon is simply to reply: 'No, they are no less important, nor is their work of lower quality'. So there is one certain, and perhaps 'natural', point of intersection between Western and Eastern European scholarly interests – the Western quest to expand and complicate simplified schemes of stylistic development may coincide with the interests of Eastern European scholars in making their heritage known outside narrow local contexts.

At the same time, some important differences remain. Some claim the most typical distinction between how Western and Eastern European art historians do their work is that the latter prefer empirical and archival studies to working with models of interpretation that are conscious of social hierarchies and dominant ideologies of culture. In turn, some post-totalitarian scholars claim that one has to gather previously disregarded facts before one can interpret them. Obviously, nobody can accumulate facts randomly, without assessing their relevance to art history, and that is why interpretation is always present and always informed by the interests, attitudes and values of the person doing the research. However, the claim that most Latvian art historians would probably contest is that there is something essentially wrong with the type of interpretation that models art history after standards of quality, formal evolution and stylistic change. Perhaps there is a reason behind the desire to avoid substituting a hierarchy based on aesthetics with something else: Edward Lucie-Smith, for instance, has suggested that perhaps this is an 'attempt to relate it to a quite different hierarchy, one based on their own necessarily subjective view of what constitutes a moral order', what is superior, in terms of social relevance, context and content.<sup>26</sup>

It is tempting to say that it is precisely because of their totalitarian past that this kind of hierarchy is especially problematic for Latvian art historians. Even while one may understand that art's dependence on political context, social issues and dominant taste can add much to its interpretation, the totalitarianism may remain as a warning from the past against narrow-minded, tendentious exaggerations based on sociological or political reductionism that can also be found in art-historical research since the final decades of the twentieth century. According to art historian Eduards Kļaviņš, 'in Baltic art history now natural and, perhaps, 'healthy' chaos prevails or, let us say in order to define it positively, a kind of a very loose empirical approach when researcher uses in the stage of interpretation and exposition simple descriptive language of common vocabulary combined with eclectic terminology at hand which reflects better or worse known old and new methodological traditions'.<sup>27</sup> This 'loose empirical approach', which may also be described as pluralistic and even eclectic, does indeed seem an appropriate characterisation of the present situation.

In his *Stories of Art*, American art historian James Elkins presents a provocative and controversial idea: a truly multicultural art history that would do justice to every marginalised aspect and subject nothing to exclusion is an idea never to be realised because it would bring disorientation and loss of the Western identity; art history's

26 E. Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art since 1945: Issues and Concepts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, p. 7.

27 E. Kļaviņš, *Art History in Totalitarian Societies and its Alternative Models in post-Totalitarian Age*. – *Studija: Vizuālo mākslu žurnāls / Visual Arts Magazine* 1999, no. 6, p. 101.



'root purpose is to chronicle, preserve, and sometimes promote the kind of culture that the authors find valuable'.<sup>28</sup> We are left with the more modest aim of 'becoming more aware of the stories we tell and the reasons we still want to tell them'.<sup>29</sup> What do Latvian art historians find valuable now? Certainly not merely some narrow set of canonical artefacts. A wide variety of topics has emerged in conference reports, articles and monographs during the past decade, including aspects of art life (institutions, state patronage, censorship, political upheavals, etc.), the 'kitsch' Soviet heritage, new media experiences, advertising, photography and female imagery.

28 J. Elkins, *Stories of Art*. New York, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 148.

29 J. Elkins, *Stories of Art*, p. 151.