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Latvian National Art after 1934: Ideology, Practice and Evaluation*

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This article focuses on the ideological underpinnings, accomplishments and assessments of art under the local authoritarian regime (1934–1940). Unity, nationalism, the cult of the leader and peasant life were promoted, denouncing modernist influences in favour of classical traditions and ethnographic heritage. The last six years of Latvia's independence saw both major state-commissioned art projects and individual contributions matching the prescribed tenets to some extent, while most critics maintained that true Latvian national art was still in the making. This ideal, which could be termed nationalist realism, remained desirable, but not mandatory in comparison with some neighbouring totalitarian countries.

The concept of an omnipresent ideology, permeating everything created in any society, has held pride of place in Western humanitarian sciences for a considerable time. It has become a sort of common sense that '[i]deologies are those bodies of beliefs, images and values which provide our understanding of the world'.¹ From such a viewpoint, ideology as the subject of a scholarly study is as topical as it is risky a choice because the researcher cannot avoid being influenced by some ideology, most likely differing from the one he or she purports to examine. While it can surely be claimed that certain beliefs, images and values are invisibly indoctrinated through the most liberal versions of democracy (their evaluation and comparison to other systems' pros and cons is yet another issue), the aim of this article is to take a bit more narrow approach, focusing on the ideological tenets extolled by the local authoritarian regime (1934–1940), which aimed to bring prosperity and a flourishing condition to the Latvian nation in general and its art in particular. The effects of these ideas and assessment of results can possibly provide noteworthy insights too. The social context is not the main focus of this article, which relies on a complex approach mostly consisting of stylistic and comparative analysis, although the historical background is briefly outlined at the beginning. Primary attention is paid to

* The article has been prepared within the State Research Program 'Letonica – Latvia's History, Languages, Culture and Values' (2014–2017).

¹ Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology. Ed. E. Fernie. London: Phaidon, 1998, p. 346.

writing about art and artworks in which the ideological function largely supplanted the aesthetic one.

Previous researches

The subject has been a somewhat uneasy topic for decades, as is seen in the present state of studies. The period of the late 1930s was understandably denounced by the following Soviet rule, exemplified by the then leading art historians as dominated by 'extreme Latvian nationalism, fascism',² an ideology claimed to be completely alien and unacceptable to the workers' state. As class divisions, inevitable conflicts and the final victory of the proletariat formed the core of the ideology of the USSR, this assessment is not surprising. Subsequent evaluations and explanations of this authoritarian rule from the art historical viewpoint are less clear-cut, most often attempting to strike some balance between gains and losses. The prominent Latvian art historian Jānis Siliņš (1896–1991), who published his major opus *Art of Latvia*³ in exile, expressed a more considered opinion on this period, seeing it as moderate in comparison with the rules of bloody tyrants to the west and east of Latvia, yet admitting that it did not allow opposition: 'Even though the Ulmanis dictatorship took a much milder form than did those of Hitler and Stalin, it was hardly tolerant of criticism. Despite all of its shortcomings, however, the regime served to foster national consolidation, enhance national self-confidence and bring about new cultural development',⁴ i.e. the flourishing of culture, even if biased, in a sense compensated for the loss of democratic freedoms. During the last couple of decades, art historians of Latvia have been even more cautious in regard to the authoritarian regime's positive contribution. Although in the popular memory the 'Ulmanis times' remain a sort of golden age (especially against the background of the following horrors of war, deportations and persecutions in the 1940s and 1950s), professionals remained largely sceptical about the art of the late 1930s, preferring modernist phenomena instead. Rather critical viewpoints predominate in the few recent studies focused on artistic life or the authoritarian culture in general. Thus the art historian Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece in her PhD thesis 'The Visual Art Life and the Latvian State (1918–1940)' seemed to question Siliņš's conclusion on the 'new cultural development':

From the point of view of modern values the relationships between art and the state in the authoritarian period cannot be regarded as a new level of development or an unassailable declaration of progress. The system as a whole was oriented toward a politically motivated regulation of the art life. It provided for the praise of the cult of the leader and along with that only

2 Latviešu tēlotāja māksla 1860–1940 [Latvian fine arts, 1860–1940]. Ed. S. Cielava. Riga: Zinātne, 1986, p. 235.

3 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.

4 J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla 1915–1940*. Vol. 2, p. 409.

correct opinion and vision. Nonetheless, it was also possible for art to be encompassed in a politically independent and private vision, because (as opposed to the totalitarian countries of the time) the state culture policies did not include the entire art life.⁵

More derogatory opinions, especially in regard to the exclusion of ethnic minorities, have been recently expressed from the broader perspective of the history of culture, particularly analysing mass pageantries as the centre of authoritarian cultural politics.⁶ However, in general the period of the late 1930s has not generated much interest in art historians since Latvia regained its independence in 1991. This can be partly explained by the rush to study marginalised and almost 'forbidden' phenomena of modernist influences which seemed much more attractive, with their experiments in artistic form and manifestations of Latvia's belonging (or at least attempts to belong) to the West.⁷ At the same time, a broader interest in the most diverse spectrum of artistic phenomena, trading innovation for more traditionalist values and sometimes verging on state propaganda, has been on the rise recently.⁸ Some generalisations were proposed regarding certain mainstream inter-war phenomena of Latvia's art after the strongest modernist impulses had petered out: 'It could also be called a harmonious formalism, which moderated the extremes of local neorealism and lessened the differences between art trends within the broad neorealist reaction.'⁹ This harmonious formalism is applicable to the widest range of inter-war production in Latvia's arts. A number of artists (largely former modernists) turned to the realm of intimate imagery and refined form, exploring colour, texture, line and other aspects within the traditional fine art genres. A part of the period's output included implementations of a certain pre-formulated ideology which were, as mentioned before, not all-encompassing but were certainly on the rise throughout the 1930s.

5 G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *The Visual Art Life and the Latvian State (1918–1940)*. Summary of the Doctoral Thesis. Riga: Latvian Academy of Art, 2011, p. 57. The thesis has been recently published in Latvian with French summaries of chapters: G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un Latvijas valsts 1918–1940 / Art et état en Lettonie 1918–1940*. Riga: Neputns, 2016.

6 D. Hanovs, V. Tēraudkalns, *Ultimate Freedom – No Choice: The Culture of Authoritarianism in Latvia, 1934–1940*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

7 Most significant studies of Latvia's modernist phenomena and artists: D. Lambergā, *Klasiskais modernisms: Latvijas glezniecība 20. gs. sākumā* [Classical modernism: early 20th century Latvian painting]. Riga: Neputns, 2004, reprinted 2016. Available also in French: *Le Modernisme classique: La Peinture lettone au début du XXème siècle*. Riga: Neputns, 2005; and Estonian: *Klassikaline modernism. Lāti maalikunst 20. sajandi alguses*. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, Adamson-Ericu muuseum, 2009; E. Kļaviņš, Džo: Jāzepa Grosvalda dzīve un māksla [Joe: life and art of Jāzeps Grosvalds]. Riga: Neputns, 2006; D. Lambergā, Jēkabs Kazaks. Riga: Neputns, 2007; D. Lambergā, Valdemārs Tone. Riga: Neputns, 2010, etc.

8 See, for instance, *Reinterpreting the Past: Traditionalist Artistic Trends in Central and Eastern Europe of the 1920s and 1930s*. Ed. I. Kossowska. Warsaw: Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2010.

9 E. Kļaviņš, *Between Engaged Public Monuments and Intimate Formalism: Latvian Neo-Realism in the 1920s and 1930s*. – *Reinterpreting the Past*, p. 272.

Unity and nationalism

To sketch the historical situation briefly, 15 May 1934 marked a turning point in Latvia's history, as Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis¹⁰ (also President of the State beginning 11 April 1936) organised a *coup d'état*, dissolving the parliament (*Saiema*) and establishing an authoritarian regime with himself as its leader, which was in line with the dominant political trends at that time.¹¹ The essence of the regime's ideology, intending to break with the corrupt and weak era of the immediate past shaped by the 'dictatorship' of political parties, was based on three dominant values – the '...cult of the leader, national unity and nationalism – which were widely popularised and promoted.'¹² The government manifesto published the day after the *coup* declared that discord among different parties had brought the state to the threshold of an impending *coup d'état* by violent marginal groups¹³, necessitating preventive action (which was not true according to historians; much more credible motives were Ulmanis's diminishing popularity and the possibility of his being forced out of the political system after the upcoming elections¹⁴). The manifesto stated that the much needed changes 'will give us a Latvia without the politics of class and hate, a place where all of Latvia's active sons, peasant and townsman, worker and clerk, will be equal; there will be no more divisions between the people and the intelligentsia it has nurtured, the sons of workers and peasants'.¹⁵ There was a clear wish to annul the idea of society as consisting of different interest groups, and the democratic system as a platform on which these various interests might be negotiated to achieve the best possible, even if provisional, solution. Some primordial wholeness or unity was proposed instead, leading to a quest for a well-defined 'Latvianness' (or 'Latvianity', in other translations) in culture and the arts.

But what exactly did this rather moderate but still undeniably authoritarian regime require of visual arts? The vagueness in the above-mentioned government manifesto prevailed, largely focusing on national unity, national spirit, national maturity and similar notions. Ulmanis' own views of visual arts remain elusive; it has been said that he did not pretend to be an expert in this field¹⁶ and refrained from direct interference in creative processes. There is just one publicised statement in which he expressed some sort of clear stance: 'I really cannot comprehend the enthusiasm that people have for paintings that show only old, dilapidated buildings, damaged or completely broken or toppled trees, and weak, feeble people.

10 Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942) was among the leading Latvian politicians of the inter-war period Latvia, founder of the Latvian Farmers' Union, a prominent political party of the time. Although he greatly contributed to the establishing of Latvia's independence from Russia declared on 18 November 1918, his authoritarian rule and even more the decision not to resist the Soviet invasion in 1940 remains a dividing issue to this day, urging to ask whether a different decision might have averted or at least modified the following fifty years of Soviet regime. After his forced resignation, Ulmanis had hoped to emigrate to Switzerland but was deported to the USSR instead and died in prison in Turkmenistan.

11 Local preconditions of authoritarianism in Latvia are analysed in: A. Stranga, LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums: Demokrātijas likteņi Latvijā [Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party and *coup d'état* of 15 May 1934: destinies of democracy in Latvia]. Rīga: Poligrāfists, 1998.

12 D. Bleiere, I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, A. Zunda, Latvijas vēsture: 20. gadsimts [History of Latvia: the 20th century]. Rīga: Jumava, 2005, p. 157.

13 Valdības manifesti [Government manifestos]. – Jaunākās Ziņas 16 May 1934.

14 D. Bleiere, I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, A. Zunda, Latvijas vēsture, p. 150.

15 Valdības manifesti.

16 J. Lejnietis, Rīga, kuras nav [Never-built Riga]. Rīga: Zinātne, 1998, p. 93.

What's the good of such works? I don't wish to judge, because I'm not a specialist; I do wish to say that I really don't understand it.¹⁷

Other leaders, for example the unsuccessful artist Adolf Hitler, did much more to influence artistic developments.¹⁸ However, Latvia's art life was significantly transformed in this period by the founding of trade chambers. Latvia's Chamber of Literature and Art was established on 15 December 1938; it consisted of six sections representing literature, publishers and dealers, fine art, music, theatre and folklore. All former artists' societies (eight were functioning at the time of this consolidation) were ordered to dissolve and unite under the wing of the Chamber of Literature and Art, forming the joint Latvian Artists' Society.¹⁹ At the same time, there was no obligatory membership as was later imposed by the USSR, in which non-members of the Artists' Union had virtually no chance of exhibiting or getting access to artists' materials and tools. There is also no evidence of censorship in the sense of artists not being allowed to exhibit certain kinds of works.

Meditations on the new epoch

At the same time, visions outlining Latvian national art were proposed and circulated, and all contributors, artists and non-artists alike, united in their quest for a new art that would be national, close to the people and also leave behind the chaotic environment of the time. The ideas that can be glimpsed from a wide variety of publications²⁰ largely fluctuated between extolling Latvian ethnographic heritage and European traditions of classical, pre-modernist art. Somewhere between these poles, the notion of a national style was searched for, clearly opposed to any foreign, alien influences of modernism, which were often conceived of as dangerously leftist. A related issue was art's much needed return to the countryside, to peasant life and work, seen as the real source of vitality and healthy creativity, far removed from the damaging and corrupt influences of urban centres. Articles clearly in line with the upcoming 'new epoch' had already appeared before 1934, indicating that the regime was in a sense 'harnessing' the moods and ideas already present in the cultural circles of the time. For example, it was said as early as 1931 that 'the task of artworks in the future is to revive the clear and peaceful spiritual nobility appropriate to an independent nation',²¹ invoking the 'great' and 'sophisticated' peasant

17 K. Ulmanis, *No sevis nekas nepiepildas* [Nothing comes about of itself]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 11 March 1940.

18 For instance, in his speech at the opening of Great Exhibition of German Art in 1937, see: *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood. Oxford, Cambridge Mass: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 423–426.

19 For more information on this process see: I. Konstante, *Mākslinieku biedrības Latvijā (1934–1940)*. *Jaunākie Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva materiālu pētījumi* [Artists' societies in Latvia (1934–1940). Latest researches of materials found in the Latvian State History Archive]. – *Māksla un politiskie konteksti* [Art and political contexts]. Ed. D. Lāce. Riga: Neputns, 2006, pp. 105–126, 176–177.

20 More detailed survey of Latvian art-theoretical ideas, outlining the contribution of particular individuals is presented in: S. Pelše, *History of Latvian Art Theory: Definitions of Art in the Context of the Prevailing Ideas of the Time (1900–1940)*. Riga: Institute of Art History, Latvian Academy of Art, 2007.

21 A. Francis, *Mākslas darba sabiedriskā nozīme* [The social meaning of the artwork]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 6 June 1931. Alfons (Aleksandrs) Francis (1905–1948) was a writer and publicist, known by his poems praising peasant life.

culture as the main point of orientation. The possible renaissance of art in Latvia was said to be achievable

...only if the whole nation were to direct its focused, strong and deliberate will towards this aim. The artistic liberation of the inner essence of a nation, the recovery of its spiritual face and its embodiment in permanent forms, such as painting, statues or buildings, is possible only if the nation as a whole and each of its members in particular charge themselves with the duty to manifest their specificity in all spheres of life. Only such a common adherence to a single guiding line – a collectively conceived nationality – and a long-term collaboration with the artist, can shape free, graceful and precise formal expression, corresponding to this collective's particular structure of thoughts and feelings....²²

There were speculations about art as the expression of the nation's universal will, emanating from the bottom to the top, as the creative impulse was said to be coming from the collective. Still, spiritual, not formal ideas were suggested as worth taking over from the ancient times, with a denunciation of the adherence to ethnographic clothes, footwear or ornaments as the only points of reference.

From 1934 on, there was a notable surge in promoting the 'new epoch' in the arts most suited to the common-sense notion of ideological propaganda. For instance, a number of 'faults' were denounced in recent art: utilitarianism, cosmopolitanism, subservience to classes and parties, and calling art 'the mystery of life'²³ that should thrill the spectator; at the same time emotions were said to be not artwork's essence but just its 'fuel'. Personal, individual emotions and experiences were clearly not considered important enough: 'The task of art is to search for and shape the nation's national hero.'²⁴ How is one supposed to imagine this hero? What was meant by 'national maturity' as the main criterion of an artwork's value?

Every nation has its spiritual life on earth; these are its desires and aspirations, espousing the nation's specificity. These desires, united in the work of art, impregnated with beauty, are what create the national hero. All of these ideas that live in the nation are entwined around this hero.²⁵

Still, what exact ideas were being espoused and what forms were best used for their embodiment remained vague at best. The most promising lead was the artist's clear adherence to the remnants of old aesthetic theories and Aristotelian legacy: 'the beautiful classical tradition teaches us to portray the human soul more deeply

22 A. Purīts, *Nacionālās mākslas renesansi!* [For a renaissance of the national art!]. – *Jaunākās Ziņas* 7 July 1933. Alfrēds Purīts (also Purics, 1878–1936) was a cartoonist and art critic, involved with the satirical periodical *Svari*, both in 1906–1907 and in the 1920s when the magazine was revived.

23 F. Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs, *Vakardienas māksla* [Yesterday's art]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 29 September 1934. Frīdrihs Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs (1888–1941?) was an actor and stage director, also reviewer of theatrical performances and editor of the theatre magazine *Aktieris*.

24 F. Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs, *Vakardienas māksla*.

25 F. Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs, *Vakardienas māksla*.

and perfectly than we see it in daily life; the artist should raise life up to art and not slide down in his art to reality'.²⁶ On the one hand, the accurate recording of details in the realist vein was not acceptable; on the other, modernist trends dismissing beauty and emotions were equally condemned. In an attempt to clarify 'what hinders the artist's merging with his nation',²⁷ there is mention of the shell of egoism and conceit, as well as the pseudo-culture of large cities where artists were supposed to spend time in cafes, restaurants and clubs, sharing their personalities instead of remaining caught up in creative solitude, which would enable their souls to communicate with God, hear the nation's heartbeat and realise the significance of 15 May and the tasks that lay ahead.

Neo-classicism and ethnography

These declarations on art, voiced largely by people involved with literature, theatre and related fields, stand out for their remarkable imprecision in regard to the concrete implementation of national ideology in visual forms, being more focused on the artist's attitude, mental orientation and world-view in general. Not much more can be determined than the suggestion for artists to engage in a certain type of meditation on the 'new epoch' that would then enable them to create more 'collectively', forgetting their spoiled individual natures. Possibly, practising artists could provide more specific guidelines as to how the new ideology might be embodied. There were quite a few instructions that might seem more useful, for example positive ideals of the past included the seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting as a model for Latvian art, as it had served well to promote the Dutch on the international level.²⁸ Elsewhere, the possible synthesis of ornament with genre painting was mentioned as the basis of a Latvian style, a sort of heir to classical antiquity and Renaissance art.²⁹ More contemporary modernist trends were clearly unacceptable signs of the artists' superficiality and laziness:

Why do some young artists still hold to foreign examples in regard to painterly style, subject and content? The answer might be rather simple: avoiding the difficulties of learning to draw and mastering the rhythms of movement in a strongly arranged figural composition. But the essence of the exalted 'new' art can do without all of that. It grows out of chance effects, at first sight wonderful but worthless in subsequent repetitions. That is why there is only one Munch, one Van Gogh....³⁰

26 F. Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs, *Laikmeta cienīgu mākslu* [For an art worth of its era]. - Rīts 18 November 1934.

27 F. Dombrovskis-Dumbrājs, *Mākslinieku uzdevums* [The task of artists]. - Rīts 3 September 1934.

28 J. Strazdiņš, *Par latviskas mākslas izkopšanu* [On the cultivation of Latvianness in art]. - *Brīvā Zeme* 25 August 1934. On the painter Jēkabs Strazdiņš' art, see below.

29 J. Strazdiņš, *Ornaments un žanrs - latviskās mākslas pamati* [Ornament and genre - the basis of Latvian art]. - *Brīvā Zeme* 24 September 1934.

30 J. Strazdiņš, *Pārdomas mūksalīešu izstādē* [Contemplation at the exhibition of Mūksala Artists' Society]. - *Sējējs* 1938, no. 12, p. 1355.

The tendency to conceive of the latest trends as 'foreign' but older classical and realist traditions as 'one's own' is a remarkable testimony to the power of established traditions, as things appropriated long ago become internalised as genuine local heritage. Artists sometimes lashed out at the fatal flaws of modern artistic trends, promoting a sort of retrospective neo-classicism as the model: 'Great, eternal art should be studied throughout one's life, accumulating achievements and knowledge over generations'³¹, while today's banal, stereotyped and fashionable art, international in its essence, was said to be incompatible with 'national art faithful to the nation's history'³². Specific anti-primitivist pathos, reminiscent of the Nazi ideologues' ideas, is sensed in the statement that

...the calm majesty and simple grandeur, the true love of nature espoused by St Francis, the herald of the Renaissance: these are the stable foundations on which a rebirth of European culture could be based. If there is talk about the decline of European culture, it is only because some people attempt to sever this nerve of life and relate to the present state of Negroes and Indians. [---] The Latvian should not start the development of mankind from chaos. The Latvian should not delight in baby talk. The Latvian should not give up the great past of his race, the knowledge and skills acquired over a long course of development.³³

Yet this somewhat 'classical' trend differed in emphasis from the archaic and ethnographic traditionalism promoted by some artists, who valued artefacts of Latvian pagan prehistory much more highly than classical European art inspired by Christianity. These opinions were greatly inspired by the local national religion *dievturība* ('god worshippers' or 'god holders'). As an answer to the challenges of the epoch, *dievturība* is said to be a '...radical, even extreme answer, as "god holders" called not to reform, modify or adapt religious tradition and institutions, i.e. Christianity, to the ethnic tradition (attempts to "Latvianise" Christianity were also made), but a complete replacement, proposing an entirely new religion.'³⁴ The Christian religion was deemed very harmful to 'true' art. While the Renaissance thrived thanks to the short-lived inspiration from classical antiquity, from the eighteenth century on art had begun to lose content and cultivate empty form.³⁵ There was also interest in bridging the gap between 'pure' and applied arts, in a sense extolling the latter and denouncing various 'modernised' ornaments; ancient ethnographic ornamental signs were admired, and there was even an attempt to

31 R. Šterns, *Strādnieks un māksla* [Worker and art]. - Darbs 1935, no. 8, p. 12. Roberts Šterns (1884-1943) was a painter and art teacher known by seascapes as well as portraits and genre paintings in realist-impressionist manner.

32 R. Šterns, *Mākslas ceļu maldugunis* [Jack-o'-lanterns of art's development]. - Latvju mākslinieku biedrības darbu klāsts 1936. gadā. Rīga: Latvju mākslinieku biedrība, p. 11.

33 R. Šterns, *Mākslas ceļu maldugunis*, pp. 16-17.

34 A. Misāne, *Dievturība Latvijas reliģisko un politisko ideju vēsturē* [Dievturība in the history of religious and political ideas in Latvia]. - *Reliģiski-filozofiski raksti 2005*, no. 10, pp. 102-103.

35 J. Bīne, *Reliģija un māksla* [Religion and art]. - *Labiētis 1933*, no. 2, pp. 24-26. On the painter Jēkabs Bīne's art, see below.

endow them with some readable message. But this meaning had been largely forgotten over the centuries. There was no real way to explain what this message might convey or how it should be read, and a unified impression of ornamented design emerged as the only criterion of value.³⁶ Still 'pure' art could be made 'more Latvian' only if content were returned to it, emphasising such elements as reflection of the national culture and its traditions, profound content, positive qualities, consonance between content and form, and technique and material corresponding to the artwork's style.³⁷ Emphasis was also placed on the fact that the unique Latvian ideal had always been embodied in the toiling worker who identified work with life. References were made largely to late nineteenth – early twentieth century Latvian artists (Ādams Alksnis, Janis Rozentāls, and Teodors Ūders), whose output was shaped by different proportions of realist, impressionist and symbolist idioms. Even a certain normative aesthetics of 'Latvian beauty' was proposed, calling for 'an inclusive philosophical system based on the Latvian world-view'³⁸ and stating that the artist should take up national aims '...willingly and cheerfully. Even if creation is unforced and free, there should always be deliberate aims connected with the development of Latvian culture.'³⁹

Overall, this variously flavoured trend of traditionalism in writing on art merged expressive and communicative art-theoretical trends with realist elements derived from the centuries-old European idea of art as representation. The contradiction between the ornament's abstract nature and representational content as essential to visual arts was never solved but rather glossed over. The question of whether these views were somehow imposed on their authors or appropriated 'willingly and cheerfully' seems to have no clear answer, boiling down to a causality dilemma similar to the chicken and the egg problem. There is a certain truth to the assumption that the political powers just used the already existing tendencies for their purposes, but there was a certain increase in fiercely anti-modernist, nationalist pamphlets on art after 15 May 1934, testifying to the possible influence of the general climate upon artists' and writers' attitudes. In general, the ideology of Latvianness in art was not codified in a manner similar to the notion of socialist realism in the USSR, as exemplified in the speech Stalin's chief cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov presented to the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934.⁴⁰ There were also no organised events aimed at denouncing unacceptable art, as Nazi ideologues arranged in their exhibitions of *Entartete Kunst* in 1937. What existed was an array of rather mismatched statements about the necessary content-based, national, positivist Latvian art scattered in different types of publications and united by their retrospective orientation and dislike of more contemporary developments.

36 J. Bīne, *Tautas māksla* [Art of the people]. – *Jaunais nacionālisms* [New nationalism]. Ed. J. Lapiņš. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1936, pp. 141–146.

37 J. Bīne, *Mūsu māksla* [Our art]. – *Sējējs* 1939, no. 3, pp. 309–310.

38 E. Brastiņš, *Latvisku mērogu latviskam daiļumam* [A Latvian measure for the Latvian beauty]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 17 February 1940. Ernest Brastiņš (1892–1942) was a painter and archaeologist, researcher of ancient Latvian castle mounds and propagator of Latvian ornament and *dievturība* movement.

39 E. Brastiņš, *Mūsu mākslas nacionālie uzdevumi* [National tasks of our art]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 30 December 1939.

40 A. Zhdanov, *Speech to the Congress of Soviet Writers*. – *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, pp. 409–412.

Major public commissions

The question inevitably arises as to what extent these tenets were embodied in realised artworks, and whether they were considered a success at the time. The most noticeable outcome was that public commissions of art projects were on the rise under the authoritarian regime; several large-scale projects were envisaged but were only partly realised or not carried out at all.⁴¹ One such undertaking which remained on paper only was the Riga Dom Cathedral decoration project⁴² in the Latvian style. Originally called St Mary's Dom Cathedral (*Der Dom zu St. Marien*), the church was renamed by the press after the pagan deity Māra in the 1920s and the Riga Dom Decoration Commission was formed in 1932. It worked out the guidelines of what a church in the Latvian style should look like; its walls, windows and supports had to be covered with scenes from the national history and religious subjects; the church was also envisaged as a Latvian pantheon, with burial places of outstanding Latvian personalities.⁴³ Little is known about the competition, as only one submission was made public; this was the proposal by the artist Jānis Kuga⁴⁴ (1878–1969), a prominent stage designer and professor of the Latvian Academy of Art. Kuga had been the main protagonist of national romanticism in Latvian stage design in the early twentieth century; during the inter-war period he headed the decorative painting master class at the Latvian Academy of Art (1921–1944) and was the rector of the academy (1934–1940; 1941–1944). His proposals for the Riga Dom Cathedral were published in the magazine *Atpūta* in 1933–1934. Kuga mixed canonical religious themes with Latvian history, for instance the composition *Latvian Golgotha* referred to battles during World War I in which many Latvians lost their lives fighting against the German army. Also such topics as the proclamation of Latvia's independence in 1918 and a Latvian chief receiving foreign envoys in prehistoric times were used, as was the mythical national hero Lāčplēšis from the nineteenth century epic honouring Latvian soldiers, and invoking the image of St. George crushing the dragon (Fig. 1). Kuga mixed inspiration from Renaissance art with prints and documents of more recent local history to create these sketches whose formal qualities remain elusive, mostly allowing us to assess the chosen subjects. However, the project was never realised; the Dom Decoration Commission turned it down several times, as it obviously seemed too much in discord with the status of the medieval monument.

Paintings of the Riga Castle – the seat of Latvia's President – were among the ideas at least partly realised in practice. The old building, dating back to the fourteenth century, underwent ongoing changes and reconstructions over time⁴⁵, but the most

41 Most of unrealised ideas of the late 1930s are related to the field of architecture which is not the topic of the present study; ambitious projects to 'Latvianise' the Old Riga in order to get rid of its supposedly German, medieval character are especially analysed in: J. Lejnieks, *Rīga, kuras nav*.

42 For more information on this project see: E. Grosmane, *Kultūras mantojums un politiskā ideoloģija: Rīgas Māras baznīcas izdaiļošanas projekts. 20. gs. 30. gadi* [Cultural heritage and political ideology: Riga Māra's Church decoration project. The 1930s]. – *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija* 2014, no. 17, pp. 36–45.

43 S., *Kā latviskojama Māras katedrāle?* [How Māra's church should be enhanced?] – *Pēdējā Briedī* 1 January 1933.

44 On Jānis Kuga see: Dz. Blūma, *Skatuves ietērpis latviešu teātrī: 1870–1919* [Stage design in Latvian theatre: 1870–1919]. Rīga: Zinātne, 1988, pp. 79–115; S. Cielava, *Jānis Kuga*. Rīga: Zinātne, 1992.

45 For a comprehensive overview of the construction history and décor of Riga Castle see: M. Caune, *Rīgas pils – senā un mainīgā* [Riga Castle – old and changing]. Rīga: Jumava, 2004.



1.

Jānis Kuga. Sketch for the stained glass panel *Lāčplēsis Crushing Evil and Deceit (Lāčplēsis samīn ļaunumu un viltu)* for the Unknown Soldier's Chapel of the Riga Dom Cathedral. Illustration from the magazine *Atpūta* 1934, no. 485, p. 8.



2.

Jānis Roberts Tillbergs. *Workers of the Awakening Period (Tautas atmodas darbinieki)* (1939). Oil painting. Riga Castle. Photo by Vladislavs Tjurins.



3.

Voldemārs Vimba. Viesturs's Battle with the Crusaders in 1219 (Battle near Mežotne) (Viestura cīņa ar krustnešiem 1219. gadā (Cīņa pie Mežotnes)) (1939). Oil painting. Riga Castle.

Photo by Vladislavs Tjurins.



4.

Augusts Annuss. Visvaldis, King of Jersika, Receiving German Crusaders (Visvaldis, Jersikas valdnieks, pieņem vācu krustnešus) (1940). Oil painting. Riga Castle.

Photo by Vladislavs Tjurins.



5.

Ludolfs Liberts. 15 May 1934 (1934. gada 15. maijs) (1934-1939). Illustration from the book *Latvijas tēlotājas mākslas pieci gadi* (1939), n. p.



6.

Jēkabs Bīne. Ancient Times (also: Latvian Farmstead or Landscape with Mythological Images) (Senatnē (Lauku sēta, ainava ar mitoloģiskiem tēliem)) (not later than 1936). Reproduction from Jēkabs Bīne's file B-8, Information Centre of the Latvian Academy of Art.



7.

Ansis Čirulis. In the Sun's Courtyards (*Saules pagalmos*) (1939). Oil on canvas. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.
Photo by Māris Kundziņš.



8.

Jēkabs Strazdiņš. Work (*Darbs*) (1935). Reproduction from Jēkabs Strazdiņš' file S-10, Information Centre of the Latvian Academy of Art.



9.

Sigismunds Vidbergs. Stained glass windows *Metal Worker (Metālists)* and *Textile Worker (Tekstilniece)* for Latvia's Work Chamber hall. Illustration from the magazine *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1938, no. 2, p. 56.



10.

Sigismunds Vidbergs. Stained glass windows *Docker (Ostas strādnieks)* and *Bricklayer (Mūrnieks)* for Latvia's Work Chamber hall. Illustration from the magazine *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1938, no. 2, p. 56.

authoritarian touch was the enhancement of the Large Banquet Hall; as early as the 1920s there were plans for the reconstruction of this much needed premise that were not carried out, but from 1937 on there was good progress, inviting a number of popular Latvian painters to contribute.⁴⁶ The commission headed by the architect Eižens Laube worked out thematic proposals from Latvian prehistory, the epoch of the nineteenth century national awakening and the independence period:

All paintings have to be of equal size, and in the same colour range and manner of execution. Each painting should cover four square metres. Artists should guarantee that what is shown in pictures is deeply related to the life and spirit of our people. All paintings that include events of our history from the first century B.C. on need to be consistent with the historical truth. All of the researches and discoveries made recently by our scientists should be reflected.⁴⁷

These guidelines appear quite at odds with the conventional perception of creativity, and the simultaneous correspondence to both national spirit and historical truth would have been hard to comply with. However, the work began and reports on its progress appeared in the press on a regular basis, with notifications that 'paintings are not carried out in classical mural techniques but ... easel paintings in oils are installed in appropriate places'.⁴⁸ Seventeen works were planned but the Soviet occupation interrupted the project; thus no assessment of all of the submissions and their overall impression could ever be made. Seven paintings have come down to us⁴⁹ created by several well-known painters of the time⁵⁰. The required 'same colour range and manner of execution' seems not to have been realised when one compares, for example, the academic painter Jānis Roberts Tillbergs's (1880–1972) static and somewhat naively stiff group portrait *Workers of the Awakening Period* (1939, Fig. 2) with the battle painter Voldemārs Vimba's (1904–1985) dynamic and deftly painted scene *Viesturs's Battle with the Crusaders in 1219 (Battle near Mežotne)* (1939, Fig. 3), somewhat reminiscent of a still from an action film. However, the sinuous baroque-style frames and complex, multi-figure compositions testify to the common spirit of the 1930s: a retrospective return to traditional modes of representation based on a largely academic approach, with touches of realist, impressionist and symbolist flavour. The required fidelity to scientists' researches and discoveries can be glimpsed in imagined reconstructions of prehistoric clothes, jewellery and other accessories (Augusts Annuss (1893–1984), *Visvaldis, King of Jersika, Receiving German Crusaders* (1940, Fig. 4)). Still these exercises in history painting, aiming to

46 More on the project see: G. Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un Latvijas valsts 1918–1940*, pp. 258–261.

47 *Rīgas pils greznumam* [For the splendour of Riga Castle]. – *Brīvā Zeme* 20 July 1938.

48 J. Rutmanis, *Valsts Prezidenta Rīgas pils jaunās svētku zāles dekoratīvie gleznojumi* [Decorative paintings of the new Banquet Hall of the Presidential Castle in Riga]. – *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1939, no. 2, p. 44.

49 In 2016, these paintings have been reinstalled in their initial places in the Banquet Hall of the restored Riga Castle.

50 Works by Oto Skulme, Ludolfs Liberts, Augusts Annuss, Jānis Roberts Tillbergs, Jānis Kuga, Arvīds Egle and Voldemārs Vimba.

depict the desired national heroes, are not among the most extreme cases of what can be termed 'local propaganda art'.

Rhetoric of the regime

For the time being, not many painters have taken up symbolic representations of the 15th of May and placed the idea of unity clearly in their works. Our symbolic and ideological painting on the whole still lacks any clear traditions. Therefore, all works created in this field should be viewed as plantings in a field covered with stumps. Those who performed these difficult tasks have not always been acclaimed. Of course, not all ideological paintings created so far can be accepted without objections to their execution. But can a field with many stumps and stones give an abundant yield in the very first year?⁵¹

These reflections using agricultural language were voiced in May 1940 when the regime whose glorification seemed to be in need of development had only weeks left. One example praised by the article was Ludolfs Liberts's⁵² (1895–1959) decorative panel *The Fifteenth of May*⁵³ for the pavilion of Latvia at the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris (1937), portraying a woman in national costume (an allegory of Latvia) with a raised hand, (reminiscent of Hitler's gestures in front of crowds) crowning a pyramidal composition. Exalted people (workers on one side, peasants on the other) are gathered around the allegorical figure, with a kneeling woman in the foreground, holding a vessel with a flame as in some sacred pagan ritual. A similar representation of the authoritarian cult of the leader could surely have been seen in the now lost tripartite painting titled *15 May 1934* (1934–1939, Fig. 5) by Liberts, with its stiff, pathetic gestures, hands stretched out towards Kārlis Ulmanis and expressions close to religious ecstasy. It was placed at the end of the Banquet Hall of the Riga Castle and surely paralleled the most extreme examples of socialist realism in the USSR, although in a more exalted, theatrical mode that would probably have seemed quite different from the then dominant *Peredvizhniki* traditions. Still some parallels can be drawn with, for instance, Aleksandr Gerasimov's iconic work *Lenin on the Rostrum* (1930). In any case, this example, a seeming invitation to coin some new term, such as 'nationalist realism', could be considered an embodiment of the 'mystery', 'thrill' and 'national unity' required in reflections of the art of the 'new era'. But there was certainly more to Liberts's artistic credo; he was a prolific artist, a painter and art deco stage designer who had excelled in dynamic, cubo-futurist variations of modernism in

51 J. Straziņš, Ludolfs Liberts – piecpadsmitais maijs [Ludolfs Liberts – 15th of May]. – Sējējs 1940, no. 5, p. 536.

52 On Ludolfs Liberts see: F. Balodis, Ludolfs Liberts. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1938; J. Siliņš, Ludolfs Liberts. Rīga: J. Kadilis, 1943; Z. Ligers, Ludolfs Liberts: Skatuves glezniecība [Ludolfs Liberts: scenery painting]. Rīga: Drujas-Foršū, 1944; G. Švitiņš, Ludolfs Liberts. Rīga: Latvijas enciklopēdija, 1995; Ludolfs Liberts: 1895–1959: Darbi no privātkolekcijām [Works from private collections] Ed. I. Kalniņa. Rīga: Pareks banka, 2000.

53 Location unknown; sketch titled *Allegorical Motif* in the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art.

the early 1920s and then developed a hazy, painterly style of cityscapes (he was especially attracted by Paris boulevards and Venice canals) in the 1930s. After World War II he emigrated to the USA and continued his successful career there, but in the late 1930s one aspect of his diverse personality certainly included being the court painter of Ulmanis's authoritarian regime.

Liberts also painted a lot of portraits; official portraits of the regime's leaders were complemented with fantasy portraits of tribal chiefs, supposed leaders of pre-historic peoples once populating the territory of Latvia. Although they can hardly be called 'Latvian' heroes or chiefs, in a sense they established the link between the present Latvian state and those largely mythical figures of the pre-Christian past that resisted German crusaders more or less successfully, but also capitulated or willingly adopted the new religion. These are typically portraits of monumental, old, bearded men, sometimes with ancient jewellery, swords and similar accessories, intended to convey ancient wisdom, painted in a rather soft technique of thick impasto and warm colours, sufficiently realistic but clearly influenced by European old masters' traditions. Remarkably, art critics largely praised Liberts' paintings, which did not successfully pay lip service to the regime. It was stated that 'Liberts's ideal is masterful, flawless painting'.⁵⁴ He was said to have appropriated a lot of impulses, yet fused them into his own unmistakable manner; individual motifs were noted as well as how they worked together in series, with only the single slightly critical remark that 'such a mode of painting makes the quality of works rather uneven'⁵⁵, at the same time praising 'good colouring' and a 'skilfully achieved illusion of space and vastness'⁵⁶. 'Conventionality' and 'artificiality'⁵⁷ were also mentioned in another review, while praising Liberts's vitality and vivid colours.

Latvian deities

Emphasis on national mythology and ethnographic, folklore-based imagery was, of course, not entirely new in the 1930s; at the beginning of the twentieth century numerous artists had used images whose origins were either derived from Greco-Roman sources or the Latvian pagan heritage extolled by national romanticism. The painter, pedagogue and art critic Jēkabs Bīne⁵⁸ (1895–1955), an adherent of the *dievturība* movement, stood out as a prominent representative of this trend in the inter-war period. He got his education in arts at the Riga City Art School (1913–1915) and the Kharkov Art School (1916–1918); then he studied at the Latvian Academy of

54 A. Eglītis, Ludolfa Liberta izstāde [Ludolfs Liberts' exhibition]. – Sējējs 1938, no. 11, p. 1243.

55 A. Eglītis, Ludolfa Liberta izstāde.

56 A. Eglītis, Ludolfa Liberta izstāde.

57 J. Siliņš, Ludolfs Liberts un viņa gleznu izstāde [Ludolfs Liberts and exhibition of his paintings]. – Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts 1938, no. 9, p. 236.

58 On Jēkabs Bīne see: J. Strazdiņš, Jēkaba Bīnes darbs mākslā [Jēkabs Bīne's achievement in art]. – Labietis 1936, no. 3, pp. 161–169; Z. Konstants, Jēkabs Bīne un latviešu ornaments. – Latviešu lietišķā māksla [Latvian applied arts]. Ed. B. Sturme. Riga: Liesma, 1989, pp. 158–176; M. Brancis, Jēkabs Bīne. Riga: Preses nams, 1995; J. Bīne, Mans darbs: Jēkaba Bīnes grāmata [My work: book of Jēkabs Bīne]. – Doma. Vol. 5. Ed. Z. Konstants. Riga: Latvijas Mākslas muzeju apvienība, 2000, pp. 11–66.

Art, graduating from the Master Class of Figural Painting taught by Jānis Roberts Tillbergs (1926). Bīne took part in exhibitions beginning in 1917 and painted mostly genre scenes and portraits in a realist vein, displaying skilful, deft brushwork, sometimes reminiscent of the Swedish artist Anders Zorn's manner. Part of his oeuvre can be seen as a contribution to the often expressed need to portray peasant life, the true seat of the Latvian world outlook, as in his genre paintings with common subjects of agricultural work or repose (*In the Kitchen*, 1926; *First Harvest*, 1929; *By the Well*, 1930, etc.). Although Bīne's interest in Latvian pagan deities and the possible meanings of ornamental signs was not easily reconciled with his painter's craft, he did make attempts at this peculiar synthesis; thus in the painting *Ancient Times* (also known as *Latvian Farmstead* or *Landscape with Mythological Images*, not later than 1936, Fig. 6) he depicted a farmstead with a staffage-like woman carrying water from a well, and pagan deities are seen as cloud formations overlooking the rural scene. The same deities portrayed as real creatures walking on a kind of parapet parallel to the picture plane against a flattened background are depicted in the work *Dievs, Māra, Laima* (1931), while a diagonal procession towards the foreground with different deities is attempted in the painting *Ūsiņš, Driver of the Sun* (1935). Although executed in oil, both paintings have certain poster-like qualities, with their bright, largely homogeneous colour fields. This contribution to 'Latvian religious painting' was noticed by contemporaries and evaluated positively: 'Bīne's work, as the first clear depiction of Latvian deities, will remain as an example for generations to come. [...] When our Laima, Māra and other divine creatures are embodied in images as beautiful as those created by ancient Greeks, they will acquire an altogether different meaning; they will become much more familiar and noble in both our own and other [people's] eyes.'⁵⁹ The mythology of the ancient Baltic people was said to be an unexplored and inexhaustible source for art, and Bīne's paintings were described as 'creative mythological compositions in the grand style': 'Here not just finish matters, as for the Riga Artists' Group, but the feeling and understanding of ancient Latvians' spirit and soul emerging in the artist's imagination....'⁶⁰ Mentioning other artists, such as Liberts and Ansis Cīrulis, the author concluded that Bīne might be among the few who had really understood the present epoch of 'national construction' and whose work would determine whether present art would be deeply rooted in the nineteenth century national artistic traditions.

A more decorative, stylised version of national mythology was presented by the versatile artist Ansis Cīrulis⁶¹ (1883–1942), who was a master of decorative arts, a painter and a printmaker. He was the son of a craftsman from Majori and learned bricklaying at the building company *Augusts un Sēja*; his artistic training began at the German Trade Society Crafts School and Wenjamin Bluhm's Drawing and Painting

59 J. Strazdiņš, *Jēkaba Bīnes darbs mākslā*, p. 165.

60 V. Eglītis, *Darbības vērtējums* [Assessment of activity]. – Studentu Dzīve 28 January 1938.

61 On Ansis Cīrulis see: Ansis Cīrulis: *Saules pagalmos* [Ansis Cīrulis: in sun's courtyards]. Ed. R. Rinka. Riga: Neputns, 2008. Cīrulis' contribution to early 20th century ceramics is briefly assessed in: *Art History of Latvia IV. 1890–1915. Period of Neo-Romanticist Modernism*. Ed. E. Kļaviņš. Riga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art & Art History Research Support Foundation, 2014, pp. 564–566.

School⁶², and continued with the famous applied artist Jūlijs Madernieks. In 1906 Cīrulis started his studies in St Petersburg at the Baron Stieglitz Central School of Technical Drawing and Yakov Goldblatt's preparatory classes of painting and drawing. The printmaker and folk art enthusiast Rihards Zariņš encouraged Cīrulis to take up ceramics and this field became his main occupation up to 1911, financing his further art studies in Paris, where he also exhibited paintings. After the interruption of World War I, Cīrulis returned to Paris in 1921 and turned increasingly to decorative painting in the 1920s, also taking up printmaking, the most notable achievement being his seasonal series *The Twelve Months* (1922). Cīrulis focussed on the creation of a unified interior ensemble in national style, designing furniture, carpets, curtains, etc. for various state institutions, as well as for individual commissions. His most outstanding project certainly was the Ambassadors' Accreditation Hall (1926–1932) in the Riga Castle, in which the ornamental images of Latvian deities with their upraised hands are reminiscent of the Byzantine imagery of Virgin Orans; at the same time, this updated national romanticism included certain elements of the art deco style. It has been noted that Cīrulis' 'version of Latvianity' was based on 'Italian Proto-Renaissance discoveries'⁶³, and at times, perhaps, on the Early Renaissance, as his painting *In the Sun's Courtyards* (1939, Fig. 7) somewhat echoes Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera (Allegory of Spring, ca. 1482)*, with its slender, dancing female figures, half-naked in the light, clothes fluttering in the wind with somewhat classical fold patterns. *In the Sun's Courtyards* repeats the central part of the intarsia of the Latvian Hall at the former Palace of Nations in Geneva (now belonging to the United Nations).

Peasants and workers

Much praised rural subjects were most consistently explored by the painter, pedagogue and active art critic Jēkabs Strazdiņš⁶⁴ (1905–1958). He was the son of a land surveyor's assistant and lived a peasant's life as a boy. Strazdiņš studied at the Latvian Academy of Art with such artists as the master of realist drawing Kārlis Miesnieks, Jānis Roberts Tillbergs and Ģederts Eliass, who was a more modernist and expressive interpreter of rural themes. In 1929, Strazdiņš was involved with the rather rebellious artists' group *Radigars*, which defended young artists' rights, depicted the 'truth of life' and brought art to the people, including travelling exhibitions in the countryside. Strazdiņš's few urban motifs were depicted with an emphasis on social criticism, showing places of poverty inhabited by vagrants and convicts. His dynamic figural compositions of agricultural work are not idyllic and rather remind us of the French realist Jean-François Millet's toiling peasants. The

62 In Latvian: Venjamiņa Blūma Rīgas zīmēšanas un gleznošanas skola.

63 D. Lamberga, *Painter and Draughtsman*. – Ansis Cīrulis: Saules pagalmos, p. 295.

64 On Jēkabs Strazdiņš see: J. Pujāts, *Zemnieku žanra meistars Jēkabs Strazdiņš* [Master of peasant genre Jēkabs Strazdiņš]. – *Latviešu tēlotāja māksla* [Latvian fine art]. Ed. I. Kreituse. Rīga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 1960, pp. 129–154; J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla 1915–1940*. Vol. 2, pp. 273–280; R. Brākere, *Jēkabs Strazdiņš*. Rīga: Zinātne, 1991.

hard work is depicted as a promise of a better future in comparison with urban misery. The most current topic is new farmers' attempts to cultivate their recently acquired land, representing land clearers, builders, animal tenders, water carriers, haymakers etc. Other favourite subjects are moments of rest when members of a family eat their lunch, have a nap or contemplate the beauty of nature (*New Farmers*, 1939; *Land Clearers*, 1939; *Daugava*, 1938, etc.). Warm colour ranges with minimal elements of *plein-air* painting predominate; Strazdiņš also used a plastic, linear form clearly inspired by Renaissance and baroque art examples. One of his major paintings, *Work* (1935, Fig. 8), was submitted to the Rome Scholarship competition, which provided an opportunity for one student of the Latvian Academy of Art to perfect his/her skills in Rome; although Strazdiņš did not win the prize, he is said to have been among the four finalists. The huge painting reportedly did not fit in the room where it was to be photographed and was described as based primarily on form and as somewhat close to Ferdinand Hodler's and Maurice Denis' art.⁶⁵ Strazdiņš's output most clearly poses the question of to what extent it can be viewed as an expression of official ideology; he painted neither Ulmanis nor Latvian deities but simple peasants with occasional folk tale imagery, likely corresponding to his deepest conviction about truth in art. Even as a convinced realist and figurist, he did not adapt well to Soviet art; deviations from socialist realism were spotted, leading to political repression and deportation in 1949. A certain digression from the official tone is apparent in some critical remarks reflecting 'gloomy, solemn moods' in the inter-war period: 'There are also sunny, happy moments in our countryside! But the author has only a sadly tuned instrument to play.'⁶⁶

Works that embody a very clear message were made even by artists whose general output differed greatly from the official ideology and was sometimes at odds with what was supposed to be 'healthy' Latvian art. Thus the prominent graphic artist, designer and pedagogue Sigismunds Vidbergs⁶⁷ (1890–1970), known in Latvian art history as a brilliant master of pen and ink drawing, was highly interested in erotic themes; he also illustrated numerous books, contributed to stage design, poster art, caricature, porcelain painting and other fields. His stylistic development progressed from art nouveau impulses through slight geometricisation to elegant, refined and voluptuous female imagery close to art deco in style. However, he created stained glass windows (*Metal Worker*, *Textile Worker*, *Docker*, and *Bricklayer*⁶⁸, Fig. 9–10) for Latvia's Work Chamber⁶⁹ building that are virtually indistinguishable

65 U. Skulme, J. Strazdiņa glezna 'Darbs'. – *Daugava* 1936, no. 9, p. 864.

66 G. Šķilters, J. Strazdiņa un Ž. Ventaskrasta darbu izstāde [Exhibition of works by J. Strazdiņš and Ž. Ventaskrasts]. – *Latvis* 10 June 1934.

67 On Sigismunds Vidbergs see: J. Siliņš, Sigismunds Vidbergs. – *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* 1926, no. 9, pp. 279–288; H. Vitols, Sigismunds Vidbergs, 75. [Toronto]: Vitols, 1965; O. Liepiņš, Sigismunds Vidbergs. *Veiverlija: Latvju Grāmata*, 1974; J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla 1915–1940*. Vol. 3, pp. 58–69; M. Bērziņa, Sigismunds Vidbergs. Rīga: Neputns, 2015.

68 Reproduced in: *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1938, no. 2, p. 56.

69 Latvia's Work Chamber was a sort of roof organisation founded in 1936 under which all existing trade unions had to unite in line with the overall consolidation processes promoted by the regime, similarly to artists' societies subsumed by the Chamber of Literature and Art. Work Chamber moved to its new, reconstructed premises in early 1938, and Vidbergs's stained glass windows decorated the large hall intended for 300 people (A. Osis, *Gājiens pa Latvijas Darba kameras jauno namu* [A tour around the new house of Latvia's Work Chamber]. – *Latvijas Darba Kameras Ziņas* 1938, no. 6, p. 16).

from examples of socialist realism. They look as if they were created decades later, with their monumental figures glorifying various professions, and with smoking chimneys as signs of industrialisation in the background. However, Vidbergs did not have to adapt to the Soviet system, as he fled to the West in 1944, ending up in New York and continuing his career with themes of Latvian refugees, more exotic female imagery and increasingly abstract combinations of forms.

What other general conclusions on Latvian art's overall development were reached by contemporaries? For example, the landscapist with a realist approach and art critic Oļģerts Saldavs (1907–1960) wrote in his overview of recent 'thematic' (genre) painting that Latvian art had followed the best examples of Dutch, French and even Italian art, but nevertheless still contained the specific traits of the Latvian world-view. Latvians were said to be a peasant nation and accordingly agricultural work was singled out as the leading theme, along with works with fishermen and workers as the main protagonists:

If we carefully and attentively inspect the most prominent Latvian painters' works, we will see all of the elements testifying to serious work, personality, problems and ideas vital to every creative and thoughtful individual. The basic principles of Latvian fine arts are those of artistic clarity and purity, and this is the single idea that can lead one through a sensitive encounter with the contemporary elements to the heights which an artwork needs to reach. Thus we would retain our artistic independence from potential alien influences. At the same time, studying the artistic traditions of old cultural nations, we would gradually approach the great flourishing of our art that will be deemed by history as Latvian national art.⁷⁰

On the one hand, such positive evaluations clearly predominated, and the question of whether more critical voices could have entered the public space remains hypothetical, probably related to self-censorship. On the other hand, Latvian national art was, even in 1940, considered to be making certain progress without having reached maturity. There was a sense that time and effort were still needed to complete this task which, however, was soon forcibly erased from the public agenda and replaced with an entirely different one: building socialist realism. Another cluster of issues involves morphological similarities between the embodiments of two different and even hostile ideologies, leading to a questioning of the idea of a radical break. The widely popularised stance of totalitarian art exhibiting common features across the widest historical backgrounds remains convincing to a large extent.⁷¹ Was the ideology of Latvian national art a sort of prelude to Soviet Latvian art? Some examples in writing about art and art itself, especially by Liberts, show the connection with totalitarian art, as these works largely did not outlive the regime they had served to glorify, and they are seen today as merely historical curi-

70 O. Saldavs, *Latviešu tematiskā glezniecība. – Senatne un Māksla 1940, no. 2, p. 147.*

71 See: I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China.* New York: Overlook Press, 2011.

osities. At the same time, the artistic ideal did not develop into an obligation for all, and this may be the factor that separated the ideology of authoritarian nationalist realism from that of the totalitarian socialist realism.