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Rethinking National Romanticism in the Architecture of Riga at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

SILVIJA GROSA

The article deals with the problem of interpretation related to national romanticism in Riga's early twentieth-century architecture, focusing on the development of the term, as well as on its suitability. The complex cultural-historical context of early twentieth-century Riga is delineated; as in many peripheries of Europe, Riga was permeated by searches for a national style in the neo-romanticist vein typical of the period. This study attempts to answer the question of whether this trend, known in the Latvian history of architecture as Latvian national romanticism, really expresses the aspirations for a Latvian national style, as Baltic German architects were involved in its implementation and the trend was critically reviewed in early twentieth-century Latvian periodicals. In addition, architects of Latvian origin also put forward some ideas regarding classical heritage as a possible paradigm of national art.

Fifteen years ago Riga's historical centre was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, testifying to the unique character and artistic quality of its architecture. This prestigious status has led both local and international circles to take an interest in Riga's architecture at the turn of the twentieth century; the number of publications dealing with this subject has also increased. Still, not all issues related to the study and interpretation of Riga's architecture have been resolved.

This article aims to take up the problem of interpretation of 'national romanticism' in Riga's architecture; the issue is well described in the text found on the website of the Riga Art Nouveau Museum:

National romanticism reflects the attempts of Riga's architects to create a specific Latvian architecture. This trend of art nouveau flourished between 1905 and 1911. Its sources of inspiration were examples of ethnographic wooden buildings and applied arts. Latvian architects paid particular attention to real, natural building materials. Buildings of national romanticism stand out in their heavy forms, monumental sublimity, steep roofs, window openings with chamfered upper parts and elegant décor of ethnographic motifs, used with

reserve and sometimes transformed into rounded, plastic ornaments of forms, in line with the general aesthetic tenets of art nouveau. At least every third or fourth art nouveau building in Riga can be more or less related to national romanticism. Artistic composition often plays with constructive elements: metal lintels, ends of supporting beams, etc. The most significant masters were E. Laube, K. Pēkšēns, A. Vanags and A. Malvēss. The trend also features in the output of local Baltic German architects.¹

Such an opinion, in an even more simplified, axiomatic form, appears in both cultural history programmes of general schools and Riga's tourist guides: 'National romanticism is a trend used by Latvian architects to create their own architecture, exclusively typical of Latvia.'

How did such a conception emerge? Is this view based on facts or has it resulted merely from interpretation?

Before dealing with the issue of the national romanticist trend in the architecture of Riga, one should recall that an active process of social change and urbanisation happened in the territory of Latvia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It had begun already in the mid-nineteenth century – the Province of Livonia was one of the strategically and economically most important regions of the Russian empire and the pace of development was much faster than elsewhere in Russia. Riga was among the largest cities in the Baltic region at that time. The rapid economic growth of the city had a very complex socio-political background. As a result of shifting political powers, the majority of Riga's inhabitants were still German in the 1870s; they held privileged positions in the municipal government, as well as in all of the most prestigious and well-paid professions. German was the only language of education at schools. Because of the politics of Russification, German was replaced by Russian in both official documents and schools after 1881. From 1867 onwards, but especially after 1897², an influx of Latvian peasants radically changed the ethnic proportions of Riga, and Latvians made up forty-five per cent of Riga's population at the turn of the century.³ Still, social mobility was difficult for Latvians. Only in the early twentieth century, when October Manifesto by Emperor Nicholas II⁴ declared equal civil rights for all after the Revolution of 1905, did Latvians become the dominant ethnic group among small entrepreneurs and house owners. Thus national self-awareness developed, possibly also influencing architectural styles. However, questions remain: how justified are claims that a trend called 'Latvian national romanticism' emerged within art nouveau architecture in early twentieth-century Riga, and is it true that 'Latvian national

1 Riga Art Nouveau Centre, <http://www.jugendstils.riga.lv/lat/jugendstilsRiga//Nacionalasiromantisms/> (accessed 20 September 2011).

2 K. Volfarte, *Latviešu Rīga [Latvian Riga]. – Katram bija sava Rīga: daudznacionālas pilsētas portrets no 1857. līdz 1914. gadam [Everyone had one's own Riga: a portrait of a multi-national city from 1857 to 1914]*. Eds. K. Volfarte, E. Oberlenders. Rīga: AGB, 2004, p. 32.

3 K. Volfarte, *Latviešu Rīga*, p. 32.

4 Высочайший манифест [‘Об усовершенствовании государственного порядка’ от 17 октября 1905 года]. – Вестник Спб. Градоначальства 18 October 1905.

romanticism is a completely independent artistic phenomenon rooted more in Latvia than outside it’?⁵

National romanticism: style, epoch an the problem of interpretation

As early as the late nineteenth century, there was an active building process in Riga and its architecture largely coincided with general European architectural developments: late historicism started here in the 1890s. Around 1898 art nouveau appeared in Riga’s architecture, becoming the most significant bearer of innovation. Thus the period from 1898 till 1914 can be called the art nouveau period in Riga. The early phase of art nouveau developed into a short-lived boom about 1903, and late art nouveau started about 1905/1906, with such historical reference points as the events of 1905 and the beginning of World War I.

Along with art nouveau, there were other stylistic trends in Riga’s architecture, which overlap and complicate the drawing of boundaries. Often buildings, most of which were multi-storeyed rental buildings, had innovative plans combined with new principles of décor and ornamental motifs on the façades. Still, a modern spatial structure could be hidden behind a façade decorated in the historicist style: as in many peripheries, art nouveau in Riga did not oppose historicism⁶, and a denial of classical tradition was also lacking. The reciprocity of various stylistic phenomena, including those of *Heimatstil* and national romanticism, was fostered by the ‘neo-romantic platform common to all turn-of-the-century arts’⁷.

In about 1907 a return to classical artistic heritage was already evident in plastic décor, but neo-classicism, which flourished in Riga from 1910 to 1914, was not exclusive; it ‘peacefully’ coexisted with modernist elements.

Stylistic tendencies in Riga’s architecture took shape in line with the general processes of European art and architecture: sources of inspiration were found in German, Austrian, Belgian and Scottish architecture. But, during the late art nouveau, impulses from Nordic countries became especially prominent; Finnish architecture was mainly useful in the attempts to integrate vernacular themes and particular motifs in the contemporary architecture. This trend, emerging in Riga during the late art nouveau period and lasting from 1905 to roughly 1911, was one of the most innovative trends in Riga’s turn-of-the-century architecture. It was established as ‘national romanticism’ in Latvian architectural history with the first publications by the historian of architecture Jānis Krastiņš in the 1980s; still, as mentioned before, interpretation and methodology are problematic. Krastiņš emphasised that ‘national romanticism ... was an attempt

5 J. Krastiņš, *Latvijas arhitektūras nacionālā identitāte* [National identity of Latvian architecture]. – *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1989, no. 1, p. 10.

6 M. Brancis, *Jugendstils un baltvācu grāmatu grafika Latvijā 19. gs. beigās un 20. gs. sākumā* [Art nouveau and Baltic German book design in Latvia in the late 19th century – early 20th century]. – *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis* [Proceedings of the Latvian Academy of Sciences] 1994, no. 1, p. 25.

7 E. Kļaviņš, *Neoromantisma pazīmes Latvijas 19. gs. beigās un 20. gs. sākuma tēlotāja mākslā* [Features of neo-romanticism in Latvian visual art at the turn of the 20th century]. – *Romantisms un neoromantisms Latvijas mākslā* [Romanticism and neo-romanticism in the art of Latvia]. Ed. E. Grosmane. Riga: AGB, 1998, p. 16.

by Latvian architects to create a national art of construction, using the formal means found in ethnographic wooden buildings, as well as motifs rooted in the traditional applied arts. Finnish architecture of the time provided an impulse in the development of national romanticism, but the main reason was the rapid boom of Latvian culture and increasing Latvian self-awareness.⁸

Turn-of-the-century culture in Latvia and Riga, as in other peripheries of Europe, was permeated by searches for a national style in the romantic mood typical of that period. However, the society of Riga remained multi-ethnic; even though the role of Latvians grew increasingly, including the number of Latvian architects and their participation in designing new buildings, Baltic German architects retained an important role and commissioners belonged to various ethnic groups. Although stylistic experiments were similar, the opinion that 'local Baltic German architects have created several works in the vein of Latvian national romanticism'⁹ is debatable. Jānis Krastiņš writes that 'the artistic language of national romanticism was so expressive, potent and, most of all, an indispensable part of the regional context, that it sometimes also showed in the creations of local German architects and those of other nationalities. Naturally, this reflected not only respect for the spiritual endeavours of the core ethnic group but also a testimony of essential politeness and acculturation.'¹⁰ But the actual situation was much more complex. One should take into account that the events of 1905 had raised tensions between Latvian and German ethnic groups, thus making it almost impossible for Baltic German architects to seek inspiration in their Latvian colleagues' works at that time. In research on Latvian history, there is a widespread tendency to see the events of 1905 only from the Latvian nation's perspective: as a turning point that consolidated the national idea. However, the art historian Imants Lancmanis is right to emphasise that such an approach is one-sided, although consensus is really impossible on the events of 1905, such as the burning down of manors, the killing of German landlords and priests, and the following punitive expeditions.¹¹

Outline of historiography

To understand the problem of how to interpret national romanticism, one needs to look at the historiography of art nouveau in Latvia. The first few publications dealing with late nineteenth-century – early twentieth-century architecture and decorative art are found in the periodicals of the time, such as the local German, Latvian and Russian press, exhibition catalogues and yearbooks. The majority of them consist of informative texts containing data on particular building objects, such as commissioners, architects and technical expenses, as well as laconic mentions of the buildings'

8 J. Krastiņš, *Rīgas arhitektūras stili* [Architectural styles in Riga]. Rīga: Jumava, 2005, p. 142.

9 J. Krastiņš, *Rīgas arhitektūras stili*, p. 150.

10 J. Krastiņš, *Latvijas arhitektūras nacionālā identitāte*, p. 15.

11 I. Lancmanis, 1905. gada revolūcija Latvijā un piektais bauslis [The revolution of 1905 in Latvia and the fifth commandment]. – Paper presented at the international conference *Informācija, revolūcija, reakcija: 1905–2005* [Information, revolution, reaction: 1905–2005], 23–25 November 2005. Proceedings. Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2005, p. 18.

styles (e.g. Italian renaissance, Low German gothic and modern style). An informative quality also typifies publications prepared by the Riga Architects' Society: *Riga und seine Bauten*, published in 1903, and *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*, published since 1907. The second group of materials found in turn-of-the-century periodicals are opinions expressed in reviews and reflections by architects, artists and publicists, whose texts largely conform to the neo-romanticist and moralist ideas current at the time. Although some publications urged the creation of individual national styles in architecture and art (the best known being the article by Eizēns Laube in the magazine *Zalktis (Grass-Snake)* in 1908), in most cases stylistic interpretations of architecture and decorative arts were fragmentary, empirical, subjectively biased and most often critically negative. This was especially typical of the Latvian press, which generally criticised the direct appropriation of samples from 'German periodicals' or opposed the phenomenon known as 'national romanticism'. For instance, one typical opinion was expressed by an anonymous contributor to the newspaper *Rīgas Avīze (Riga Newspaper)*: '...during the last few years buildings in Riga appear completely different in comparison with earlier times. [...] These buildings of the new fashion are very strange throughout. [...] This new style is called the 'Finnish style'. Whether these buildings are better in respect to practical benefits of spatial arrangement or outer appearance, we do not know. But the buildings themselves do not please from the cultural viewpoint.'¹²

The negative attitude towards the early twentieth-century architectural heritage, common throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, occurred in Latvia, too. Publications dealing with the output of particular architects tended to omit this period or interpret it as inescapable pandering to the public taste. Considering the professional growth of art history in the inter-war period, the first assessments of late nineteenth – early twentieth-century architecture in Latvia and Riga occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. A typical example is the text by Jānis Rutmanis in the chapter on Latvian architecture included in the publication *Mākslas vēsture (Art History, 1934)*, edited by Vilhelms Purvītis.¹³ It contains critical remarks about Mikhail Eisenstein and 'the flamboyant secessionist modernism current in the West at that time'¹⁴, also presenting one of the first assessments of Riga's early twentieth-century architecture in Latvian art history. Unfortunately, the opinion was influenced by the official ideology of the ruling authoritarian regime. Rutmanis's critique is positive only in regard to the 'second-generation' Latvian architects who 'delved into the search for the traits of national character after the Finnish so-called Nordic style, espoused by Lars Sonck, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen. Similarly to our conditions, they took the forms of ethnographic wooden buildings as the basis of architecture, emphasising national material and ethnographic ornament'¹⁵; this was not just a one-sided view of their output but also a complete disregard of buildings designed by Baltic German architects,

12 [An Associate], Kāds vārds Rīgas Latviešu biedrības nama celšanas lietā [A word about the building of the Riga Latvian Society house]. – *Rīgas Avīze* 19 November (2 December) 1908.

13 [J. Rutmanis], Latviešu arhitektūra 19. un 20. g.s. [Latvian architecture in the 19th and 20th centuries]. – *Mākslas vēsture [Art history]*. Vol. 1. Ed. V. Purvītis. Rīga: Grāmatu draugs, 1934, p. 255.

14 [J. Rutmanis], Latviešu arhitektūra 19. un 20. g.s., p. 255.

15 [J. Rutmanis], Latviešu arhitektūra 19. un 20. g.s., p. 255.

which make up the largest part of the period's architectural heritage. The text also delineates the future stylistic development of architecture within the period in question: 'This essentially romantic trend, close to secessionist modernism, soon was opposed by the same generation, influenced by the strong Russian empire style ... and its classical balance, harmony of forms and clarity of construction won the favour of the most fanatical followers of the Nordic trend.'¹⁶

It is clear that this text was approved by the architect and theoretician Eižens Laube, who had become the official voice of the state during President Kārlis Ulmanis's rule. It is noteworthy that this rather biased view would become a sort of milestone in future assessments of national romanticist architecture, creating an interpretative basis for the exoneration of art nouveau in Latvia during the 1980s. Then, unlike in the first decades after World War II, systematic and purposeful research on architecture and plastic arts of the turn of the twentieth century began.¹⁷

Focusing on architecture in particular, one should emphasise that the first attempt at an objective analysis of Riga's art nouveau architecture was the diploma work 'Art Nouveau in the Architecture of Riga' by the art historian Edgars Dubiņš, defended at the Latvian Academy of Art in 1971; it marked an important turn in the exoneration of art nouveau. During the last decades of the twentieth century, some publications by émigré authors emerged in the West, but they still featured the negative opinions on art nouveau architecture and its décor established in the inter-war period; these influenced both the volume and content of interpretation. For instance, the most prominent Latvian émigré art historian, Jānis Siliņš, expressed the following criticism of art nouveau in his monograph *Latvijas māksla: 1800–1914* (*Art of Latvia, 1800–1914*, the chapter on architecture till World War I, dealing with turn-of-the-century architecture): 'Imitations of the belated and often banalised art nouveau appear in the buildings of Riga. Tastelessly packed and exaggerated tin and plaster decorations of façades are found in Mikhail Eisenstein's ... buildings at Alberta and Elizabetes Streets. ... the following of samples and fashion also typifies other Latvian architects' works.'¹⁸ Siliņš briefly touches upon the output of particular architects, pointing out that 'Germans still held the leading position'¹⁹ in turn-of-the-century architecture, and then follows Jānis Rutmanis and focuses on the works of Eižens Laube and Aleksandrs Vanags. He praises particular buildings as influenced by the 'Finnish national romanticist trend'²⁰ and expressing 'Nordic sensibility'. Siliņš stresses the return of traditionalism in Latvian architecture by the end of the period and the search for a Latvian style in both architects' works, especially in Laube's projects during the independent state of Latvia.

The first comprehensive study of Riga's art nouveau architecture in connection with urban planning issues was the dissertation *The Development of Riga's Architecture in*

16 [J. Rutmanis], *Latviešu arhitektūra* 19. un 20. g.s., p. 255.

17 For more on this topic, see S. Grosa, *The Historiography of Art Nouveau in the Context of the History of Art History in Latvia*. – Paper presented at the conference *The History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*. Torun, The Centre of Contemporary Art, 14–16 September 2010.

18 J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla: 1800–1914* [Art of Latvia: 1800–1914]. Vol. 2. Stockholm: Daugava, 1980, pp. 365–366.

19 J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla*, p. 382.

20 J. Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla*, p. 373.

the Second Half of the 19th – Early 20th Century (Развитие архитектуры г. Риги второй половины XIX–начала XX веков) by the architect Jānis Krastiņš, defended in 1973. In 1980 his book *Jugendstils Rīgas arhitektūrā*²¹ was published, laying the basis for further research and publications on Riga's architecture. Krastiņš's opus was especially significant in specifying the architects of particular buildings, gathering data on the numbers of buildings constructed in Riga and reflecting the wide scale of construction at that time. His research also involved phenomena outside art nouveau that were common at the turn of the twentieth century.²² Krastiņš's publications were crucial for art nouveau in Riga, not only lifting it to an equal position in comparison with other historical styles but even bringing it into the foreground. In the following years, several monographs on Riga's architecture by Krastiņš were published; thus he established his name as a specialist of Riga's nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture, and his opinions and conclusions are almost never disputed.

Still Krastiņš's inclusive conception of art nouveau, useful to exonerate the trend that 'comprises art nouveau in its accepted and specific sense along with national romanticism, neo-classicism and the rationalist trend',²³ requires differentiation in our day because it reveals contradictions and causes a simplified interpretation of style, especially in respect to 'Latvian national romanticism' as a stylistic category. It is important to point out that this is rooted in the above-mentioned conception nurtured by the authoritarian regime established in 1934. Ironically, this attitude turned out to be suitable for the Soviet occupational regime, coinciding with the current lines of thought in the USSR during the 1980s. Then leading researchers of art nouveau emphasised the ethnically national motivation as innovative and opposed to the 'retrospective' neo-classicism. The statement about 'special attention paid to the use of natural building materials, avoiding any imitation'²⁴ is also debatable, as the mentioned traits are characteristic of late art nouveau architecture in general.²⁵

National romanticism or nordic style?

The notion of national romanticism can be elucidated from different perspectives. It became current in world histories of architecture beginning in the 1960s as a stylistic category and most often described certain phenomena in the architecture of Scandinavian and Nordic countries.²⁶ This has been explained in different ways: a narrow reading stresses the formal traits; a wide reading, such as the one proposed by Barbara Miller Lane, includes German and Scandinavian architecture from 1885 till

21 J. Krastiņš, *Jugendstils Rīgas arhitektūrā* [Art nouveau in the architecture of Riga]. Riga: Zinātne, 1980.

22 J. Krastiņš, *Eklektisms Rīgas arhitektūrā* [Eclecticism in the architecture of Riga]. Riga: Zinātne, 1988.

23 E. Kļaviņš, *Latvijas XIX. gs. beigū un XX. gs. sākuma tēlotājas mākslas ikonogrāfija un stilistiskais raksturojums* [Iconography and stylistic description of late 19th century – early 20th century visual arts in Latvia]. Riga: Mācību iestāžu metodiskais kabinets, 1983, p. 27.

24 J. Krastiņš, *Rīga – jūgendstila metropole / Riga – Art Nouveau Metropolis*. Riga: Baltika, 1996, p. 40.

25 For more on these issues, see S. Grosa, *Ata Ķeniņa skolas ēka un nacionālais romantisms Rīgas 20. gs. sākuma arhitektūrā* [Atis Ķeniņš School building and national romanticism in the architecture of Riga at the turn of the 20th century]. – *Latvijas māksla tuvplānos* [Latvian art in close-ups]. Ed. K. Ābele. Riga: Neputns, 2003, pp. 62–63.

26 S. Ringbom, *Stone, Style and Truth: The Vogue for Natural Stone in Nordic Architecture 1880–1910*. (Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen aikakauskirja 91.) Helsinki, 1987, p. 153.

1920.²⁷ The unifying factor is related to certain social and aesthetic ideals promoted by national romanticism, and the politicised overtone emphasising the word 'national' or regional. In respect to formal means and aspirations, national romanticism is akin to *Heimatstil*. In fact, both phenomena take part in the same process, in which architects choose a deliberate archaisation of architectural forms, and look for archetypal origins of architecture and the imagined or real invention of the region's historical traditions in architecture, including vernacular architectural motifs and patriarchal themes. Differences are found mostly in the sources chosen for interpretation and in attempts to foster certain social ideals.

As is known, the term 'national romanticism' is used in a wider sense as well, characterising certain processes in the cultural history of a concrete society. In Latvia, this sense of national romanticism was first represented by the spiritual and social movement known as 'Neo-Latvians' during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, searches for Latvian identity and archetypal origins entered visual arts when the artists' group *Rūķis* (*Gnome*) took up stylistically diverse idioms. They used subjects and images from folk tales, trying to express or, more correctly, to invent the code of Latvianness in a visually perceptible form without concrete reference points in the past. In early twentieth-century decorative art, the strongest reference point was stylisations of ethnographic ornament. Architecture featured similar experiments. It is interesting to note that Eižens Laube also pointed this out in his publication of 1934: 'Architects' spirit, intellect and intuition, when deeply focused on the given task [creation of a national architecture – S.G.], can find elements in the national history, prehistory or traditions useful for the present-day architectural tasks of the nation and state, and help to express the ethnographic-national quality in the realisations of these tasks. Examples of such actions are found in the searches for an ethnographic-Latvian style, as well as in the movement of *Heimatkunst* in Germany at the beginning of this century.'²⁸ But, in general, as in visual arts, there was no common national romanticist stylistic platform in architecture, contrary to widespread opinion; the pursuit of Latvian identity can be attributed to several different stylistic idioms in Riga's buildings, including the neo-classicist trend. National romanticism in the architecture of Riga and Latvia is comprised of different stylistic phenomena and does not fit in the time-span of a few years. An early and distinct manifestation of national romanticism in architecture was the pavilion of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition (fig. 1), organised in Riga to coincide with the 10th All-Russian Archaeological Congress²⁹ (1896, architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns). After the turn of the century, national romanticism, on some occasions, was identified with the Nordic style, also exhibiting elements of vernacular culture (a typical example is the Kļaviņa house at 26 Marijas Street, designed by the architects Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eižens Laube). But soon a tendency appeared

27 B. Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

28 E. Laube, *Nacionālā arhitektūra* [National architecture], quoted from: E. Laube, *Raksti par arhitektūru* [Writings on architecture]. Lincoln: Vaidava, 1960, p. 59.

29 Jeremy Howard has also emphasised the role of this exhibition in the context of national romanticism: J. Howard, *Latvian National Romanticism and Art Nouveau: Origins and Synthesis*. – *Romantisms un neoromantisms Latvijas mākslā*, pp. 129–131.

of expressing national ideas in neo-classicist forms, including plastic décor in which there were attempts to integrate ancient Latvian myths into traditional classical art.

These considerations allow for a terminological castling, choosing the version of Nordic style still current in early twentieth-century, Nordic art nouveau or Nordic national romanticist style. This makes it possible to put aside ideological aspects, even more so because these formal means can be synthesised with art nouveau, especially with its geometrical version.

The influence of Finnish architecture is clear in the development of the trend. The Baltic German architect Bernhard Bielenstein³⁰ was among the first to promote the Finnish architectural style theoretically; the designers of the first artistically important buildings were Latvians – Konstantins Pēkšēns and his young disciples Eižens Laube and Aleksandrs Vanags – but commissioners belonged to different ethnic groups. Among the first was the Russian merchant M. Nesterov, whose rental building at 5 Andreja Pumpura Street / 2a Jura Alunāna Street (fig. 2) was designed by the Finnish architects Armas Lindgren and Knut Wasastjerna in 1906. Aleksandrs Vanags supervised the construction of the building. The well-considered, functional layout of the building, and its fine, decorative interior provide an ideal example of a high-quality interior design of late art nouveau in Riga. The reserved plastic décor combines several motifs from classical art, geometric ornament and stylised art nouveau motifs, freed from tension and made more static, thus pointing towards art deco interior traits in the 1920s.

In fact, the trend that sometimes coincided with aspirations for a Latvian national style was an international phenomenon in Riga's architecture. Its roots are also international: the above-mentioned phenomenon of Finnish architecture that emerged as a synthesis of various elements in the period before 1904, including German medieval elements, nineteenth-century American architecture (a version of the 'Richardsonian romanesque'), Bronze Age architecture of the Mediterranean basin, etc. This was a sort of deliberate archaisation³¹ of the art of construction, enhanced with transformed creative impulses from such modernist classics as Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Olbrich, especially after 1904.

Archaisation was also typical for some Riga buildings – for example, evident in some elements taken from romanesque fortresses or plastered imitation of rustication. A characteristic example is the Brigaders house at 58 Brīvības Street (1906, architect Aleksandrs Vanags): with its monumental, massive building block featuring laconic décor; it imitates specific means typical of romanesque fortifications, reminiscent of a fortress with its geometrical motifs of ethnographic ornaments (fig. 3). This impression is stressed by the contrast with the nearby building in the Tudor gothic style at 17 Lāčplēša Street (1896, architect Edmund von Trompowsky). The Brigaders house is one of the Nordic style examples with an accentuated national romanticist idea.

30 The lecture was presented to the Riga Architects' Society on 18 October 1907. (Latvian State History Archives, coll. 2748, reg. 1, file 8, pp. 79–80.)

31 P. Korvenmaa, Regionalism: Import, Innovation, Export. The Role of Finnish Turn-of-the-Century Architecture in the Baltic Sphere. – *Jugendstils. Laiks un telpa: Baltijas jūras valstis 19.–20. gs. mijā / Art Nouveau. Time and Space: The Baltic Sea Countries at the Turn of the 20th Century*. Ed. S. Grosa. Riga: Jumava, 1999, p. 207.



1.

General panorama of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, Riga, 1896. Illustration from the magazine *Austrums* (*Eastern Wind*) 1896, no. 10.



2. Nesterov rental house at 5 Andreja Pumpura Street / 2a Jura Alunāna Street (1906, architects Armas Lindgren, Knut Wasastjerna and Aleksandrs Vanags). Illustration from S. Grosa, *Art Nouveau in Riga: Taking A Walk Through Riga in the Art Nouveau Era*. Riga: Jumava, 2003, p. 46.



3. Brigaders rental house and storage building at 58 Brivibas Street (1906, architect Aleksandrs Vanags). Illustration from *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*, Riga, 1908, p. 116.



4. Pārups rental house at 10 Vilandes Street (1908, architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns). Detail of the façade. Photo by Silvija Grosa.



5. Virsis rental and storage building at 62 Brīvības Street (1908, architect Eižens Laube). Illustration from *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*, Riga, 1909, p. 80.



6. Virsis rental and storage building at 62 Brīvības Street (1908, architect Eižens Laube). Detail of the façade. Photo by Silvija Grosa.



7.

Cross Church at 120 Ropažu Street (1909, architects Wilhelm Bockslaff and Edgar Friesendorff). Photo by Silvija Grosa.



8.

Riga Latvian Society building (1910, architects Ernests Pole and Eizēns Laube; frieze by Janis Rozentāls). Illustration from S. Grosa, *Art Nouveau in Riga*, p. 36.

The architect Aleksandrs Vanags was one of the Latvian intellectuals actively involved in ethnographic culture³², but ethnographic motifs in the décor of his buildings often serve to create generalised archetypal associations. A typical example is the building at 31 Blaumaņa Street (1911), whose façade features a granite column supporting the corner bay window – a direct quote from ancient Egyptian architecture. It is one of the main decorative accents, along with interpretations of ethnographic motifs and vernacular themes. The theme of ancient Egypt also appears in the Baltic German architect Wilhelm Bockslaff's design for the contractor Feldmann's house portal at 47 Nometņu Street (1909), interpreting the subject of Egyptian pylons. Fascination with archetypal motifs was also displayed in radically different experiments: for example, the Baltic German architect Eduard Bush's private rental building at 12a Skolas Street (1908) features a gate portal with plastic, rusticated figures of a man and monkey, most likely intended to illustrate the ideas of human evolution.

In the façade décor of Riga's buildings, some means of the Nordic national romanticist style are complemented with typical art nouveau motifs and elements more closely coinciding with *Heimatstil*, such as the use of half-timbering. Half-timbering was equally widespread in both Latvian and Baltic German architects' works – stylistic purism was not favoured and a synthesis of various decorative elements within one building was very common. Examples are the Riga Second Mutual Credit Society Bank, the residence at 46 Brīvības Street (1907, architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns) and the Pārups rental building at 10 Vilandes Street (1908, architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns), featuring a figural relief related to classical mythology (fig. 4). However, the dancing maidens with rose garlands allow for a broader neo-romantic message, including references to the popular art nouveau theme of music, and revealing the ideas of national romanticism.

The Krastkalns rental building and store at 47 Brīvības Street, designed by Eižens Laube in 1907, has an expressive, asymmetrical silhouette, possibly an interpretation of Lars Sonck's Tirkkonen House in Helsinki (1900), decorated with a synthesis of imagined, seemingly vernacular motifs and typical art nouveau elements. Such a combination characterises several buildings designed by Laube (for instance, at 11 Alberta Street and 27 Miera Street, both in 1908). Sources of inspiration for these motifs are seemingly quite varied: the Virsis rental building and store at 62 Brīvības Street (fig. 5) has a biomorphic, ornamentally decorated portal complemented with two figural reliefs, symbolising Architecture (fig. 6) and Sculpture. The prototype of these rusticated images from sandstone brick is found in the architecture of Berlin, on the façade at 110 Kurfürstendamm (architect Max Bischoff, sculptor Richard Gerschel)³³, although these images have different meanings.

In comparison with Finnish examples, more angular forms and planes were favoured in Riga, possibly showing the orientation towards the transformed tradition of vernacular wooden buildings, although the chamfered window openings derived from wooden architecture are common elsewhere as well – particularly in Helsinki

32 P. Kampe, A. Vanaga dzīve un darbs [Life and work of Aleksandrs Vanags]. – Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts [Ministry of Education Monthly] 1929, no. 6/6, pp. 497–516.

33 Architektonische Rundschau: Skizzenblätter aus allen Gebieten der Baukunst 1908, Heft 2, p. 16.

but also in Saint Petersburg (several buildings by Fedor Lidval on Vasilevsky Island, Kamennooostrovsky Boulevard, the Aleksei Putilov rental building by Ippolit Pretro, 1906–1907³⁴, etc.). In the architecture of Riga, there are also attempts to synthesise some archetypal motifs with the means of art nouveau's geometrical version. But around 1907 motifs and themes of the classical tradition were included in décor, thus deviating from the internationally accepted term 'national romanticism'.³⁵

Nordic national romanticism and classical tradition

The Nordic national romanticist style in Riga is most manifest in the architecture of residences, with some exceptions: Cross Church (1909, architects Wilhelm Bockslaff and Edgar Friesendorff), the Atis Ķeniņš School building (1905, architects Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eizēns Laube), and the Āgenskalns water tower (1910, architect Wilhelm Bockslaff).

One of the earliest and artistically important examples of Nordic national romanticist style architecture is the Atis Ķeniņš School building at 15/17 Tērbatas Street. The main decorative idea of the façade is based on contrasts of textures. Early twentieth-century sources (the façade drawing in the project and a photograph in *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen* of 1907³⁶) show that the inscription 'Ķeniņa reālskola' (in Latvian, Russian and German) was an important element of the façade composition. At that time, the façade had several details that enhanced its decorative-ness, but these were lost during later repairs, as was most of the interior finish. The decorative solution of the entrance with the small passage and vestibule is relatively well preserved. Especially interesting is the plastered frieze reminiscent of ancient Egyptian relief *en creux*. Despite the later layers of oil paint, one can sense the peculiarity of the geometric motifs combined in the frieze, which can be described as a fusion of Latvian grass-snake and classical meander. The interior of the hall, known from early twentieth-century photographs, clearly manifests the impulses of the vernacular tradition. The wall finish is important in the realisation of the overall decorative idea: stylised birds flying towards the sun are shown on the wall, symbolically pointing towards spiritual enlightenment. This idea coincided both with the general function of the building and the practical usage of the hall: it was meant for concerts, musical and literary evenings and public lectures. Thus both façade and interior solutions demonstrate the ideals of national romanticism, as well as modernist tendencies of the time and a wish to create a general Nordic image.

Cross Church at 120 Ropažu Street (1909, architects Wilhelm Bockslaff and Edgar Friesendorff) is an equally expressive embodiment of the 'Nordic dream'³⁷, integrating the plastic architectural volumes of early medieval German lands into the subtle geometric version of art nouveau (fig. 7). Similar to most turn-of-the-century buildings in

34 L. A. Kirikova, *St Petersburg: The Challenge of Modernism. – Architecture 1900: Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, St. Petersburg*. Eds. J. Howard, K. Hallas-Murula. Tallinn: Eesti Arhitektuurimuuseum, 2003, p. 115.

35 B. Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture*, p. 7.

36 *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*. 1. Jg. Riga: Architektenverein zu Riga, 1907, p. 68.

37 B. Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture*, p. 17.

Riga, the Cross Church interior has been deformed by later reconstructions; still, one can sense that the spatial solution and decorative finish were envisaged as a unified ensemble, oriented towards natural materials and a sort of minimalism. This shows in the peculiar perimeter frieze made of clay tile shards and the items of furnishing, such as benches with a reserved decoration. According to the art historian Jeremy Howard, Cross Church in Riga, influenced by Lars Sonck and Josef Hoffmann³⁸, is a unique and innovative example, not just in Riga but in the whole Baltic region, of sacred architecture.

The discussed examples represent a huge amount of material: in the period up to 1911 there were a large number of Nordic national romanticist style buildings. Most of Riga's architects had taken up this idiom, finding new possibilities for creative work. Despite bright artistic achievements, around 1908 Nordic-style buildings received ever more critical evaluation. Jūlijs Madernieks, the art critic and outstanding master of ornamental and ethnographic stylisations, was one of the most active on this theme in the early twentieth-century Latvian press.³⁹ This points to the role of German culture in the flourishing of national romanticism in Finnish architecture, described also by Finnish historians of architecture.⁴⁰ Possibly 'German roots' were decisive in prompting critical opinions of the Nordic national romanticist style, in Latvia indirectly indicating the centuries of German domination.

Ideas of the classical heritage as a possible paradigm of national art were also proposed among Latvian architects, especially after 1911. A contemporary's testimony is significant here. The art historian Eduards Kļaviņš has found the draft article 'Jaunā Rīga' (New Riga) by the artist Jāzeps Grosvalds, preserved in his archive, and writes the following in the monograph on Grosvalds:

He [Jāzeps Grosvalds – S.G.] identified the new Riga and especially recent buildings with the Latvian Riga: 'You should see how, with such an informed courage, the yellow Latvian house at the corner of Elizabetes and Strēlnieku Streets demonstrates its solid, rounded forehead to the surrounding buildings – the guardians of the baronial district clothed in gothic, showing where their rule ends.' The last mentioned building, constructed in 1910, was designed by the architects Ernests Pole and Mārtiņš Nukša. [...] Could the ideas and tendency of this article be somehow inspired by them?⁴¹

The mentioned building is a pronounced and indubitable example of the decorative neo-classicism typical of Riga.

Practice also confirms the aspirations of inscribing the Latvian style in the classical heritage of architecture and art. A typical and very significant example is the Riga

38 J. Howard, *Style and Patronage in Latvian Architecture and Design of the *début-de-siècle* Period*. – *Jugendstils. Laiks un telpa*, p. 211.

39 J. Madernieks, *Baltijas mākslas gada grāmata [A yearbook of Baltic art]*. – *Dzimtenes Vēstnesis* 14 (27) February 1909.

40 P. Korvenmaa, *Regionalism: Import, Innovation, Export*, p. 206.

41 E. Kļaviņš, *Džo: Jāzeps Grosvalda dzīve un māksla [Džo: Life and art of Jāzeps Grosvalds]*. Riga: Neputns, 2006, p. 115.

Latvian Society building (1910, architects Ernests Pole and Eižens Laube; frieze by the artist Janis Rozentāls) (fig. 8). It is symptomatic that the design of this main centre of national ideology was changed: the initial Nordic-style building by Eižens Laube was replaced by a neo-classical one by Ernests Pole. The final neo-classical image, as aptly noted by Jeremy Howard, symbolised the belonging of Latvians as a cultural nation to the classical European tradition.⁴² The allegorical decorative frieze (painted cement combined with *tessera* mosaic) on the Riga Latvian Society building façade by Janis Rozentāls played a special role; it generated wide resonance during its creation in Riga's (especially Latvian) society.⁴³ The frieze consists of separate (seven in total) panels arranged in a closed composition on the façade, balanced with the building's architectonic elements and emphasising the overall rhythm. The flattened depth of the space, stylisation of images and objects (figures and elements subjected to this in various degrees) and contouring enhance decorative qualities that are decisive in the colour solution. However, the colouring is also tonally subtle, with nuances created by surface textures and mosaic elements that are sensitive to changes of light at different times of the day and in different seasons. An iconographic explanation of the allegorical compositions is found in the press of the day:

As to the allegorical paintings, they all have emerged from the world of Latvian sacred tales. The famous mythological images symbolise power, wisdom and beauty. *Pērkons* (Thunder), the symbol of power, is placed in the middle between two columns. He holds a fire hammer in his hand because he is the blacksmith of heaven and earth; a white swan in *Pērkons*'s other hand symbolises the heavens and the sea; he knows the silent depths of the sea and has seen the clear distances of the sky permeated by sunlight. Two images stand next to *Pērkons* on both sides: one is physical, the other – spiritual power. People have gathered around, striving towards power. To the right [to the left from the spectator's viewpoint – S.G.] there is *Potrimps* – the god of light and beauty. He rides over seas with the sun horses. Two young people – a girl and a boy (this is mankind) – with their outstretched arms, stand on the side in ecstatic joy, longing for light and beauty as the last redeemer and consoler of mankind's grave sufferings. Sky over their heads, consecrated earth beneath their feet, infinite sea and light in front of them The combination in the third painting is real luck for Rozentāls. *Pikols* has been taken as the symbol of wisdom. Usually he is considered the god of death that destroys everything. But we know that there exists an eternal rejuvenation and return. Nothing perishes, just changes and returns in another form. The wise man is not afraid of death because he has overcome it. [---] The gate of high wisdom would open only to someone capable of resigning from himself, but he who gives himself up is not afraid to die.⁴⁴

42 J. Howard, *Style and Patronage in Latvian Architecture and Design*, p. 213.

43 H. Asaris, *Mākslinieks Janis Rozentāls* [The artist Janis Rozentāls]. – *Latvija* 31 July (13 August) 1910.

44 H. Asaris, *Mākslinieks Janis Rozentāls*.

Other parts of the frieze depict allegories of Industry, Science, Art and Agriculture. Although there are points of intersection with Finnish art in Rozentāls's narrative (he was interested in it), the result is innovative. The work features a number of traits typical of art nouveau (flatness, decorativeness, stylisations, and oppositions of figures and objects, also an interest in biological ages). At the same time, there are neo-classical elements in the form (balanced plastic forms and classical clarity) and also in the iconography, such as *Potrimps's* cart, invoking clearly perceivable parallels with the classical image of Apollo, the god of the sun.

It is likely that Rozentāls's work inspired other attempts in Riga's late art nouveau architectural décor to synthesise national romanticist narrative and themes of classical art with art nouveau motifs. One of the most typical examples is the tradesman Kārlis Ratniks's rental building and store, designed by the architect Oskars Bārs, at 68 Maskavas Street (1910). Its plastic finishes, whose themes and imagery coincide with national romanticism and neo-classicism, also include current art nouveau ornamental motifs. The bay windows are topped with flat parapets decorated with figural, allegorical reliefs depicting the allegories of Industry and Agriculture, Architecture and Art. The compositions conform to the classical principle of isocephaly, but the treatment of figures manifests a combination of academic realism and archaism, with the craft-like accomplishment leaving the impression of naïve self-confidence. Each allegorical composition features a frontal, seated female figure at the centre, creating vague associations with allegorical images abounding in the monumental complexes of historicist architecture in Vienna, Brussels and elsewhere. The side façade is decorated in a different way: reliefs depict stylised daisy blossoms as well as two figures referring to the Latvian folk tale *Eža kažociņš* (Hedgehog's coat); the crowning parapet contains a relief with a patriarchal ploughman with a horse. Façade reliefs are original but craft-like works, expressing national romanticist narrative and ideas of awakening typical of the period, stylistically taking up neo-classicism and art nouveau.

Conclusion

Summing up the insight into the problems of national romanticism in the early twentieth-century architecture of Riga, one should note that art nouveau and national romanticism are international phenomena united by the turn-of-the-century neo-romantic culture. Specifying the parallels between architecture and applied arts, there is the common principle of unity between the utilitarian function and artistic form, the aesthetisation of nature, and compositional dynamics or partial balance, using asymmetry if possible; there are also contrasts between ornamentally packed and blank areas and the use of different materials of finish. As to the nature and iconography of concrete decorative motifs, the issue is complicated by the fact that universal art nouveau was greatly oriented towards local, and in that sense also national, motifs. Thus, establishing the possible specific traits of art nouveau in architecture, the general thematic substantiation of the style is of primary importance, as it determined both the iconography and semantics of decorative motifs and their specific formal

expression (biological, asymmetrical rhythms of curved lines etc.). Regardless of the mentioned neo-romantic affinity, the formal language of a theoretically pure national romanticism is much different, as follows from the above-mentioned generalisations. The stylistics of particular objects can manifest the coexistence and overlapping of different elements, but they can be singled out in the process of concrete analysis. The 'national romanticist' formal language in Riga's architecture, including its décor, is comprised of elements of different origin; stylisations of ethnographic ornaments are the clearest links with Latvian folk traditions. Whether this is an argument in favour of 'Latvian national romanticism' as a term to cover the décor of such buildings in general depends on the differentiation of the wider trend of national romanticism, also important in the process of writing the history of art in Latvia.