



Metamorphoses of Wood in the Works of Wood Carver Antons Rancāns

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Antons Rancāns is a veritable Latgalian, an advocate of the rural lifestyle, a well-known wood carver and educator. He was born in 1938 in the homestead Sili of Nautrēnu parish, Ludza region, in the family of Rogovka furniture carpenter Alexander and seamstress Konstantina. In 1963 he graduated from the Rēzekne branch of Riga Applied Art College, the Department of Decorative Design. In 1972 he graduated from Latvian Academy of Art, the Department of the Interior, where, as he wrote, “I made a knack of wood carving” (P e l ū d e 2002).

When studying in the Academy of Art, Rancāns wanted to become a painter, yet his sarcastic view of life drove him along a different path, and today we know him as an outstanding personality in the trade of wood carving.

In 1982 Antons Rancāns founded the Department of Wood Carving at Rēzekne Art College and was its head until 1991. He wrote about this, “I had evidently irritated the headmaster of the college so much that he not only discharged me from the entrance examination board but sacked me mentioning as the official reason immoral action.” (Ibid.)

What was the great sin for which Antons Rancāns was accused and fired? He was a free thinking spirit seeking to follow new ways and think differently from others. He was the one to start the restoration of road-side crucifixes in Latgale. He got his students from the department of wood carving of the college engaged in this work and this was considered as the immoral deed he was accused of. A. Rancāns’ work dedicated to studying road-side crucifix tradition, documenting and reconstructing in 1992 was excelled by giving him “*Sējējs*” prize and Ludis Bērziņš prize in 1995. At the age of 56 he defended master’s thesis *Crucifixes in the Landscape of Latgale* and in 1997 his book *Kokā cirstā ciešanas* (Passion of the Carved in Wood) was published. Rancāns stated, “A nation cannot have a future if it does not have a past. Therefore we must try to preserve everything that has been significant in the previous course of development, that we have got used

to in the course of millennia and that is just about to disappear not only from our everyday life but also from our memory and consciousness.” (Ibid.)

In 1976 Rancāns joined Latvian Artists’ Union. He lives and works in Makašāni, Rēzekne district, where he has founded the Crafts College. It is meant for the renewal of the deteriorated Latgalian craft tradition and making Makašāni a blooming centre of crafts, art, and culture. For more than 17 years, Rancāns has been teaching young boys the craft of wood carving. His students come from various places in Latvia and are among the artists on demand in many countries of the world; yet the school and the craftsman’s home in Makašāni have sustained the specific world feeling of the Rancāni family, their active and sincere way of living cultivated for decades; everything here has the particular character of Latgalian culture and spirit.

In 1997 Antons Rancāns was awarded the prize of the Ministry of Culture of Latvia in the sphere of libraries, museums, and folk art, and in 1998 he was awarded the Three Star Order.

What kind of person is Antons Rancāns?

He is a many faceted personality that is difficult to understand, as he always preserves space around him. His daughter, artist Gundega Rancāne tells about her father, “He is quick tempered, a person of quick reaction and rather moody.” (G u l b e 1996, 35). The artist is always dissatisfied with something, a rebel, laconic, but possesses certain wisdom of the heart.

Rancāns has fallen in love with wood, he perceives wood as a living being and talks to it. A tree is still alive for a year after it has been cut down; only then it starts to get dry. The craftsman walks on tiptoe around the blocks of ash and lime tree in his workshop. Wood carving, in his opinion, is cutting the living flesh. It is also guessing, a revelation. Wood carving needs a patient and even stubborn mindset, the ability to calculate in advance, to guess, it requires carefulness and perseverance; one must approach a block of wood like a beehive – only with positive intentions. Rancāns stated, “I am looking at the wooden scoop and thinking why it is so attractive, where this eternal and time resisting beauty comes from...” (K a l v e 1987, 174).

Rancāns has been an interior painter; he has made wooden interior decorations, round sculptures, reliefs, and wooden caricatures. He is a scathing and acute artist whose look often lingers at the negative sides of life.

His wooden caricatures are often satirical. His works can be surprising and delightful as well as irritating. Speaking the language of irony and sarcasm, Rancāns, however, does not go beyond healthy humor and benevolence and this makes his sculptures very humane.

He has reached popularity with his wood carvings and his ironic Latgalian style; in each exhibition he strikes his audience with a new, nontraditional, scandalous work at which they gather in great numbers.

His work “*Nepārvaramā vara*” (Force-majeure) depicts an impressively big fist inspired by the lines of the Latvian poet Eduards Veidenbaums “*Virs zemes nav*

taisnības, dūrei tik spēks” (There is no justice upon the earth, it’s just the fist that has power) conveying the wrath of the common people about the realities of the contemporary realities. Lawyers are well familiar with the argument of force-majeure that in the artist’s interpretation is depicted as a huge and mighty fist. And who possesses the major power in Latvia? According to the artist, it belongs to the



A Teacher in a Boot (Photo A. Bondarenko)

bureaucrat who controls and inspects other people’s work. “We grow everything ourselves in Latvia! Bureaucrats as well!” (K o k a r e v i ĉ a 2003). And: “In the case of force-majeure, the sense of power, human spiritual values are deformed as well” (Ibid., 7).

Bureaucrats are also unmasked in his work “*Izaugums*” (Protuberance). There are such protuberances on trees in nature in which the most diverse images can be noticed, and Rancāns has discerned in them a bureaucrat or an inspector of other’s work who has a great power in the present-day Latvia. The owners of wood carving workshops, Rancāns’ disciples, say that the inspectors threaten to close down their business but when you present them with a door or a piece of furniture everything is settled.

Rancāns has always been able to notice those processes and phenomena in society that are urgent and sore and depicted them in the wooden sculpture.

We see a lying man with a boot around his neck in Rancāns’ work “*Skolotājs siekstā*” (A teacher in a boot). The scathing sense of time characteristic of Rancāns has always let him notice what is most characteristic at the given moment of time. This time it is a Latvian teacher looking at us from under the boot. Watching this work one is overcome by a tragic feeling and the question why in the 21st century teacher is not respected in this country. Is he crucified? Will he resurrect? Latvian people will have to take away this boot from the teacher’s neck. If someone is still uncertain about our system of education, then answers are provided on a plaque beside with a written explanation of the sins that the society accuses teachers of. The author says, “For instance, the teacher is blamed for not motivating his students to learn. Then I reckon that the teacher who works one and a half load must motivate learners 20,000 times a year. If I tell the learner why s/he must learn today, tomorrow something new must be invented. Where can this rundown horse, the teacher, find such a lot of motivation?” (K o k a r e v i ĉ a 2007).

A perfect modern work of installation shows the artist's reply to the question: why don't learners learn? It makes a good use of a hand-written text endowing this work with authenticity. The sculptor concludes, "The teacher is not valued in the society, either materially or morally. For instance, the act of education states that the aim of education is to make it possible for youth to work and make living with honest labour. But if a teacher wishes to teach that child, it is called exploitation. What is the driving force behind it? European Union that needs us as consumers and not as producers" (R a n c ā n e 2008).

Antons Rancāns' works tell us about ourselves somewhat sharply, sometimes even painfully, as we are all responsible both for the deputies who crawl as reptiles towards a mystical destination without a peak – "*Ceļš uz Saeimu*" (A Road to Saeima) and for the coalition formed by the lithe bodies of snakes with split tongues. In the work "*Ceļš uz Saeimu*" in an upwardly directed movement crawl lizards, beetles, caterpillars, crayfish, maybe even lice and other creatures on the trunk of a tree, surpassing and pushing down one another. In this way the artist reveals with sarcasm and irony the realia of the socio-political life.

Antons Rancāns was one of the founders of the Popular Front and was the deputy of the first Saeima after regaining the independence of Latvia. He retreated when realizing that the upper hand was taken by the seekers of their own good. To the 15th anniversary of the Popular Front he dedicated a wooden sculpture "*Man pieder tēvu zeme*" (I own my fatherland) showing a skinny man dressed in a baggy jacket with stubbornly compressed lips. These words about owning fatherland with all fallow lands were said at the 1st congress of the Popular Front by the popular Latvian actor Ēvalds Valters and everybody bowed in reverence before them. And now? How many of those two hundred thousand live their life under humane conditions today? At that time we thought that we owned our fatherland; but now?

Antons Rancāns has witnessed much – the Soviet times and the present turn of events. The artist proposes monuments – to the deceased Homo sapiens, Homo sovieticus, Homo alcoholicus. The author says, "Homo sovieticus came and told us how to live. But if you fed him and gave him something to drink, he became quite good-natured" (S p r a n c e 2005). The wooden figurine looks like that reminding of Bulgakov's imagery in *Heart of a Dog*. The author says rather sarcastically, "I got interested in that matter of monuments. And I think why in Riga, in the place of the little known Barklay de Tollī who will be even less known to the coming generations could not be the statue of Homo sovieticus so familiar to many



Homo Sovieticus
(Photo B. Sprance)



Latvian Expresident Vaira Viķe-Freiberga
(Photo A. Bondarenko)



Keep to Centre (Expresident Guntis
Ulmanis) (Photo A. Bondarenko)

people? And in other places it would be possible to demount the aluminum tubes and install my Alcoholicus? Who is unaware of them being all over the place?" (Rozeniēks 2005).

In the work "*Konkurētspēja*" (Lead the way) we see a half-stripped girl energetic and ready to stand the competition in Europe. It seems that the representative of the most ancient profession will be most competitive in Europe – a girl from a village in Latgale. This gives a precise and ironic picture of the social problem and a perfect sense of the contemporary age.

Thinking about the idea conveyed by the work of art and the artist's creative searches one realizes that nothing occurs without a reason, in a moment. A work of art is born of the fusion of artist's associations and impressions.

Rancāns in his works treats with a kind humour and irony the ongoing processes in the present-day society. His small sculptural caricatures are especially peculiar. Many have come into the focus of his humour and sarcasm: Latgalian culture and political figures, Antons Kūkojs, Andris Vējāns, Anta Rugāte, Polikarps Čerņavskis; writer Pēteris Jurciņš is treated with kind humour and exhaustive account of his work, also the former minister of defense Andrejs Krastiņš wearing a soldier's helmet and an automatic rifle in hand (one of those purchased from Slovakia for an unproportionally large sum of money), Edvīns Inkēns with crossed legs and raised

arms and nose, Einārs Repše in an airplane of money, Raimond Pauls in a lofty posture at the piano, the young politician Lībane as a horse rider on the back of the ex-premier Andris Bērziņš. The work “*Svētā trīsvienība*” (Holy trinity) shows Bojārs-father, Bojārs-son, and Bojārs-the Holy Ghost.

The artist is inspired by getting irritated at somebody. In the work “*Bundzinieks*” (The Drummer) we can recognize



Latvian Ex-president Valdis Zatlers (Photo I. Dundure)

Ivars Godmanis. When asked what wrong Godmanis had done to him, Rancāns replied that Godmanis did wrong to others by “destroying agriculture, creating a possibility for stealing and himself benefiting from it” (Vizule 2003). Images of state presidents have not escaped the scathing vision of the artist. Sculpture “*Turīes centrā*” (Keep to the Centre) depicts the ex-president Guntis Ulmanis half-squatting with a protruded lip. With an idea of an exaggerated mission he tries hard to keep his head straight with a rooster sitting on it. “Keep to the Centre,” he is poking to the rooster. The centre of the world for the bird is the short crop of the president’s hair. This image was created at the time when the post of the prime minister was taken by Jānis Gailis (*gailis* – Latv. ‘rooster’).

The former Latvian president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga is depicted as an aristocratic poodle with a huge ladies’ hat upon her head. Resembling a nicely cropped poodle, with fur left around chest and a switch at the tail end, she is sitting, waiting to be groomed and cuddled. Like a poodle dog meant for luxury, without any militant strivings, the president has no real power in Latvia. A similar question: “Who am I?” is asked also by president Valdis Zatlers.

Church related images have been carved in wood as well – the dean Andrejs Aglonietis, the archbishop of the Roman Catholic church at that time, Jānis Pujats, and a third one coming to their heels. Rancāns stated that it is emphasized in the Holy Scripture that we are all chased by the devil and the holy are those who fight him. The artist depicted this image visually placing it beside the church fathers. The artist also considers that Aglonietis and Pujats are not innocent in the matter of the financial problems of Aglona basilica. Rancāns said, “I know that this work caused scandal in the church circles. Some priests reproach me for that while others support me. In other countries people draw caricatures even about the pope, so why can’t we pull the leg of our holy fathers?” (Tomson 2001).

Rancāns has made a wood carving cycle “*Suņu sēnes*” (Toadstools) depicting politicians of diverse range as protruding mushrooms on long stems. They bear portrait resemblance with the leaders of the communist party, Klaučēns, Rubiks, and colonel Alksnis. This series also includes the Saeima deputies Anta Rugāte from Latgale and the chair of the regional council of Rēzekne, Monvīds Švarcs, who were criticized by the artist for not supporting his Crafts College.



The Committee of Rescuing Latvia (Photo I. Dundure)

Replying to the question of compromise and whether one needs to rub along with envious, go-getters, fools, professional weaklings, the artist replies, “I can live on good terms with honest matter-of-fact people who keep their promises; the majority of my enemies are those who have let me down some time or other...” (Meiera 1992). His work “*Piemineklis pēdējam latvietim*” (A Monument to the Last Latvian) is of interest in this respect, depicting supple pants twisted in a block and the work “*Latvijas glābšanas komiteja*” (The Committee of Rescuing Latvia) wherein we can recognize certain ministers.

The artist’s attitude to life ranges from kind humour to scathing irony. His satirical wood carvings challenge, make people angry, even scare with their directness, lack of ceremony, the whirl of emotion, and the sharp vision of the society. He is ignored by some politicians, called heretic by some Christians, many people admire him and admit being of a similar opinion. The reactions called forth by the small artworks in wood are very different.

Bishop Beļeslavs Sloskāns in his memoirs of the time spent in a labour camp expressed an idea that a nation cannot be destroyed by external enemies, but the nation can destroy itself and this happens when it loses morality. The artist’s daughter Gundega Rancāne says, “I am glad that my father has not lost his sharp look and alertness to all that takes place in our life, politics, reacting to the current events in his art” (Rancāne 2008). Ability to laugh at oneself and the self-erected symbols is a feature of the nation’s health. We have always lacked this ability. We have always wished to perceive everything very seriously, with knitted brow and grim look. Rancāns tried to prevent this by gnawing away the wall of prejudice in his art. He did it with optimism and a dimension of light acquired in hard work and tempered in folk art. His works bring out with distinction the qualities of the contemporary life: imaginativeness, emotional charge, sense of

intention. The artist has reached a profound insight into the capacity of wood to balance, reconcile, make natural. According to the writer Aivars Kalve, "The tree of his art has so many branches: in one branch there is laughter and clatter, in another there are serious portraits, in yet another – decorative reliefs. Antons Rancāns proceeds from verified ideas, olden traditions of craft. <...> The sculptor is careful when touching wood" (Kalve 1987).

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Valentīna Liepa

Medžio metamorfozės drožėjo Antono Rancano kūrinuose

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinés sąvokos: medžio drožėjas, skulptūros iš medžio, Antanas Rancanas, Latgala, skulptūriniai šaržai, satyra, ironija.

Straipsnis yra skirtas medžio drožėjo Antono Rancano, įkūnijančio Latgalos amatininkystės tradicijas, kūrybiniam darbui apžvelgti.

Antanas Rancanas domisi įvairiomis skulptūros formomis. Šis straipsnis gilinasi į skulptūrinius šaržus. Skulptūriniai šaržai atspindi skvarbų menininko žvilgsnį į dabartinį laikmetį bei jo vertybes, humoristinį, satyrinį požiūrį į pasaulį, skausmingą reakciją į visuomenėje vykstančius procesus, tų procesų pajautą ir savitą interpretavimą. Straipsnio autorė analizuoja išskirtinius A. Rancano darbus, jų simboliką, emocinį krūvį, menininko

ketinimų prasmę ir jo požiūrį į medį kaip į itin tinkamą medžiagą skulptūrai. A. Rancano darbuose vaizduojami biurokratinio aparato veikėjai, mokytojai, nepelnytai nuvertinti XXI a. visuomenėje, Seimo nariai, Anapilin išeinantys *Homo sapiens* ir tarpstantys *Homo alcoholicus*, jaunos merginos, parsiduodančios turtingajai Europai, valstybininkai, politikai, netgi prezidentai, dvasininkai ir kiti. Ši teminė įvairovė savo ruožtu atspindi skirtingą įvairių visuomenės sluoksnių požiūrį į paties A. Rancano meną ir jo, kaip menininko, asmenybę.

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *wood carver, wood carving, Antons Rancāns, Latgale, sculpture serges, satire, irony.*

The present article reviews the creative work of the wood carver Antons Rancāns who in his work preserves the craft traditions of Latgale. He has worked in various spheres of sculpture. The article focuses on his wooden caricatures that reflect the artist's sharp feeling of the contemporary epoch, his humorous and satirical world outlook, his vision of the painful processes in the society, their understanding and interpretation. The article provides analysis of his particular works, their imagery, emotional charge, sense of the artist's intention and his attitude towards wood as a material of sculpture.

Rancāns' works depict bureaucrats, teachers grossly underrated in the 21st century society, deputies of Saeima, the passing away *Homo sapiens* and the abundant *Homo alcoholicus*, young girls selling themselves to the rich of Europe, statesmen, politicians, even state presidents and priests, etc. This thematic diversity forms equally diverse attitudes of the society towards the art of Rancāns and his personality.

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