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The Glass Bead Game in the Topic of Classics

Baltic Identity and the Transport of Culture

Juhan Maiste

The reception of Baltic art history can be compared to an intellectual glass bead game; its depths are only unveiled after repeated rereading of related visual signs and the text composed of these signs. The unique status of a border area, its lack of stability in the sphere of outside and inside communication, has produced an unusual artistic narrative, a peculiar cultural heritage with artefacts capable of producing a momentary blaze, while subject matter and poetic message – this special sensation of catharsis that, according to Aristotle, is born through a relieving self-perception of a free spirit – still remain scanty. The energy, igniting from the transfer and holding (transport) of European cultural values and representing the reflection of a light that was lit in larger centres or even the reflection of a reflection, is induced by a perpetual need for self-proof, a subconscious yearning for protection, an inner insecurity that urged the artists to focus on form rather than subject matter, transport of ideas rather than creation. The forms of Baltic art without doubt function as a link in the chain of Western art and culture; still, in order to estimate the character and strength of this link, we need the wisdom inherited from the Greeks, enabling us to recognize the meaning (*semeion*) in the midst of common and widespread icons (*eikones*).

1. Incitement to map spiritual energy

Writing this paper in Valkla, situated on the outskirts of the former estate of the De la Gardie and von Stenbock, not far from the sea, in a house protected by coastal dunes and a pine wood, I recollect, above all, mostly beautiful things in the early springtime sun; that is, history as it appears to us in our personal memories – a mirror image of what has once been, a glass bead game of empirical facts mingled with poetic recollections.

The creation of poetry and the writing of history are two different poles of one and the same inquisitive human nature: while they may largely use the same material of events and experiences, yet they differ from each other in one, main thing. To quote Aristotle's *Poetics*, the historian and the poet differ from each other

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not because one of them writes verse and the other one prose, for "... also Herodotus could be put into verse, but it will still remain a history, whether in verse or prose, but because the historian relates what happened, the poet what might have happened. That is why poetry is more akin to philosophy and is a better thing than history; poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events."¹

Setting aside the problems of general ideas in relation to single truths, pointed out by Aristotle and the whole tradition of Western thought, I will remain within the framework of historiography as a discipline in the thoughts to be presented in this paper; true, compared with the usual analytical science the method that I follow is more focused on the subject, i.e. it regards the subject and the object as an integrated whole, as the two equal poles simultaneously denoting both science and poetry. In short, on the one hand, the approach will be phenomenological.

On the other hand, in what follows, we will be dealing in our own way with "archaeological excavations". History and art history, their visible documents, have several dimensions and layers. The narrative, which tells us the story of facts in the language of visual symbols, is equivalent to description. As Erwin Panofsky tells us, extending deeper from it is the iconological level, which speaks about things and events in a language of signs; signs in their turn are integrated in a communicative system by semiotics.² Semiotics speaks not so much about individual symbols as about the system of symbols, opening cause-and-effect relations in a wider, interdisciplinary sense. Semiotics is the generally recognized language of modern science. As we know, we use language to speak. Only God, or perhaps Plato and his followers can see deeper than language, displaying the philosophers' infinite interest in the deepest nature of things, the true essence of all being, regardless of whether it is contained in the methods and paradigms of religion, cultural anthropology, mind and physical geography or the mutual junctions of these paradigms.

Yuri Lotman has named the sphere to which our approach below is the closest, the semiosphere, i.e. the space defined in the categories of culture, which contrary to the "biosphere, which processes the radiation energy of the Sun into chemical and physical energy, has above all a spiritual nature"³. According to Lotman, the realm of the semiosphere is abstract. Its categories are culture and the fields in immediate contact with culture. It is the energy that stimulates a person to action, provides a motive for the action and generates the need to map the world in a language of signs understood by him. Already for hundreds, if not thousands of years, maps have been drawn up of the physical nature of the earth. One by one, closer and more remote places and entire continents have become known to us. Maps have been compiled of historical events, political manifestations and entire empires.

Apparently, as of today, we have gained possession of what is physically measurable, we have so-to-say read Aristotle to the last page, have made new discoveries of micro- and macrostructures, delved in matter and dreamt of the spirit which, as we know, make up one and the same cosmos, defined by God. There has

¹ Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. 23rd printing (New York, 1987), p. 18.

² E. Panofsky, *Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction in the Study of Renaissance Art-Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Gloucester, 1957), pp. 26–41.

³ J. Lotman, *Semiosfäärist* (Tallinn, 1999), p. 10.

only been too little understanding of the actual nature of things, which according to Plotinus has created both the beautiful and the ugly, i.e. “what has given to the beautiful a concrete form and to the ugly what is capable of form but does not accept it and is not fully subjected to it”.⁴

My concern is with maps, although not with those depicting the French Empire or Napoleon’s operations, but the maps that, perhaps, have not been drawn up yet. I mean the maps of human energy, this motive power, which forever pushes history on, accompanies us in both good and evil, brings the Greeks to India and gives birth to the signs that are created from contacts between different civilizations. By cultural transport I mean, first of all, the exchange of ideas, the transfer and reception of culture and its signs not by copying and imitation but by an inner urge, not in the commercial language but in the tongue of poetry. My favourite signs are Buddha-faced Apollos in the Gandhara region (Eastern Afghanistan and North Western Pakistan) telling of the opportunities of a multicultural semiosphere. The villages of the Old Believers (*starovertsy*) on the coast of Lake Peipus with their churches that have been standing side by side with the Orthodox churches and cemeteries and the latter with the Lutheran churches and cemeteries for centuries come to mind as the symbols of one of the most powerful cultural exchanges of Europe. Seeing the world through my Valkla window, my object is inevitably the immediate environment – the East Sea (*die Ostsee, Östersjön*), the land and its people on its southern coast, the border region of a big semiosphere.

2. Patterns and signs

I can see nature, trees, snow, man and the traces of his activity from my window; people have cultivated land in the area for thousands of years, as early as the time when the ziggurats were built in Iraq and the pyramids in Egypt. Pliny the Younger wrote about Thule and Ultima Thule, i.e. the land where the Sun went to sleep and where winter lasted uninterrupted for six months. It is possible that the historians of Plinius’s day were thinking of lands beyond the Polar Circle, but it may well be they had in mind the land right here, next to us.

It is difficult to say anything final about people who have not left behind powerful stone monuments or worshipped human-faced gods. Like Herodotus once among the Persians, Henricus de Lettis⁵ was surprised at the local barbarians being ready to worship a god, Taara, who had wings but no recognized visual or plastic form (Greek: *eikones*). It is difficult to accept the idea that there have been civilizations that did not need either figurative art or the erection of large temples to support their beliefs. Estonians, however, did not build in stone before Christianization; the patterns and signs of their culture were expressed not so much by visual art as in the words and melodies of the alliterative folk-songs.

In the perception of the native inhabitants, stone was hard and cold, like winter ice. The worker who burnt lime for the manor houses of the De la Gardies or the

⁴ B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale. Teoria e storia* (Milan, 1990), p. 209.

⁵ *Henrici Chronicon Livoniae. Henriku Līvīmaa kroonika*, translated by J. Mägiste and edited by N. Tarvel (Tallinn, 1982).

von Stenbocks was called a *kalkar*. It is a Germanic loan-word to which the people attributed a slightly derogatory shade of meaning. Wood and stone are two fundamentally different elements and the conflict between the cultures based on these two elements can be followed with dramatic clarity since the beginning of Christianization. The dominating image of Valkla has to do with forest, brush and pasture; this is the *genius loci*, which speaks to us in cyclic time like spring, summer and winter. In contrasted, stand the patterns and signs evidencing the transport of culture – stone churches and fortified towers all around, with their history written in linear time, i.e. the time defined by St Augustine as extending from the creation of the world to the Last Judgement.

3. Transport and colonization

It is about one kilometre to the East Sea from where I sit. Its rushing, foam-crested waves have carried many a ship, large and small; it brings to mind the splashing oars of the Vikings and the creaking shrouds of the Hanseatic cogs; the crusaders and pilgrims coming to Mary's Land; the traders and discoverers who ventured beyond civilization to seek experience and find confirmation of their lives. Over the centuries, culture, or what has been regarded as culture, has reached the Northern shores of Harju and Viru by sea. The early churches of the country, although built of local whitish-yellow limestone, were erected by the order of foreign overlords – the Cistercians and those who inherited their doctrine – the Teutonic Order and their successors.

Estonian art history up to the 20th century is largely of German and Scandinavian origin; the transport of culture has quite unambiguously meant a unilateral invasion of one culture. It brings to mind a monastery of friars not far from here in the Kolga woods, a place that the Swedish conquest turned into a manorial seat, which was given by Johan III to his son-in-law, Pontus de la Gardie, in an act of investiture. It brings to mind the Kiiu fortified tower beside an important strategic road from Tallinn to Narva, which, as the legend tells, was built by the Kolga monks, but in the opinion of art historian Villem Raam by the Tiesenhausens and much later too, in the early 16th century. Finally Valkla Manor, a baroque palace on a limestone shore, from the stepped terraces of which one can see the blue sea and to which a straight, tree-lined avenue leading from the main Narva road, just as in Versailles, meets the eye.

Livonia was an artistic treasurehouse with showpieces brought in or inspired from abroad; its architecture and works of art can be admired like the rosary or the pearls in the necklace of a merchant's wife. Furs from Russia and grain from the fields of the estate were exchanged for altars, porcelain, and first from Lübeck, then from Bruges and later on from Dresden came the general idea of a beautiful life. Craving for distant lands is deeply rooted in Baltic art. The lions on church portals and window jambs "are from Africa", bunches of grapes and orange trees provoke Mediterranean associations.

As Livonia rediscovered Europe in the 17th century, so did Europe discover Livonia. Things are usually found when one is prepared for them, like the Vitruvius manuscript, for instance, which was discovered in the Montecassino Abbey by Poggio Bracciolini in 1414. The columns of the Vitruvian teaching of orders can

first be met in the Baltic context in 1595 on Pontus de la Gardie's gravestone in Tallinn. During the rule of Pontus's son, Jacob, the first modern-style manor house was built in Kolga under the direction of a local builder, Z. Hoffmann. Pontus' grandson Magnus, however, dreamt of nothing less than a new Roman-style Renaissance town in Kuressaare, on the island of Saaremaa. The town was planned for him by Nikodemus Tessin the Elder, who, not for the first time, left the Eternal City.

The visitor Adam Olearius came to Estonia in 1630. In his opinion the fields burnt clear of woods and brush along the Northern shore reminded him of the soils around Mount Vesuvius, near Naples, where according to Strabo's fifth book, "the soil is said to be fertile as the mountain burns from time to time".⁶ As Lüder wrote in the first issue of the monthly journal of the Berlin Academy of Arts and Mechanical Science in 1788, "culture from warm countries, where people live close together, has gradually spread to colder areas".⁷ In this sense we are all in the same boat, having settled around the same cold East Sea in our humble cottages. Like the Vikings in the past who – having adjusted to the new conditions – no longer took precious goods and valuable objects directly and by force but acquired them indirectly – for money. Roughly speaking, Western culture was brought to the Baltic countries as early as in Hanseatic times. The artefacts, conveying a classical spirit, are like delicate southern flowers, transplanted to the limestone fields of Harjumaa. While they resemble the originals, they are, however, different in a thousand ways. Seen through half-closed eyes, Valkla manor house resembles an antique temple and in the earthen body of the garden terrace the inquisitive eye can find a grotto, perhaps once decorated with a statue of Artemis or Neptune, the ruler of the seas.

4. Transport and poetry

In 1635 the ship on which the Duke of Gottorp had sent Adam Olearius to negotiate with the Persian Shah ran aground at Malla, about a day's ride on horseback from Valkla. Fortunately, the company found shelter on the first floor of Kunda Manor. Clothes were dried and people assembled in a cosy circle around the Renaissance fireplace. Adam Olearius fell in love with Katherina, the daughter of the lord of the Kunda estate. Envoy Philipp Kruse chose Johann Müller's other daughter, while the German poet Paul Fleming fell in love in Tallinn, composed poetry and established a literary Shepherds' Association. Fleming wrote: "Amphitrite (the goddess of the Sea (JM)) has treasured a tall rocky island, which has rescued many a ship from great disaster".⁸

Like songbirds, poets and other artists, too, arrived in spring and mostly left in

⁶ Olearius, *Offt begehrte Beschreibung der neuen Orientalischen Reise so durch Gelegenheit einer Holsteinischen Legation an den König in Persien geschehen* (Schleswig, 1647). Here and below quoted in English after the Estonian publication translated by I. Leimus: *Täiendatud uus reisikiri Moskoovia ja Pärsia teekonna kohta*, edited by I. Leimus (Tallinn, 1996).

⁷ Quotation translated from Lüder, "Versuch einer Geschichte der schönen Architektur", *Monats-Schrift der Akademie der Künste und Mechanischen Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 1: (Berlin, 1788–1789), p. 6.

⁸ Olearius, op. cit. p. 96.

autumn. Michel Sittow, the court painter of Isabel of Castile and Philip the Good, the protégé of Margaret of Austria, and the servant of Charles V (who took four of his oil paintings – as, by the way, he did with Titian – to take to the Spanish Abbey St Geronimo de Yuste), twice returned home to Tallinn from his sojourns in the wide world – for the nesting time. The first time his youngish wife died and the second time, in 1525, the artist himself died after the Reformation and the related iconoclasm.⁹ The pain and beauty of big art is represented in Estonia; we have “pearls” from Bernt Notke to Arent Passer, from Hanseatic to post-Hanseatic culture. All these are but odd blossoms, very rare, hence almost unreal.

The light of European art radiated mostly through reflection and the reflection of a reflection into this remote province,¹⁰ manifesting itself in the expertise, skills, pattern books and fashion magazines introduced from across the sea. Unlike in a metropolis, context rather than text is a more important issue in a province; the criteria of pure art in Heinrich Wölfflin’s sense never appear as individual objects of study here; art is instead understood in the sense of visual culture and language, as something, established by Lars Olof Larsson as the instrument of science,¹¹ which helps us to understand the flow of philosophical processes, appearing as their parallel phenomena as suggested by E. Forssman.¹² Visual art is never poetry as declared already by Lessing, an opinion especially relevant for the Baltic countries.

For art in general, such a layer, born in the system of international transport and trade routes, constitutes the cream of civilization, the skin that has little to do with local culture. The Teutonic Order and Hanseatic culture, which are our topics, represent culture for about 5% of the population.

Historically, the purpose of visual art in Estonia has been concealment and protection of its owners rather than courtesy and generosity towards the surrounding land and its inhabitants. The purpose of art in the province, in this remote periphery of Europe, is not the study and reflection of the inner substance of things but being like somebody or something else. Visual art in the Baltic countries corresponds to the criteria of representation rather than innovation; its core lies not so much in meditation (which we find in the sphere of verbal culture) as in imitation, being not poetry and utopia but rhetoric.

The path to self-determination of Baltic art is long and complicated. From the 16th century one war followed another, chaos and destruction were everywhere and the land experienced depopulation and the destruction of culture more than once. Estonia is not rich in gold like Mycenae in the epics of Homer but all the more in ruins. There was rarely time to take a breath. One such period occurred in the last decades of the 18th century, when the concurrence of two phenomena – the boom of local aristocratic culture and Western European Enlightenment – brought

⁹ P. Johansen, “Meister Michael Sittow, Hofmaler der Königin Isabella von Kastilien und Bürger von Reval”, *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, vol. 61,1, No. 9: (Berlin, 1940).

¹⁰ J. Maiste, “Die Renaissance in Tallinn. Ein neuer ‘Stil’ in der alten Hansestadt”, *Finskt Museum* 1992, vol. 99: (Helsingfors, 1994), p. 26.

¹¹ L. O. Larsson, *Kunstgeschichte als Stilgeschichte. Om stilforskning*. Föredrag och diskussioninlägg vid Vitterhetsakademiens symposium 16–18 November 1982. Konferenser 9. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Konferenser 9 (Stockholm 1982), p. 2.

¹² E. Forssmann, *Ikonomie und allgemeine Kunstgeschichte. Ikonomie und Ikonographie. Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem*. vol. 1: (Köln, 1979), p. 280.

about great changes and the post-Hanseatic and Swedish traditions were replaced by a new paradigm.

Classicism as an international style of art meant more self-discoveries in the Baltic region than any other style of art with an international flavour since the Middle Ages. *Liefland ist Blivland* [Livonia is a country to stay], went an old saying. The Baltic region was a place where architects arriving from abroad could put down their roots. By the initiative of Johann Wilhelm Krause and other foreign professors, one of the epoch's greatest miracles in Northern Europe was born. Tartu University was built, which on the mental level melted together the longing for ancient cultures and the dark Teutonic soul.¹³ The former occasioned Tartu being called the Athens on the Emajõgi, the city that is still shining because of the Doric order portico of the main building of Tartu University and the red brick church casting its mystical dark shadows over the Cathedral Hill.¹⁴

Estonia is a land open to the winds of the world. Carl Ludwig Engel spent four to five years in Tallinn, married the daughter of a local town councillor and then travelled on to St Petersburg and Finland, where challenges meeting his expectations were waiting for him – a new Athens on the East Sea coast. Tallinn with its crooked, medieval streets was too confining for the artist, who had grown up in the spirit of a new era; the all-Russian standard facades were distressing, his soul yearned for something else,¹⁵ for the freedom that Winckelmann saw as the precondition of all art.¹⁶

5. Transport and identity

In 1842, Elizabeth Rigby, the future Lady Eastlake, reports on how a storm hit her ship and “lifted us from the ocean, and then buried us crashing down to a depth whence it seemed impossible for any animate object to recover itself...”. Thank God the company arrived in Tallinn, where, the foreign visitor pointed out, “Like ancient Thebes, Reval is entered by seven gates.”¹⁷ But the more instructive part of the travel book is devoted to manorial culture. The wealth of the local noblemen and the select beauty of the manor houses baffled the young lady. She compared the park of Valtu Manor to the terraces of Regent’s Park in London.

Elsewhere she points out: “Never was poor a mortal so taxed with an *embarras de richesses pittoresques* as myself” when she visited Alexander Benckendorff, the head of the Tsar’s 3rd department and the commander of the gendarmerie, at Keila-Joa (Fall). “It is not Estonia – that’s quite sure, it is not Russia – here is no disorder: nor France – though the echoes answer in French numbers; nor England – though as like as any. What is it, then? Where are you? – In a beautiful, delicious, unique

¹³ J. Maiste, K. Polli & M. Raisma, *Alma Mater Tartuensis* (Tallinn, 2003).

¹⁴ J. Maiste, “A Temple of the Enlightenment Rises from the Ruins of a Medieval Cathedral”, in *Ars Ecclesiastica. The Church as a Context for Visual Art*. International Symposium held in Jyväskylä 18.-21.8.1995, pp. 95–107.

¹⁵ J. Maiste, “Carl Ludwig Engel: ein Deutcher Baumeister in Tallinn”, in *Friedrich Gilly (1772–1800). Innovation und Tradition klassizistischer Architektur in Europa*. X Greifswalder Romantikerkonferenz 2000 (Greifswald 2002), p. 100.

¹⁶ J. J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, edited by W. Senff (Weimar, 1964), p. 36.

¹⁷ E. Rigby, *Letters from the Shores of the Baltic*. 2nd ed. vol. 2 (London, 1842), p. 144.

garden of nature – the pot pourri of all nations – the quintessence of all tastes; where the courtier, the philosopher, the lover of nature, the votary of fashion, the poet, the artist, the man of sense, may all be happy in their own way.”¹⁸

Baltic art is an extremely hard nut to crack. The story of local art is the story of different styles and of the perpetual need to prove oneself that, existing side by side with culture, has created a sort of meta-culture, which has given birth to the need to compare oneself to somebody or something in the province. H. J. Jannau said as early as 1781, “Livonia has some beautiful buildings to show, but unfortunately the local art of building is nothing but a copy. Everything that already exists in Rome, Naples, Dresden or Berlin had to be represented also here.”¹⁹ People travelled a great deal; Baltic noblemen could be seen at Goethe’s home, in Weimar, but later quite often also in Rome. In 1871, Alexander von Nolcken wrote to his contemporary and friend in Sangaste, Friedrich Georg von Berg from Alatskivi Manor,²⁰ “... I am planning a trip via Warsaw to Vienna, Venice, Florence, Palermo, Naples and Rome. We could meet in Messina and visit Sicily’s beautiful shores. Although, to be true, I’ve seen them while returning from Cairo...” Or, “Our friends are going to Dresden where the peak season will begin on 22 December, but there is art, after all ...” (Tartu 1874). Or take the following lines: “We remembered Place Vendôme: I’ve brought you the Venus of Milo” (Tartu 1875). Count Friedrich Berg’s home in Sangaste resembles Windsor Castle, while Baron Alexander von Nolcken’s Alatskivi Hall was completed in 1885 as a copy of Balmoral, the British sovereign’s residence in the Scottish moorlands.

Art in the Baltic provinces is not defined by Winckelmann’s categories: rise, maturity and fall (spring, summer and winter).²¹ Even the traditional history of style – in the spirit of Honour-Fleming,²² Richard Hamann²³ or Voldemar Vaga²⁴ – only applies conditionally in this part of the world. Baltic civilization developed differently from the civilization of Western Europe. In 1215 the Lateran Ecumenical Council approved Bishop Albert’s proposal and dedicated the land to the Virgin Mary. From then on, developments in Estonia and Latvia took a different path from those in Finland, Sweden and Denmark. The patterns and signs left in the territory of Estonia in the past seven or eight centuries mainly speak about the conqueror’s fortifications in a conquered land, of town walls and castle towers permitting us to draw a comparison between the early settlement scene in St Mary’s Land and the crusaders’ settlements in the East – in the Holy Land.

In the widest sense of the word, it has to do with the invasion of a foreign culture into a land, which, true enough, can sometimes provoke a sense of hunger, but will mostly leave the hunger unalleviated. Old Livonia and its legal and political successors – the Baltic provinces – make up a border region, differing both from the

¹⁸ Rigby, op. cit., p. 159.

¹⁹ Quotation translated from H. J. Jannau, *Sitten und Zeit. Ein Memorial von Lief- und Ehtlands Väter* (Riga, 1781), p. 65.

²⁰ Quotations translated from Eesti Ajaloo Arhiiv [Estonian Historical Archives in Tartu], F. 1874, nim. 1, s. ü. 1426.

²¹ U. Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte. Der Weg einer Wissenschaft* (New York, 1996), p. 59.

²² H. Honour & J. Fleming, *World History of Art*. 6th ed. (London, 2002).

²³ R. Hamann, *Geschichte der Kunst*. 2 vols (Berlin, 1959).

²⁴ V. Vaga, *Üldine kunstiajalugu* (Tartu, 1937).

province and the periphery by its fundamental characteristics.²⁵ From Roman times, border areas have lacked an inner sense of security, i.e. the freedom which, from the times of Diderot and Goethe, has been regarded as an inevitable precondition of art. This absence of freedom has caused a dearth of poetry in visual art. It is especially true, for example, in comparison with the Estonian oral tradition and its most famous feature: folk poetry. The large Estonian collections of folk poetry excel by an extraordinary range of imaginative and creative metaphors.²⁶

Contrary to Yuri Lotman, who has written much about the creative nature of a border when discussing the concept of semiosphere I consider the border between two large civilizations a culturally difficult ordeal. The *Not-I* in contrast to the *I*, this watershed between the barbarians and our civilization, of which we can read in Herodotus, produces very different semiotics here. The coast of Lake Peipus and Gandhara represent rare exceptions. The map of Baltic art matches the routes of Baltic trade and transport, while the sources of Baltic art are related to shipping, traffic and ports.

6. Twisted semiotics

When the Bastille was stormed on 14 July in Paris, the von Focks were busy at Sagadi Manor House (about thirty kilometres from Valkla) rebuilding their grand manor in an even grander style. Dresden *Zopf* style now replaced earlier decorations in the spirit of Rastrelli, with the walls of the new house covered with festoons, garlands and fragile feathery stucco – which became one of the most expressive symbols of Baltic culture from the late 18th century. The then manorial world was in several senses a representation of the culture of the period; the manor with its alleys trimmed in Versailles style and inviting *fête-galante* park corners formed an icon that in the Baltic context spoke a language fallen to oblivion elsewhere. At a time when Europe was taking the road to capitalism and democracy, Old Livonia became one of the last oases of the blue-blooded aristocracy. The meanings of local culture speak not only of the differences between the metropolis and the province, but also of the deeper causal associations arising from history and its social-psychological roots.

The *noblemen's republic*, established within the Russian Empire after Peter I, meant the invasion of the classical element. Unfortunately, it was formal, remaining a façade, which, like the Potyomkino Village had to conceal the inner meaning of things also to the persons involved. The Enlightenment did not bring about the establishment of individual freedom in the Baltic countries. As Garlieb Merkel wrote in 1800, “in a time when even the haughty Englishman is trying to grant... freedom and civic rights to Great Britain's Negro slaves, there are whole nations in Europe tossing under the whip of the greatest despotism... sacrificed to the avarice of a few noblemen, the Latvians and Livonians have been reduced to zero among

²⁵ Cf. the chapter “St Mary's Land” in J. Maiste: *Tuldud teed tagasi. Retracing Steps* (Tallinn, 2002), especially p. 56.

²⁶ The Estonian Folklore Archives at the Estonian Literary Museum consist of 1.3 million manuscript pages.

other peoples.”²⁷ Manors rose like unassailable oases of culture and civilization amid a sea of slavery, isolated by their level of international art – architectural style – as well as by the taboos protecting the same style. Setting the manor apart from the village were the visible walls of the park as well as the invisible walls of education, where beauty meant the need of spiritual isolation as in Carthusian philosophy, which meant a narrow road to the truth through aesthetic striving. Not to see, not to hear, may the flood come after me....

On the one hand, the Baltic nobility quickly adopted new styles, changing tastes, fashions and its icons (the first monuments to Fr. Schiller in Europe were erected at Helme estate and Puhtulaid in Estonia); on the other hand, these signs lacked a deeper intrinsic meaning. The Platonic idea of the synchronism of aesthetics and ethics, while constituting a part of the classical canon of beauty, remained unattainable in Estonia. Revolution – a sacred and inviolable ideal in the context of Western culture since the French Revolution – denotes mostly destruction and violence in the East, and not on the social level alone but also in culture. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the language of form born on the crest of the wave of the French so-called revolutionary architecture is not unknown in the East, yet east of Berlin it acquires new meanings. Beginning with Thomas de Thomon and Nikolai Lvov, the architecture of St Petersburg is impressive not only by its almost unreal monumental scale but also by its characteristic qualities in the spirit of Ledoux and Boullée; nevertheless this language must be read in a key differing semiotically from the usual language of classicism.²⁸ The greatness and monumentality which the Parisian architects dreamed about in the 1770s (regardless of whether the dreamers were idealistic revolutionaries or royalists) were materialized in the city born a hundred years earlier on the Neva and then again in many Baltic manor houses.

Paradoxically, revolution found its architectural “materialization” in a country where Revolution was suppressed. Only the form remained – an empty ambition to conquer space. If we take a look at one of the most magnificent buildings in St Petersburg – the Admiralty (*Admiralteistvo*), or opposite to it, the Winter Palace (*Glavny Shtab*), we have to admit that many of the ideals of the revolutionary generation have become true. It is another question what truth is – the truth when the *utilitas* is determined by the military force and the *venustas* by the foreign taste.

The aesthetics of Neoclassicism are unthinkable without another category – ethics. The architecture rising from the sources of an ascetic purification of mind is not without a certain moral force. In this sense, the manor architecture of late Neoclassicism has left us with a riddle that we can read on two different levels. On the one hand, porticoed façades are the measure of a hankering for distant Athens, while on the other hand they link local culture with the architecture of the new settlers in New England, Virginia; the semiotic message of Baltic manorial culture is comparable to that of the *haciendas* in Mexico. Baltic visual art is not a simple thing to understand. On first contact, the visitor is amazed by its peculiarity that permitted Lady Eastlake poetically to call the country’s heritage the “Lily of the

²⁷ G. Merkel, *Die Letten vorzüglich in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1800), p. 4.

²⁸ J. Maiste, “Revolutionary Architecture in the East. The Problem of Classical Ideal”, in *Art and Architecture of the Countries around the Baltic Sea*. Estonian Academy of Arts. Proceedings No. 13 (Tallinn, 2003), edited by K. Kodres, P. Lindpere & E. Närepea, p. 212.

North”. Only years later, which sometimes can take as long as a whole lifetime, you will begin noticing the real meaning – the *genius loci*, something what will definitely convince you that you are right in the middle of many indescribable and immeasurable values. Reading a book on the history of Estonian art not only requires knowledge of the culture of the whole East Sea region; knowledge of its roads of distribution, knowledge of the map of Europe, but also an understanding of the land and its culture.

Nothing begins or ends in or around Valkla. Taken separately, i.e. out of context, the perspective of the view from my window in Valkla, this “Versailles” – a manor house in the late Baroque style – lacks any meaning. The light from major art centres appears in the form of a reflection of mostly representative contents and aims as well as rhetorical forms. It is art that may be extremely beautiful when imported from abroad, but that is never really warm, because of its foreign nature. It has the face of its customer and patron – a priest, later a pastor or a Hanseatic merchant, or a baron who ruled the land here, but never the face of an indigenous inhabitant of the country.

Like a mosaic fragment, Baltic art shines only in relationship with other arts. To become knowledgeable in it requires knowledge of the integral picture. Baltic art is not (or is only rarely) a text, an open book, the reading of which can be assisted by the more voluminous art histories of Europe. The history of local visual symbols is closely related to a comprehension of the context. The latter in its turn means the climate and natural conditions in addition to the social ones – everything already spoken of in the architectural language of theoreticians starting from Vitruvius, Serlio and Blondel. But in addition to ratio and analysis, something else is needed. We also depend on a heart and courage to replace the text that has been erased from memory because of constant overwriting: “The history of art is lost, but art history is still with us; and although art history often attempts to bring the object back to life, finally it is our means of laying it to rest, of putting it into its history and taking it out of our own, where we have witnessed its departure.”²⁹

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²⁹ W. Davis, “Winckelmann Divided: Mourning the Death of Art History”, in: *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, edited by D. Preziosi (Oxford, 1998), p. 50.