



Art of poster in Latvia.

1920 - 1990

This exhibition offers French viewers the possibility of discovering Latvia, its past and culture, from a historical perspective. The poster, a manifestation of "democratic" art par excellence, was born in the social turmoil of the twentieth century. The poster has always been intimately connected, more than any other art form, to political and economic reality. It has consistently been a space of creation and expression for artists, thereby constituting a mirror of its particular era.

The purpose of this exhibition is to allow a discovery of the culture, traditions and history of Latvia by using the reflection of the world which has always been offered by the poster. The presentation consists of 120 original printed posters which have been drawn from the collections of the Latvian National Library (LNL) and the Museum of the Union of Latvian Artists (ULA).

Janis Liepins

Contre le chômage et la faim ! / Against unemployment and starvation!

Why were these two collections brought together for the exhibition?

The LNL maintains an unrivalled collection of printed posters compiled in a regular manner. It begins with the end of the nineteenth century and extends right up to our own times. The oldest piece dates from 1899. This collection of posters bears pictorial witness to political and social change in Latvia. It enriches our artistic vision considerably and pays tribute to the talent of less well-known artists. It also strives to analyze from a historical perspective the evolution of the art of the poster in a European context.

The history of the creation and elaboration of the collection of the museum of the ULA, with its three hundred original posters, is completely different with respect to their provenance. The museum of the ULA was created in 2001 on the basis of the collection of artworks possessed by the Union of Latvian Artists. The collection covers the period from 1945 to 1991. Historically, the strategy of the creation of a collection was defined by Communist ideology, being elaborated and dictated for all the artistic unions of the USSR. Communism "left art among the people". In this context, a foundation responsible for the creation of the collection was set up in 1957. For more than thirty years, the congress of the Union of Artists pursued an active policy of acquiring artworks, all of which were commissioned by the power structure. In 1991, after the political upheavals, there was no longer a secure financial foundation for acquiring and maintaining these artworks. Since 2001 the museum of the ULA has begun to develop several programs for cultivating, studying and analyzing the Latvian art of the second half of the twentieth century. Today the museum possesses more than 15,000 artworks. This represents one of the largest collections in Latvia. One part of the collection of the museum of the ULA is included in the holdings of the national museums, a testimony to its national importance.

Among the artworks in the collection of the museum, sixty-three posters, the most remarkable examples from the Soviet era, have been especially selected for the exhibition in France. Several posters will be presented along with their copies, thereby offering the viewer the chance to become aware of the difference between the original and its various reproductions. One can raise questions about the absence of the previous decade in the exhibition. The market economy, globalization and the rapid development of innovative technologies have brought about a loss of that definition which one is certainly inclined to give to the poster in its classical

MAZĀK CREZNU FRĀŽU, VAIRĀK VIENKĀRŠA, IKDIENIŠKA DARBA.

/VI LĒNINS/



Peteis Civlis

Moins de discours pompeux, plus de travail quotidien (Lénine)

Less pompous phrases, more everyday work (Lenin)

1980



Imars Blumbergs
J. Svarcs "Dragon"
1985

expression. Other forms of publicizing expression have gained the upper hand in the meantime. It is impossible to trace the different commissioning orders for posters. Unfortunately, with only several exceptions (such as the posters for productions by the National Opera of Latvia), the artistic quality of the posters has depreciated.

In working out the structure of the exhibition, it was important to present the evolution of the art of the poster from the beginning of the twentieth century, when numerous Latvian artists were involved in this genre during the era of modernism. In the context of Soviet art, it is also important to recognize the quality of the poster as well as its ideological dependency. The works of the exhibition are grouped into themes and arranged chronologically, so that the French viewer is able to discover in all their diversity the historical and stylistic transformations that took place across the twentieth century.

Posters in Latvia from the beginning of the XXth century until the Second World War

Art Nouveau, national Romanticism, and subsequently Art Deco exercised a profound influence on the art of the poster in Latvia. It is highly significant to see certain posters signed by such renowned artists as Rihards Zarins, Sigismunds Vidbergs or Niklavs Strunke and guaranteeing the high artistic quality of these posters. Other less well-known authors created works of equal interest, among them Vilis Krumins, Oskars Steinbergs, Alfreds Svedrevics, Nikolajs Puzirevskis. The presence of foreign artists rounds off the collection of works printed by Latvian artists. Let us mention in particular the poster of Raoul Dufy for the exhibition of French art at Riga (1939). It is not always easy to identify the author of the works, but it is sometimes possible to guess the identity of the creator.

When analyzing the collection of the LNL from this period, a specific Latvian characteristic becomes apparent, namely traditional realism, even in those works with a modern form.

After independence (during the 1920s and 1930s), political and advertising posters develop according to the rhythm of political orders. The setting up of the Independent Republic of Latvia corresponds to classical modernism in art. During this period, the representatives of Latvian modernism such as Romans Suta, Konrads Ubans, Janis Liepins and Niklavs Strunke occasionally turn their attention towards the art of the poster (it was

sometimes solely a matter of earning their daily bread). This type of poster (for example intended for parliamentary elections) is clearly an artistic work, while at the same time presenting an era of positive democratic changes.

The period of the 1930s was the era of Art Deco and the new realism. The poster of this era illustrates economic growth as well as political changes. The authoritarian regime of Karlis Ulmanis levels the diversity of social and creative life. The sole value that carries any weight becomes that which is "Latvian". The posters take on a systematic nature. There are only a few artists who animate the stereotyped posters and give them "a breath of life".

The positive image becomes dominant, and the decorative qualities of Art Deco and of monumentalism serve the propaganda of the state. The movement of the cooperatives is initiated, and the leitmotiv of economic life becomes the appeal: "Latvian money for Latvian production". There is an increase in the number of advertisements for local production. The posters issue an invitation for another life: to pursue international competition, to travel, to visit foreign and local exhibitions.

The 1940s bring wrenching transformations to the history of Latvia. The Soviet government destroys all the values of contemporary life. The political poster has the sole function of praising the new regime. Subsequently it follows the Second World War and the dramatic events that determine the fate of Latvia.

Posters in Latvia from 1940 to 1965

On 5 August 1940, during a conference of the General Council of the USSR in Moscow, Latvia is integrated into the Soviet Union. The brief period of independence from 1920 to 1940 is thus brought to a conclusion by the "voluntary" accession of the Latvian state to the USSR and its subsequent designation as the "Soviet Republic of Latvia".

The postwar period does not put into question the attraction for painting or design in the poster. Nevertheless, the subjects are treated in a more anatomical manner. The compositions are more illustrative and the style naturalistic.

The poster becomes the tool of Stalinist propaganda. Its aesthetic takes on a systematic character which includes such elements as billowing flags above an industrial landscape, pivoting cranes, tractors on fields of

kolkhozes, and patriotic smiles. The distance between the poster and reality increases. Little by little, the poster is stripped of its artistic value.

At the same time, however, certain changes become apparent during the course of the 1950s and 1960s. The interest in the poster intensifies and diversifies. The poster acquires a richer thematic nature and is strengthened with a more contemporary expression. The 1960s are a period of stylization, laconism, decorative space and lapidary forms. In 1963, the poster designed by the graphic artist Gunars Kirke for the exhibition of the works of Leo Kokle is particularly remarkable. In spite of the density of the message, one finds a certain visual and dynamic lightness. This particular work marks a definite turn in the art of the poster.

Posters from 1966 to 1975. Development and renaissance

The poster reacquires its noble status during the 1960s. Once again it becomes popular and exhibits a high quality of accomplishment. The Polish school of the poster exercises a determinative influence in this era. In 1966, the first international exhibition of posters is organized at Warsaw. The systematic publications in *Projekt*, the Polish magazine devoted to the visual arts, include presentations of the most significant Latvian artists.

Likewise, the first exhibition of Latvian posters is inaugurated during 1966 in Riga. It is an event without precedent. In effect, for the first time the poster departs from the street and takes up a position in a gallery, thereby entering into the domain of art. This first exhibition, in spite of the omnipresence of Soviet academism, presents innovative and ambitious works which are based upon the design characteristic of the 1960s.

This style exercises a seductive influence upon the artistic world. Artists, painters, theatrical directors, stylists, graphic artists and designers take notice of its potential and of its power of communication. Gunars Kirke (1926 – 1993) is the leader of this infatuation.

Other figures following his lead develop this tendency: Laimonis Senbergs, Georgs Smelters, Ilmars Blumbergs, Juris Dimiters, later Gunars Lūsis and Juris Ivanovs.

Posters from 1976 to 1981. Artistic maturity

There are two notable aspects of this period: the maturity of the contents and the richness of the artistic language. The vitality of the social poster is confirmed. Henceforth it illustrates the individual and social point of view

**KĀRLIS PADEGA
VALDIS ROZENBERGA**

GLEZNU un
GRAFIKU.



IZSTĀDE
№22 — 5. FEBR. ELIZABETES IELĀ 55

Kārlis Padeģs

Exposition de peintures et d'art graphique de Kārlis Padeģs et de Valdis Rozenberģs

Exhibition of paintings and graphic arts by Kārlis Padeģs and Valdis Rozenberģs

1934

of the author and no longer that of an omnipresent and omnipotent power. The poster takes on an emotional charge, sometimes pushing back the limits of the imagination. Its profundity and philosophical dimension illustrate without complexity the most highly diverse themes. It is the cultural poster which constitutes the essential element in the message being diffused. Theater performances, exhibitions and concerts are announced through the poster. In addition, it becomes the site of political and social contention, transforming itself into an echo of the most progressive tendencies of society. In the 1980s, thanks to Laimonis Senbergs, Ilmars Blumbergs, Juris Dimiters and Gunars Zemgals, it experiences an artistic renewal. One can view this manner of utilizing the poster as unique within the cultural space of Eastern Europe. During this period, the poster strives to position itself within the artistic world. The liberty which it allows in both expression and realization appeals to numerous young talents.

Posters from 1982 to 1991. Exceptional individual natures

The artistic maturity of the poster continues to increase; its popularity and pictorial richness do not weaken. The human being reappears in the poster. Let us mention the posters of Ilmars Blumbergs as well as the new generation of artists – Andris Breze, Peteris Civilis, Aivars Draznieks, Ivars Mailitis, Ojars Petersons and Juris Putrams. The posters illustrate the opinions and points of view of contemporary society, connected with the spirit of the *Perestroika* of Gorbachev which, at the end of the 1980s, transforms itself into a movement of the Popular Front.

The journalistic but also creative dimension of the poster endows it with an extensive capital of popularity and of confidence with respect to the general public. Furthermore, as is stated in the Latvian expression, History "Rolled Onward", and the poster has been one of the most effective media and witnesses in this unfolding process.

Inese Baranovska

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E. Mellups
Fête de l'aviation
Aviation Festival
1932

Oskars Noritis
Festival de la danse populaire et du sport
des "Défenseurs"
The "Defenders" Festival of dance and sports
1937