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## **Decorative Art of the Latvian SSR, Searching the Way Between Party-Mindedness and National-Mindedness**

The basic principle of socialist realism was the belief in the political ideals proposed by the ruling Communist party (party-mindedness) of the Soviet Union, enriched by national-mindedness and *ideinost* (ideological-content). Already since the early 1930s, in the Soviet Union every single cultural worker in every single discipline of art had to strictly follow the method of socialist realism. The canon of socialist realism was equally applicable to fine art as well as applied art, the specific function of which was supposed to be purely utilitarian use. Decorative art in the national republics of the Soviet Union usually took the forms of folk art, and decorative art since the beginning of the 1960s was perceived as an integral component of Soviet culture. The essence of Soviet culture had already been formulated several decades earlier, and it had to be socialist in content and national in form, emphasizing the importance of national traditions.

It was possible to treat this principle in various, even very disparate ways, so the problem of adherence to the party principles and the manifestation of national distinctiveness was an inexhaustible topic of theoretical and practical discussions. Conceptual ambiguity, as well as very different visions among artists, theoreticians, as well as party officials, did not allow to develop a unified theory of applied art. Due to the afore mentioned ambiguity and the pluralism of opinions artists of applied art could enjoy some space of freedom for creativity, without directly violating the canons of socialist realism.

The author of the paper examines and analyzes the development of professional decorative art in the Latvian SSR of that time, ideological currents in art theory, and center–periphery relationship.

***Key words:*** Applied art, folk art, ornament, socialist realism, ideology

Socialist realism was a method of artistic creation determined by the official ideology in the Soviet Union in the 1930s–1980s and in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe after World War II. The theoretical principles of the method were formulated in 1932. For the most part, this method was theoretically formulated and applied in literature, dramaturgy and theater art. The first sources dealing with this method are a series of publications, including A. Lunacharsky's lecture "О социалистическом реализме в связи с задачами советской драматургии" (Луначарский, 1933). Unexpectedly, after this talk, a broad theoretical discussion was started, which surprised even the author of the idea, who was caught completely unprepared to develop it. Later, the Central Committee of the CPSU took over the baton and put forth the slogan of socialist realism. Lunacharsky initially could not define if socialist realism was a direction, type, method or an art style. "I would strongly be against it that the slogan of socialist realism would be recognized as a determinant of style", he wrote. Two years later, at the Congress of Soviet Writers, the main principles of socialist realism were officially defined and strictly followed by all artists of the Soviet Union. From that moment on, socialist realism became the only artistic creative method in the USSR for many

years. In the Baltic states, these new ideological trends in artistic life emerged only after the occupation carried out by the USSR in 1940. It is impossible to assert that the creative intelligentsia in Latvia was not informed about these processes. Literary magazines published relatively accurate references of meetings and congresses in the USSR. This is obvious, because some Latvian writers (though, a small part of them) had remained in Soviet Russia and there were also writers living in Latvia who had sympathies for leftist ideas. Writer Andrejs Upīts was active in this field, and in the Soviet time, he became the most important theoretician and adherent of socialist realism in Latvia.

There is a considerable amount of written material about Latvian literature under the shadow of socialist realism during the Soviet years. Possibly, the best assessment of the situation is given by literary critic Guntis Berelis: "We don't know what was left unwritten in the forties and fifties; nor do we know what was not subsequently written under the influence of the then unwritten works, but what could have arisen if literature had not been under the power of ideological terror". (Berelis 1999: 106) Less material can be found regarding the application of socialist realism method in the field of fine arts (painting, graphic art, sculpture). These reviews appear timidly in the narratives of artist biographies. Also, the art works created by the artists of this time rarely leave the museum storages for exhibition displays (Карпова, 2011)

In its turn, the field of applied arts has not been researched. It has several reasons:

The canon of socialist realism was planted and introduced in the applied art, whose specific function was utility. The principle of the unity of fine art and decorative applied art was foregrounded together with their common adherence to the canon of socialist realism. Although, despite the postulated principle of unity, in real life, applied art occupied a more modest place in the art hierarchy. This division into "high" art and applied art as a step "lower", was not officially defined, but, in practice, this kind of attitude existed both within the structure of artists' unions and regarding exhibition policy.

The distinctive division of the cultural space that has lasted for generations is most significant: the main consumer of fine arts were always the upper class social circles – the nobility, wealthy and educated citizens, while the lower class, for centuries belonging to the peasants, determined its existence in another space of traditional culture like folklore, folk music, and folk art. As times changed, the intelligentsia of the Soviet nomenclature replaced the nobility and educated citizens.

Over a longer period of time, the basic principles of socialist realism crystallized and were unsteadily formulated in the program of the CPSU, issued in 1961. It was the program, initiated and assessed already during Stalin's time in the 1930s.

It stated that the Communist Party asserts respect to cultural heritage and traditions. The program says: "In the art of socialist realism, based on the principles of nationalism and ideological commitment, bold innovations in the artistic representation of life combine with the application and further development of all progressive traditions of world culture.

This explanation comes up at a time when the darkest years in the field of art have already passed and the so-called Khrushchev's thaw has begun. (Both the darkest years and the thaw are purely theoretical findings.) Literary critic Berelis distinguishes two stages of the existence of socialist realism. First, truly classical and dogmatic socialist realism, which originated with the occupation of Latvia in 1940 and lasted until the German occupation in 1941; and second, from the end of WW2 to till about the mid-fifties. According to the researcher, in the middle of the fifties, the canon of classical socialist realism began to disintegrate. It was a predetermined process: it is obvious that the aesthetics of classical socialist realism was an artificial creation, like a deceptively strong and stable structure hanging over the void (Berelis, 1999, p. 107, 120)

During the first year of the occupation of Latvia, which lasted until the German occupation in 1941, the regime was unable to pay serious attention to decorative art, as all attention was paid to fine art, the reorientation of which in the direction of socialist realism was vitally important. Attention was mainly

focused on propagandizing the positive example and achievements of the Soviet way of life, as well as the production of portraits of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, including Stalin and other Soviet officials.

In the post-war period, there was an increased interest in the study and development of the culture of all national non-Russian peoples throughout the USSR. In addition, this happened at the same time as a pronounced russification and the displacement of large masses of people within the USSR. Nationalism was becoming in demand. The solution to this was the application of folk or national ornament in decorative art. In the case of the Baltic republics, it was the uncorrupted raw material unspoiled by bourgeois nationalism. It was the source for artists to work on traditional motifs, create forms, and choose materials.

The difference between folk art and the so-called "high" art lies beyond the historical sequence of styles, that it has no age. It combines ancient, almost mythical traditions with elements of the present, where naturalism, in a queer way, coexists with stylization, as was written by art historian Boris Viper (Vipers, 1940, p. 15).

When we speak about the attitude of Latvians towards ornament, let me quote the conclusions carried out by the Russian ornament researcher, ethnographer Rizhakova: "There are nations who have a special attitude towards ornament. In the Baltic area, they are, for example, Swedes, Norwegians, Latvians. The Finns, Danes and Lithuanians living nearby, of course, also have wonderful traditions of decorating folk objects, but they do not focus so much on their ornamental signs. Their ethnic identity has a different "center of gravity". And for the first, above mentioned – an ornamental sign, a pattern has a meaning of a sacred nature (Рыжакова, 2002, p. 7).

National motifs were also used in the decoration of important monumental buildings in the pre-war USSR, but it was a unique synthesis of antique aesthetics, classicism and folk art, whose authors were usually professional architects. Folk art became the main source of inspiration among decorative art professionals.

The ideas of primordialism (the theory of primordialism) were generally recognized in the Soviet Union and used to explain the origin of ethnicities. One of the founders of this theory was the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Supporters of this theory believe that ethnicities originated with the emergence of the human. Consequently, a person already at birth has the character of a national group determined by biological characteristics and genes ("community of blood").

Soviet primordialist ideas in regard to the nation extended into the sphere of applied art. The general mood of magazine publications of that time show this trend. Also the leaders of the USSR Artists Union adhered to the idea that only artists of the respective ethnicity could develop and show a genuine comprehension of their own national ornament, regardless of their studies or research. It just somehow "stemmed from their inner self".

It is a paradox, but the artist's ethnicity was taken as a certificate of authenticity.

Parallel to these trends, which occurred more or less synchronically in all Soviet republics, the Soviet power in the Baltic republics had yet additional reasons to support the development of national (based on ethnography) decorative art. These republics had joined the family of fraternal nations only just before the so-called Great Patriotic War, and life in the independent states in the past based on the national principle was still a fresh memory. The Soviet system had managed to discredit itself in just one (!) year, so that in 1944 and 1945 approximately 200,000 people left their homeland as refugees (Soviet authorities deported more than 14,500 inhabitants to Siberia just one week before the outbreak of the war, not to mention many Latvian citizens who were shot and tortured.) Carried by the wave of emigration, many outstanding people of culture, who were unquestionable authorities left. (e.g. composer Jāzeps Vītols, academician, painter Vilhelms Purvītis). The Soviet power had to prove to the people of Latvia that the Soviet regime was not hostile and anti-national. Artist Jūlijs Madernieks (1870-1955) was chosen for this purpose.

Madernieks was the most outstanding master in the field of Latvian ornament design and author of the first published Latvian ornament collection. He was innovator in art, and his work showed influences of modernist directions of the 20th century complemented with the traditions of folk art. His artistic

contribution is based on creatively transformed folk art. No imitation or replicas, but rather, creative usage of folk art principles. In the period of Latvia's independence, Madernieks laid the foundations for Latvian design by creating important public interiors, furniture sets, and diverse compositions for textile design; he worked in the field of book design and applied graphics, he was a respected teacher of many Latvian artists. And later, already in the Soviet time, his impeccable reputation and popularity were used in the interests of the regime.

On March 1, 1945, while the war in the Kurzeme (Courland) kettle was still ongoing, newspapers published the news that Jūlijs Madernieks was awarded the title of Merited Artist of the Latvian SSR. This was adopted and announced by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR (LPSP AP Prezidija ziņotājs 1945). It was unexpected recognition for the master of Latvian applied art, who dealt mainly with Latvian ornament.

A couple of days earlier, everybody could read an article in press written by poet Jānis Sudrabkalns, praising the talent of Madernieks. It said: When the Soviet Latvia government awarded high honorary titles to Latvian artists, the entire Latvian nation brimmed over with joy and pride. These were the festive days of our art. We were happy that the swastika wearing Germans did not manage to wreck our prominent artists, did not manage to herd them into trains and ships that headed for destruction. We are happy and proud that our respected artists, whose names and works have been familiar to every Latvian, faithfully love their homeland and unequivocally understand its future paths (Sudrabkalns, 1945). It is worth to know that Sudrabkalns was one of the most active glorifiers of the Soviet regime, as evidenced by his honorary titles – The People's Poet of the LSSR and laureate of the Stalin Prize. After a short time, he was already sitting in the presidium of the First Republican Congress of Intelligentsia of Soviet Latvia. There is no doubt that the elderly artist was delighted by this occasion, but most likely he was also aware of the reasons for this attention. Also artist Ansis Cīrulis (1883–1942), an outstanding Latvian ornament researcher, graphic artist, painter, master of applied art, author of the first mail stamp of the Republic of Latvia and the designer of the national flag was also initially, during the Soviet period, included into the group of recognized classics of decorative art. Most likely, he would not have received such an honor if he had lived till the second occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union.

Jūlijs Straume (1874–1970), one of the most remarkable masters of Latvian applied art, studied at the Baron Stieglitz Central School of Technical Drawing. Afterwards, he continued to study textiles in Paris for another three years. In 1907, after the appointment offer of the Ministry of Agriculture of Russia, he went to the Caucasus, where for sixteen years he was engaged in the study of folk arts and crafts, managed a carpet weaving workshop and established the museum of home crafts of the Caucasian peoples in Tbilisi.



**Picture 1.** Jūlijs Straume. Rug. Wool, linen, 75,5cmx 68 cm.  
Latvian National Museum of Art.



**Picture 2 Lavins.** Jānis Ozoliņš (1915–1967)  
Sketch for album. "Kultura Latvijskoj SSR". 1950s  
Watercolor, pencil drawing on paper, 42 cm x64 cm  
Latvian National Museum of Art

At the 1925 International Exhibition for Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris, the carpets by him and David Tsichshvili, created in the very first years of Soviet power, won a gold medal. His relationship with the Soviet power after 1945 was complicated and ambiguous. In the post-war period from 1945 to 1959, despite elderly age, he worked at the Central State History Museum in Riga. From 1951, he received a personal pension (usually higher, given to war and party veterans), which after a short time was cancelled due to some of his unflattering statements about the Soviet regime during the German occupation. Feeling unfairly slandered, he started to write endless pleas of not being guilty and letters of explanations. Due to this unfavourable situation, the artist encountered difficult financial conditions which made him sell the family house in Mežaparks. With the help of his former colleagues in Georgia, he started fight to reset the personal pension. Only in 1959, the History Museum of Latvian SSR hosted Jūlijs Straume's exhibition of ornament design and rugs, and he was awarded the title of Merited Artist of the Latvian SSR. It shows that even with no proof of hostile activities and none criticism of the artist's creative work, the bureaucratic machinery was capable to settle a score with a creative personality. His personal pension was reset only in 1963, but the book dedicated to the artist's work was repeatedly refused for publication and was never released.

Conceptual ambiguity – undoubtedly complicated communication between all interested parties – artists, party nomenclature, theoreticians and commissioners – prevented the creation of a coherent theory of applied art. This, however, left the representatives of the applied art some room for maneuver, some freedom. It was an opportunity for smart tactics – artists created their works by manipulating with the notion of *national form* and, at the same time, they did not directly violate the canons of socialist realism. (It is true that it was not always glossed over by critics and workshop colleagues.) (Капцова 2011) The principle of nationalism was not really comprehensive. The postulate *national in form, socialist in content* also gave the option for various interpretations. It was necessary to find out what was meant by form and what – by content under the realm of decorative art.

The principle of ideological commitment in the combination with the principles of ethnicity and the right comprehension of party ideas was the ideological weapon to fight against freedom of thinking. Although there were also cases when the public polemic could be considered scientific, at least formally, but it was carried out in an offensive and incomprehensible way. In 1948, writer Jānis Niedre (1909–1987) published an article dealing with issues related to Latvian folk art. In the introduction to the article, he announced that the new science and art will be able to develop and flourish only under circumstances when the influence of the old idealistic, bourgeois views and theories will finally come to an end. To reinforce his viewpoint he quoted Stalin. His criticism was directed against Matīss Siliņš, head of the Latvian Folklore Repository (1924–1934). Siliņš was reproached for the fact that Latvian folk art had been viewed as a category devoid of historical background. According to Niedra, Latvian folk art does not exist as a single phenomenon. It has to be identified as two distinctive Latvian folk arts: the folk art of the absolute majority of the working people's class and the folk art of the exploiting class – the rich, which is the minority. Further, he discusses bourgeois theories and predicts their end.

He voiced three important issues – first, Latvian folk was not created by the entire undifferentiated nation. This contains Latvian wood carvings, forged iron objects, fabrics, embroideries, ornamental decorations and their composition which were not elaborated by the whole nation, masters and servants, rich and poor – all together in one friendly family. Second, Latvian folk art should not be considered as non-historical category and its fundamentals have changed through several thousand years. Third: it is not true folk art has always been an end in itself for the Latvian people, not really a necessity of life as Latvian bourgeois scholars have claimed. Folk art is a weapon in the struggle of the working people to make difficult work accomplish easier through the creation of beauty. There are also objections from his part about the unscientific division of folk art and folk costumes corresponding to regions (novadi).

He considered that the national, the special feature in folk art is not just the pure repetition of ornaments. In his opinion, artists must rework the old patterns and stop admiring the beauty of the passed times. Needless to say that the author of the article was not an ordinary communist party member. He was a significant Soviet official, First Secretary of the Writers' Union of Latvia (1941-1957). The set task for significant modification of the ornament in accordance with the new requirements corresponded to the artistic creativity in the field of ornament design, already visible in the works of Straume and Madernieks. Artists who tried to stick to traditional Latvian folk ornament in the creation of their works were severely criticized.

The outstanding artist Jēkabs Bīne (1895-1955), a painter, stained glass artist, pedagogue and art critic, author of the "Tauta" service, which was exhibited in the joint pavilion of the Baltic States at the 1937 Paris World Art and Industry Exhibition, researcher of ornament and adherent of Dievturi movement was also criticized for his views.

In the article "Non-scientific, harmful lecture" he received criticism for the fact that he claimed that "an ornament is a pictorial, graphic or relief decoration", "a rhythmic arrangement", the nature of which depends on the material, technique of performance, etc. He was criticized of not mentioning the fact that ornament reflects the reality of life and is an ideological formation, ornament is a historical category and it reflects the worldview of the people at a certain historical stage. At the same time, Bīne allegedly referred to the unscientific bourgeois "migration" theory, trying to "prove" that the major elements of the Latvian ornament have come from somewhere else. Bīne as if had deceived the listeners telling them false stories. Afterwards, another critical article appeared in the newspaper "Literatūra un Māksla [Literature and Art]" (issued by the creative association). It was entitled "Let us not allow distortions in the issues of ideology". The author of the article was Georg Kruglov – the head of the Ceramics Department of the Academy of Arts. Bīne had dared to say that realism in ornamentation seems to have discredited itself already in the days of the "proletkult" (proletarian culture in Russia, 1917). Bīne as if believes that an ornamental pattern should not be in contact with the reality of the present era. With the aforementioned negative historical example, Bīne as if has attempted to show that the creative method of socialist realism is not applicable in the art of ornamentation. He has gravely misunderstood the leading role of the method of socialist realism. Similar discussions about the role of ornament in decorative art and socialist realism method were carried out also on other occasions.

### **Conclusions.**

While speaking about the applied art and the usage of ornament in this field, one might get the impression that this theme is of calm and balanced nature, developing steadily and silently. Unfortunately, it must be stated that this kind of idyll does not exist, and that the field of applied art has also been affected by various forces – both intellectual and social thought, prevailing trends and directions of art, as well as political regimes which acted either through soft power, or sometimes through brutal attack.

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