

Do We Need an Art Academy? Clashes of Opinions in Latvia During the 1920s

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The article delves into the spectrum of conflicting views surrounding the need for the establishment of an art academy in Latvia. Authors with predominantly modernist attitudes asserted that an independent nation's cultural objectives should diverge from those of the Russian-German imperial academies, which they believed stifled creativity. Instead, they advocated for training in private or state studios, reminiscent of the "good old times of the Renaissance". Critical opinions were summarized in an open letter to the government, asserting that true art has always been revolutionary and, therefore, at odds with academic aspirations. However, opposing viewpoints argued that the future academy need not be confined to teaching drab academism. They contended that training under a single individual, without a broader educational foundation, would only produce imitators and diletantes. While the verbal skirmishes between modernists and traditionalists subsided during the 1920s, the spotlight once again fell on the need for this institution, as the echoes of the Great Depression in the USA brought financial challenges. However, it was widely recognized that no viable alternatives to academic education had emerged, and the withdrawal of state funding would only result in a radical impoverishment of educational options.

Keywords: Art Academy of Latvia, artistic education, academism, artistic traditions, modernism.



1. Central Railway Board House at 3 Gogoļa Street in Riga, venue of the Art Academy of Latvia from 1922 to 1940, 1923–1924, photo courtesy of the Art Academy of Latvia Information Centre, Riga

Centrinės geležinkelio valdybos namai Rygoje, Gogolio g. 3, kuriuose 1922–1940 m. buvo įsikūrusi Latvijos dailės akademija, 1923–1924

Introduction

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several art schools and artists' studios began offering education in the arts. However, higher education opportunities were scarce in Latvia at that time. Only future architects received training at the Riga Polytechnic School.¹ As a result, Latvians predominantly pursued their art studies in Russia or Western Europe. Before World War I, a vision for a graduate art school had already taken shape. It was closely associated with the Riga City Art School, led by the renowned landscape painter and educator Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945). Unfortunately, due to the war, this vision remained unrealized.² However,

1 For a comprehensive insight into the period's local educational options, see Kristiāna Ābele, "Artistic Life", in *Art History of Latvia IV: 1890–1915*, ed. Eduards Kļaviņš (Riga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art & Art History Research Support Foundation, 2014), 34–40; 51–56; 73–78; 115–127.

2 Ābele, "Artistic Life", 121.



2. General classes at the Art Academy of Latvia, 1924, from *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* 46 (1924): 1011

Bendri uzsīemimai Latvijas dailēs akademijojē, 1924

the need for a higher educational institution gained prominence after the founding of an independent state in 1918. During a brief period of Bolshevik rule (January–May 1919), there was a plan to establish proletarian art studios modelled after Soviet Russia.³ Yet, this plan did not come to fruition. When the Communists were ousted, Purvītis assumed leadership of the Art Academy of Latvia. In October 1921, the academy finally opened its doors and began enrolling students (Fig. 1–2). Latvia's case stands out among the Baltic states, as neither Lithuania nor Estonia attempted to create new art education institutions modelled after academies in the specific sense. For instance, the precursor to the present Estonian Academy of Arts – the Tallinn School of Arts and Crafts – was more aligned with the Stieglitz Art School in St. Petersburg.⁴ In Lithuania, the focus was on developing existing academic traditions rather than establishing a new academy.⁵

The academy's inception and subsequent years, marked by the Great Depression, were characterized by intense debates and conflicting viewpoints. These discussions remain a significant aspect of Latvia's artistic history, explored in various art-historical publications that delve into contextual

3 "Proletāriskās mākslas darbnīcas" [Proletarian Art Studios], *Cīņa*, May 4, 1919, 1.

4 See Mart Kalm, "100 Years of Art Education in Tallinn", accessed October 18, 2023, <https://www.artun.ee/en/academy/about/history/>.

5 The origins of academic training in the arts trace back to the late 18th century at the University of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For more information, see Małgorzata Geron, ed., *Wydział Sztuk Pięknych na Uniwersytecie Stefana Batorego w Wilnie (1919–1939/45)*: *Dydaktyka, Twórczości Tradycja Artystyczna = The Faculty of Fine Arts of the Stefan Batory University in Wilno (1919–1939/45): Education, Creativity and Artistic Tradition* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2022).

elements such as art education and criticism. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece has meticulously examined the intricate relationship between art and the state, outlining the main arguments put forth by both proponents and opponents of art academies.⁶ Similarly, Eduards Kļaviņš provides valuable insights into the clashing opinions from both sides in his survey of the period's artistic life.⁷ Despite these efforts, no publication has yet explored this subject with the depth and breadth it deserves. This article seeks to expand and elaborate on the topic, giving greater attention to authors' perspectives on art's overall development and its connection to their stance on the art academy. The theoretical framework of the article extends beyond art itself, aligning with the tradition of social art history and employing a complex methodology. The essay's structure follows a chronological approach, tracing the evolution of discussions over time using the historical method. Additionally, the biographical method is used to study authors' careers, complemented by elements of the postcolonial perspective.

Modernist decolonisation

These discussions began at the inception of the independent Republic of Latvia, which had recently liberated itself from what was referred to as “intra-European colonization”, the term denoting the situation of “many countries and nations of the region being subjected to and exploited by neighbouring hegemons”⁸ – in Latvia's case, tsarist Russia. The issue of the art academy became closely intertwined with this legacy, which was perceived as deeply damaging and, thus, subject to heavy criticism. Notably, the German nobility, who had retained privileges even after Latvia's gradual incorporation into the Russian Empire during the 18th century, contributed to the local specificity of this historical context.

- 6 Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un Latvijas valsts. 1918–1940* [Art and the State of Latvia. 1918–1940] (Rīga: Neputns, 2016), 53–54; 61–62.
- 7 Eduards Kļaviņš, “Artistic Life”, in *Art History of Latvia V: 1915–1940*, ed. Eduards Kļaviņš (Rīga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art & Art History Research Support Foundation, 2016), 63–65; 87.
- 8 Agnieszka Chmielewska, Irena Kossowska, and Marcin Lachowski, “Introduction”, in *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe, 1918–2018*, ed. Agnieszka Chmielewska, Irena Kossowska, and Marcin Lachowski (New York and London: Routledge, 2023, 2). For more information, see, for example, Siegfried Huigen and Dorota Kołodziejczyk, eds., *East Central Europe Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023).

While opinions in the press began to emerge in 1921, as early as 1920, the applied artist, educator, and often stern art critic Jūlijs Madernieks⁹ (1870–1955) welcomed the proposed changes. He asserted that the obstacles to artistic education, lingering from the pre-war era, such as the oppressive Russian tsarist bureaucracy and equally unfavourable German chauvinism, had finally been eliminated.¹⁰ Simultaneously, Madernieks cautioned against the resurrection of a tsarist-type academy that would constrain art within rigid boundaries. He advocated for a new institution grounded in strong democratic and national principles, expressing doubts about the direction of the ongoing process. In conclusion, Madernieks posed a critical question: “Why do we need an art academy? On the one hand, there is a demand for education among young people.”¹¹ However, he also acknowledged the challenging material circumstances faced by artists, compelled to earn a livelihood as clerks, coupled with inadequate state support for the arts. Madernieks suggested that if improvements in state support were not addressed, postponing the establishment of the academy might be prudent. In a sequel to this article,¹² Madernieks explored the history of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, drawing harsh conclusions:

A lifeless routine stifled the free development of art. The academy’s pseudo-classical degeneration was compounded by a shallow, banal cult of romanticism supported by soppy, dull naturalism. [...] The advent of Peredvizhniki philistinism shackled the academy for a long time. [...] The academy’s despotic degeneration had become so deeply entrenched in the artistic organism that escape was impossible. Fortunately, a revolution intervened, wiping away the rotting stain from the earth’s surface – a welcome respite for weary art.¹³

Madernieks’s stern critique of the Russian academy aligns with his early 20th-century position as a radical advocate for neo-romanticist

9 For a comprehensive study of Madernieks’ prolific and manifold artistic and critic’s career, see Inese Baranovska and Rūta Rinka, eds., *Madernieka stils = The Style of Madernieks* (Riga, LNMM DMDM, 2021).

10 Jūlijs Madernieks, “Mākslas akadēmijas lietā” [On the Case of the Art Academy], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, July 24, 1920, 2.

11 Madernieks, “Mākslas akadēmijas lietā”, 2.

12 Jūlijs Madernieks, “Mākslas akadēmijas lietā”, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, August 7, 1920, 3.

13 Madernieks, “Mākslas akadēmijas lietā”, 3.



3. Private studio of Uga Skulme, first from the right – head of the studio, 1922–1927, from a photo from a private collection, Latvia

Ugos Skulmēs privāti dailēs studija, pirmas iš dešinės – studijos vadovas, 1922–1927

subjective emotionality, formal autonomy, and naturalness. These principles were aimed against both academism and naturalism, but his stance evolved into a more moderate one during the inter-war period. Even in the 1930s, he expressed some anti-modernist sentiments. This moderation is evident in his concluding remarks, where he emphasized that classical examples and modern Western European art should not be seen as ultimate aims or ideals; instead, they should serve as means to develop a distinct Latvian art.¹⁴

A similar viewpoint was expressed by the painter, pedagogue, and prolific art critic Uga Skulme¹⁵ (1895–1963) (Fig. 3). Initially intrigued by Pablo Picasso's Cubism and Neo-Classicism, Skulme later shifted towards more painterly realism. Like other authors, he began his article with

¹⁴ Madernieks, "Mākslas akadēmijas lietā", 3.

¹⁵ For an overview of Uga Skulme's theoretical outlook, see Stella Pelše, "Construction and Constructive Art in Latvian Art Critic Uga Skulme's Writings of the 1920s–30s", in *Sztuka Europy Wschodniej = Искусство Восточной Европы = The Art of Eastern Europe*, vol. IX, ed. Małgorzata Geron, Jerzy Malinowski (Warsaw and Toruń: Polish Institute of World Art Studies, Tako Publishing House, 2021), 23–31.



4. Romans Suta, early 1930s, photo by Alfrēds Pole, Romans Suta and Aleksandra Beļcova Museum, Riga

Romanas Suta, XX a. 4 deš. pradžia

a historical overview, asserting that “the artistic genius has already left the thrones”,¹⁶ implying that art academies merely functioned as “organs” of state bureaucracy promoting official art. He stressed the need “to separate art from the state”¹⁷ and proposed alternative channels of state support, advocating for financing artists’ associations and their private studios rather than replicating “rotten” examples from tsarist Russia.

The most vehement critic of the academy idea was Romans Suta¹⁸ (1896–1944), a versatile modernist artist and explorer of Cubism and Purism who promoted contemporary art (Fig. 4). He contended that the cultural goals of an independent nation differed from those of Russian-German imperial academies stifling creative art, which had already been closed when Latvians were preparing to open one. Suta argued that academies “tend to imitate past grand epochs, practicing epigonism”,¹⁹ and

16 Uga Skulme, “Apzēģelētā māksla” [The Stamped Art], *Latvijas Kareivis*, March 12, 1921, 3.

17 Skulme, “Apzēģelētā māksla”, 3.

18 For a comprehensive publication on Romans Suta, see Laima Slava, ed., *Romans Suta* (Riga: Neputns, 2016).

19 Romans Suta, “Ap akadēmiju” [About the Academy], *Latvijas Sargs*, March 15, 1921, 2.

were supervised by monarchs' courts, primarily serving to confer honours and titles rather than fostering creative, living art. He dismissed the institution as useless, claiming that significant Russian artists like Valentin Serov, Mikhail Vrubel, and Victor Borisov-Musatov owed nothing to the academy. Suta also challenged the notion that French artists like Eugène Delacroix, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, or Henri Matisse were state shaped by state education. Like Madernieks, Suta perceived the founding process of the academy in Latvia as shrouded in secrecy. He advocated for training in private or state studios, raising questions about whether Suta favoured Soviet Russian examples. While leftist views were common among Latvian modernists, who stood against the old art and "bourgeois" society, no evidence has surfaced linking Suta to illegal Communist circles.²⁰ His mention of the "good old times of Renaissance"²¹ as a model to be followed suggests that historical paradigms of artistic education held more prominence in his perspective.

Art historian, painter, and critic Jānis Siliņš²² (1896–1991) shared a profound scepticism toward the academy, expressing his views in several detailed and referenced articles. According to Siliņš, "the most severe opponents of academies are the great personalities inscribed in gold letters in the history of art."²³ He directly associated academies with monarchic state systems, drawing parallels between their role in controlling and guiding art and the absolutist rule of kings over their countries. Siliņš focused extensively on the history of the Imperial Academy in Russia as a crucial training centre for Latvian artists. Despite the transformations brought about by the Peredvizhniki rebellion, he argued that the academy remained

20 While Romans Suta was commissioned to create a large poster in Moscow during the Monumental Propaganda Plan and engaged in some large-scale projects during the short Soviet episode in Latvia, he never joined the Communist underground circle at the People's University where he later taught. See Marta Šuste, "Mākslinieks un laiks. Romana Sutas dzīves un darbības dažas epizodes" [Artist and Time. Some Episodes from Romans Suta's Life and Activities], in 17. *Borisa Vīpera piemiņas lasījumi: Krīze un māksla*, ed. Elita Grosmane (Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūts; Mākslas vēstures pētījumu atbalsta fonds, 2009), 27.

21 Suta, "Ap akadēmiju", 2.

22 Jānis Siliņš' main contribution to the local art history is the survey *Latvijas māksla* [The Art of Latvia] in five volumes (1979–1993) he wrote in exile after the Second World War.

23 Jānis Siliņš, "Vai brīvai Latvijai ir vajadzīga mākslas akadēmija?" [Does Free Latvia Need an Art Academy?], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, June 18, 1921, 4.

fundamentally bureaucratic and detrimental to true art, citing the opinions of art historian Alexander Benois, renowned Peredvizhnik painter Ilya Repin, and others. In his conclusion, Siliņš asserted the incompatibility of academies with democracy, contending that free Latvia had no need for such an institution. He also distinguished universities from academies, emphasizing that universities were more open to the advancement of sciences.²⁴ In response to the suggestion that “our” Latvian academy could differ from past examples, Siliņš argued that such an institution would deserve a different name.²⁵

The critical perspectives were consolidated in an open letter addressed to the government,²⁶ asserting that true art has always been revolutionary and, as a result, contrary to academic aspirations. The letter characterized an academy as a conservator of certain traditions, with its best-case goal being to maintain a mediocre artistic level. It proposed that supporting such a “regulator” might be suitable in large and rich countries, but in Latvia, the letter argued that artists’ studios were a more favourable solution. The signatories represented a diverse group of Latvian artists, including members of the Cubist and Purist-oriented Riga Group of Artists (Romans Suta, Oto Skulme, Uga Skulme, Aleksandra Beļcova, Niklāvs Strunke, Erasts Šveics), as well as individuals with more moderate, realist, or neo-classicist inclinations (Kārlis Baltgailis, Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš, Kārlis Miesnieks, Kārlis Zāle), and those who primarily wrote about art (Jūlijs Madernieks, Alberts Prande). Notably, the opposition against the academy extended beyond the most radical circles of modernist influences.

Defending the traditions

Shortly after the surge of criticisms, a counterbalance of views supporting the establishment of an art academy in Latvia began to surface. Some notably conservative attitudes were directed against modernist influences, viewing the academy as a necessary guardian of endangered traditions. The argument against teaching drab academism was notably articulated by

24 Jānis Siliņš, „Vai vajadzīga mākslas akadēmija?” [Is There a Need for an Art Academy?], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, September 10, 1921, 5.

25 Jānis Siliņš, „Vai vajadzīga mākslas akadēmija?”, *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, September 17, 1921, 5.

26 “Ministru prezidenta, Izglītības un rūpniecības ministru kungiem” [To the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Education and Industry], *Latvijas sargs*, June 22, 1921, 3.

caricaturist and critic Alfrēds Purics (1878–1936). Purics contended that “the academy should serve as a gatherer, developer, and improver of certain strong principles and knowledge, acting as a foundational source of artistic technique accessible to everyone”.²⁷ He advocated for a practical orientation, emphasizing the role of “masters” rather than practitioners of “pure” art, which he believed often led to unemployment. Purics, leaning towards a more conservative stance, no longer saw individualism as endangered, foreshadowing his later speculations about art as a revelation of the nation’s collective inner essence. He belonged to the more conservative wing that did not support “‘futuristic modernity’ embellished with grandiose nightmares and the canons of crazy ideas”.²⁸ Romans Suta, readily engaging in polemics, responded in a different newspaper²⁹ after *Latvijas Vēstnesis* reportedly refused to publish his critique. Suta adopted an ironic tone and employed ad hominem arguments to criticize not only Purics’ work but also that of other academically trained, conservative artists associated with the academy, such as Rihards Zariņš, Jānis Roberts Tillbergs, and Jānis Kuga.³⁰

Despite reaching its peak in 1921, the debates continued in the subsequent years. The position of the academy’s rector (1921–1934), Vilhelms Purvītis, who also led the Landscape Painting Master Studio, remains of interest. (Fig. 5) Although he did not engage in press polemics himself, his supportive views on the institution are evident in an unpublished letter to Minister of Education Aleksandrs Dauge dated 13 January 1922:

Creative art, as proven by art history, has always been not revolutionary but evolutionary. [...] To learn the “craft”, the institution is necessary; if there will

27 Alfrēds Purics, “Mūsu mākslas akadēmijas lietā” [On the Case of Our Art Academy], *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, August 5, 1921, 3.

28 Purics, “Mūsu mākslas akadēmijas lietā”, 3.

29 Romans Suta, “Akadēmijas lietā” [On the Case of the Art Academy], *Latvijas Sargs*, August 26, 1921, 2.

30 The debates surrounding the art academy should also be understood in the context of the Kasparsons Affair in 1920. During this incident, academic artists organized an exhibition featuring collectively created paintings in a geometric style, attributed to the young painter Reinholds Kasparsons. The purpose of the exhibition was to demonstrate how easily one could produce works in line with modernist trends. However, the Riga Group of Artists took serious offense at this “performance”, and society at large did not support the endeavour. See: Dace Lambergā, ed., *Rīgas Mākslinieku grupa 100 = The Riga Group of Artists 100* (Rīga: Latvian National Museum of Art; Neputns, 2020), 48–49.



5. Vilhelms Purvītis with his students in the Landscape Painting Master Studio at the Art Academy of Latvia, c. 1930, photo courtesy of the Art Academy of Latvia Information Centre, Riga

Vilhelms Purvītis su savo studentais Latvijas dailēs akadēmijas Peizažinēs tapybos studijojē, apie 1930

be no academy that preserves traditions and maintains art at a “certain level”, it will be impossible. Training under one person cannot teach art, it can only teach to imitate that person. Only a collective of persons who are familiar with the tradition of art (i.e., are educated in this particular subject) can provide the basis without which even the most gifted individual will remain only a dilettante.³¹

Nevertheless, the positive role of collectively maintained traditions remained a point of contention for some. In 1923, Uga Skulme and modernist sculptor Emīls Melderis (1889–1979) continued the critical trend by co-authoring an essay, in which they underscored the academy’s perceived major contribution to producing obedient painters of aesthetically pleasing pictures and sculptors focused on classical busts.³² The academy was accused of still embodying a German spirit and failing to showcase

31 Gerharde-Upeniece, *Māksla un Latvijas valsts*, 58.

32 Emīls Melderis, Uga Skulme, “Akadēmijas’ jautājums” [The Issue of the “Academy”], *Sociāl-demokrāts*, May 27, 1923, 4.

any notable achievements to the public. According to Skulme and Melderis, the institution's primary goal was securing advantageous positions and high salaries.

Concurrently, the defence of the academy persisted, particularly from a conservative standpoint, exemplified by the views of Andrievs Dzilna, likely a pen name for journalist and writer Ādolfs Erss (1885–1945). Dzilna dismissed academy opponents as “ultra-modern”, branding them as incompetent “cube-makers”³³ who attacked the institution out of envy and greed. Emphasizing “a return to old masters’ traditions and the cultivation of painting’s objective, specific values”,³⁴ which he praised as the most topical tendency abroad, he portrayed the academy’s role as guarding against harmful influences rather than chasing transient trends.

Despite these debates, the academy described as combining “the models of French classicism and German romanticism”³⁵ during the interwar period did not fully become such an anti-modernist guardian of traditions. Rector Vilhelms Purvītis invited several reasonably modernist painters, including Ludolfs Liberts, Valdemārs Tone, Konrāds Ubāns, and Ģederts Eliass, to teach at the academy, aligning with his emphasis on evolution rather than revolution. These artists introduced creative approaches centred on various aspects of form. Simultaneously, pedagogues like Jānis Roberts Tillbergs or Rihards Zariņš adhered to more traditional academic and realist approaches. While the verbal conflict between modernists and traditionalists gradually waned in the 1920s, the need for the art academy resurfaced, particularly with the financial challenges stemming from the echoes of the Great Depression in the USA.

More artists or more craftsmen?

The tabloid newspaper *Pēdējā Brīdī* [In the Last Moment] emerged as the primary platform for renewed discussions, where arguments were now grounded in assessments of the past eight years, offering both positive and negative perspectives. Romans Suta, who never served as a teacher at

33 Andrievs Dzilna, “Maizes naids” [Enmity Resulting from Greed], *Latvijas Sargs*, June 17, 1923, 9.

34 Dzilna, “Maizes naids”, 9.

35 Andris Teikmanis, „1919–1929“, in *100: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija = Art Academy of Latvia*, ed. Inese Bauge (Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija, 2019), 15.

the academy,³⁶ initiated fresh polemics and remained the most relentless critic. He targeted his modernist colleagues who had become “salaried officials”,³⁷ portraying them as academic pedagogues, incapable of earning a living through other means. Suta argued that the academy generated an overproduction of artists, lured by dreams of fame and a fascinating eventful life but destined to face unemployment later. His proposal suggested maintaining a lower-level school for drawing teachers, providing direct support to artists to focus on their creative work, and sending the most talented youngsters abroad to refine their artistic skills. According to Suta, this approach could save the state a significant amount of money.

A few days later, the newspaper published an inquiry titled “Does Latvia Need an Art Academy?”³⁸ featuring opinions from several prominent figures in the art world. Painter and stage designer Oto Skulme³⁹ (1889–1967) acknowledged flaws in the academy’s work but advocated against its closure, suggesting that, as a recently established institution, it should be given a chance to progress. The academic painter Jānis Roberts Tillbergs (1880–1972) refuted claims about the overproduction of artists, stating that many university graduates faced challenges finding jobs and did not work in their specialties. Painter Leo Svemps⁴⁰ (1897–1975) expressed support, noting the lack of alternative educational options to replace the academy. Graphic artist Sigismunds Vidbergs (1890–1970) aimed to strike a balance between support and criticism, acknowledging the necessity of

36 Despite his earlier opposition to the art academy, Romans Suta later became significantly involved in art pedagogy. He headed the Drawing and Painting Studio at the left-leaning Riga People’s University from 1928 to 1934 and, following the authoritarian coup d’état, ran his private studio from 1934 to 1941, educating a substantial number of the next-generation Latvian artists.

37 Romans Suta, “Vaj mākslas akadēmija likvidējama?” [Should the Art Academy Be Closed?], *Pēdējā Brīdī*, February 13, 1929, 1.

38 „Vaj mākslas akadēmija Latvijā vajadzīga? ‘Pēdējā Brīdī’ aptauja” [Is There a Need for an Art Academy in Latvia? Inquiry by “Pēdējā Brīdī”], *Pēdējā Brīdī*, February 16, 1929, 6.

39 Oto Skulme was the rector of the academy in the Soviet period from 1940 to 1941 and again from 1944 to 1961. The involvement of former modernists with the Soviet-era academy can be partially attributed to their leftist leanings and a certain opposition to nationalist authoritarianism. However, despite their initial alignment with the Soviet regime, these artists did not escape later dismissals, persecutions, and accusations of formalism launched by the Soviet authorities.

40 Leo Svemps taught at the academy (1940–1941; from 1944) and took over the rector’s office from Oto Skulme (1961–1975).

organized artistic education, regardless of its name. Vidbergs delved into the issue of artists' employment, proposing that if the state allocated substantial funds to the academy, equal sums should be assigned to museums, embassies, and other institutions for the purchase of artworks. He also emphasized the importance of commissions for monuments and the decoration of buildings.

A few days later, art historian Jānis Dombrovskis (1885–1953) joined the critical discourse, echoing concerns about excessive expenses and the overproduction of artists, particularly painters and sculptors. Dombrovskis argued that applied artists were not being trained in sufficient numbers and called for the establishment of a higher school of artistic crafts, deeming it more necessary than the academy and suggesting its reorganization.⁴¹

A collective proposal to close the academy re-emerged, signed by earlier opponents like Suta, Strunke, and Madernieks, alongside new signatories such as Žanis Smiltnieks, Ernests Brastiņš, Jēkabs Bīne, and Ansis Cīrulis. The arguments reiterated the huge sums of money spent in eight years, with many graduates struggling to find stable employment and surviving from odd jobs.⁴²

Responses to the debate appeared in other periodicals as well. Battle painter and artistic life organizer Kārlis Baltgailis (1893–1979), in the March issue of the journal *Zaļā Vārna*, echoed the criticism, emphasizing the lack of economic prospects for future artists. Baltgailis proposed reorganizing the academy as a school of applied arts and suggested state commissions as a solution to artists' unemployment. If the state does not need art, he argued, then it should at least hire artists as house painters.⁴³

Saving artistic education

Largely supportive voices from the earlier inquiry were echoed in the leftist newspaper *Sociāldemokrāts* [The Social Democrat]. A collective letter from academy students with seventy signatories stated: "Abolishing

41 Jānis Dombrovskis, "Mākslas akadēmija pārorganizējama" [The Art Academy Has to Be Reorganised], *Pēdējā Brīdī*, February 23, 1929, 2.

42 "Mākslinieki prasa mākslas akadēmijas likvidēšanu" [Artists Demand the Liquidation of the Art Academy], *Pēdējā Brīdī*, March 1, 1929, 1.

43 Kārlis Baltgailis, "Mākslas akadēmija" [The Art Academy], *Zaļā Vārna* 2 (1929): 77–79.

or converting into a craft school our sole art institution providing systematic artistic education at an affordable fee is not acceptable. Getting this kind of training privately is absolutely impossible.”⁴⁴ The letter refuted claims that students merely imitate their instructors, emphasizing the normalcy of this process and dismissing Suta’s assertions that art students start their education expecting an easy path. The conclusion conveyed a traditionalist sentiment, emphasizing the enduring value of long-term, relentless efforts under systematic training rather than mere “fashionable painting.”⁴⁵

Even the previously critical Uga Skulme⁴⁶ shifted his stance, asserting that no real alternatives to academic education, such as master’s studios with disciples, had yet emerged. Skulme warned against withdrawing state funds, as it would lead to a radical impoverishment of educational options. He emphasized that cutting the budgets of cultural institutions would not benefit the art community:

Artists should not forget that by cutting the academy’s budget, they will not gain anything apart from causing trouble for some colleagues and a large part of young people. The small savings at the expense of the academy will never reach art and artists.⁴⁷

Moreover, Skulme expressed doubt about the frequently asserted need to shift towards more applied education, arguing that just as we do not discuss the overproduction of poets, we should refrain from talking about the overproduction of artists. He contended that craftsmen who do not aspire to create great art were already being trained at craft and technical schools. Sceptical of expanding applied art departments at the academy, Skulme claimed they were as detached from practical needs as fine art departments, producing mostly expensive and impractical items for the wealthy.⁴⁸

44 “Par uzbrukumiem mākslas akadēmijai” [On the Attacks Against the Art Academy], *Sociāldemokrāts*, March 3, 1929, 7.

45 A reference to modernist trends as equivalents of a short-lived fashion, often found in the period’s artistic debates.

46 Like several of his moderately modernist contemporaries, Uga Skulme also taught at the academy in 1941 and after the Second World War.

47 Uga Skulme, “Mākslas akadēmijas apkarošanas sezona” [The Season of Struggle Against the Art Academy], *Sociāldemokrāts*, March 7, 1929, 4.

48 Skulme, “Mākslas akadēmijas apkarošanas sezona”, 4.

The local Latvian authoritarian regime established in 1934, along with subsequent German (1941–1945) and Soviet (1940–1941; 1945–1991) occupational powers, did not directly question the institution's necessity to the same extent as in the early or late 1920s. This can be attributed to the general trajectory towards national art or Socialist Realism, both rooted to some extent in academic traditions of beauty, correctness, and the imitation of visual appearances. After 1991, there has been no questioning of whether the state can afford an art academy, which is no longer strictly "academic" in the traditional sense, absorbing a wide range of modernist and post-modernist approaches to art. The transformed socio-political conditions "built the prerequisites for the restoration and reintegration of the academy's traditional master workshop training in the artistic and cultural processes in the world, as well as determined the need to find a balance between the academic tradition of the art teaching and the conditional contemporary cultural paradigm of the new art."⁴⁹ However, debates about the justified financial support for culture and art, which may struggle to survive as a popular phenomenon, resurface in Latvia's public sphere repeatedly.

Conclusion

There seems to be no strict correlation between authors' positions in either the traditionalist or modernist camp, or their political stance, and their support or opposition to the need for an art academy. While traditional academic realists leaned more towards support and modernists towards opposition, many voices occupied middle ground positions, and exceptions were evident. For instance, both Romans Suta and Uga Skulme, known as adherents of modernism and moderately leftist views in Latvia's art history, found themselves on opposite sides regarding the need for an art academy in Latvia in the late 1920s. This suggests that disagreements over the spending of public money were to a large extent pragmatic and may have involved personal disputes.

Simultaneously, discussions about the art academy were undoubtedly influenced by broader theoretical, stylistic, and political commitments of the time. A clear decolonizing desire to dissociate from imitative artistic

49 "About", Art Academy of Latvia, accessed October 18, 2023, <https://www.lma.lv/en/academy/about-academy>.

traditions linked to oppressive German and Russian powers and their academies, bringing more modern forms to the new art of independent Latvia, was evident. The emerging “return to order” typifying the 1920s, which grew increasingly critical of “pure” art and unrestrained individualism, seeking to integrate art and life and emphasizing applied arts, served as an argument against the academy. Conversely, the resurging value of artistic traditions, subsiding modernist experiments, and the lack of educational alternatives favoured a more positive attitude towards academic education.

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Santrauka

Ar mums reikia dailės akademijos? Nuomonių skirtumai Latvijoje XX a. 3 dešimtmetyje

Stella Pelše

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Latvijos dailės akademija, meninis ugdymas, akademizmas, dailės tradicijos, modernizmas.

XIX a. pabaigoje ir XX a. pradžioje Latvijoje meno dalykus pradėta dėstyti keliose meno mokyklose ir menininkų studijose, tačiau aukštojo mokslo dailės studijų šalyje nebuvo, tik Rygos politechnikos mokykla rengė būsimuosius architektus. Todėl latviai studijuoti dailės daugiausia vykdavo arba į Rusiją, arba į Vakarų Europą. Įkūrus nepriklausomą valstybę (1918), tokios aukštosios švietimo institucijos poreikis tapo akivaizdus. 1921 m. buvo įsteigta Latvijos dailės akademija, tačiau jos veiklos pradžioje dailės dėstymas susilaukė prieštarinių nuomonių. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama apžvelgti įvairių autorių požiūrius į bendrą dailės raidą ir jų nuostatas dėl akademijos poreikio. Daugelis modernistų autorių, rašiusių apie meną, pavyzdžiui, menininkas Romanas Suta, teigė, kad nepriklausoma tauta turi kitokių kultūrinių siekių nei bet kokią kūrybiškumą mene slopinusios Rusijos ar Vokietijos imperijų akademijos, kurios jau buvo uždarytos, latviams rengiantis atidaryti savąją. Vietoj to šie autoriai pasisakė už mokymą privačiose arba valstybinėse dailės studijose, kaip „senais gerais Renesanso laikais“. Kritinės nuomonės buvo apibendrintos atvirame laiške vyriausybei, kurio autoriai tvirtino, kad tikras menas visada buvo revoliucinis ir todėl prieštarauja akademiniams siekiams. Tačiau būta ir priešingų nuomonių, teigta, kad būsimos akademijos paskirtis jokių būdu nėra sleisti nuobodų akademiškumą; be to, mokymasis pas vieną asmenį, neturint platesnių išsilavinimo pagrindų, pasak peizažisto ir akademijos rektoriaus Vilhelmo Purvičio, gali išugdyti tik mėgdžiotojus ir diletantus. Nors XX a. 3 deš. žodžių karas tarp modernistų ir tradicionalistų nuslopo, o kai kurie kritikai netgi pradėjo dėstyti akademijoje, Jungtinių Valstijų Didžiosios depresijos aidą sukelti finansiniai sunkumai vėl privertė prisiminti šios institucijos poreikius. Vis dėlto tuo metu jau buvo plačiai pripažįstama, kad realių akademinio išsilavinimo alternatyvų, tokių kaip studijos pas

pripažintus meistrus, taip ir neatsirado, o valstybei atsisakius skirti lėšų, pasak tapytojo ir kritiko Ugos Skulmės, mokymosi galimybės galėjo radikaliai sumažėti. Net jei akademiniai realistai buvo labiau linkę palaikyti akademiją, o modernistai – jai priešintis, dauguma balsų liko kažkur per vidurį, o išimtys buvo akivaizdžios. Aiškiai jautėsi dekolonizacinis noras atsiriboti nuo imitacinės meninės tradicijos, susijusios su okupacinėmis Vokietijos ir Rusijos valstybėmis bei jų akademijomis, suteikiant naujam nepriklausomos Latvijos menui modernesnių formų. Tam tikru argumentu prieš akademiją tapo ir besiformuojantis „grįžti prie tvarkos“ kvietimas, būdingas XX a. 3 dešimtmečiui, kai vis labiau buvo kritikuojamas „grynasis“ menas ir nevaržomas individualizmas, siekiant sujungti meną ir gyvenimą ir akcentuojant taikomąją dailę. Ir atvirkščiai, atgimstanti meninių tradicijų vertė, slūgstantys modernistiniai eksperimentai ir edukacinių alternatyvų trūkumas savo ruožtu skatino pozityvesnę požiūrį į akademinį išsilavinimą.