

What Is so Wild Here? Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States (2018–2021): Project Evaluation and Resonance

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The joint Baltic exhibition *Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States* took place in Paris in 2018 at the Musée d'Orsay, which offered its most prestigious hall for the project. The museum was also the main financial partner, enabling the realisation of both the exhibition and its catalogue. The aim of the Baltic colleagues was to develop the project as a travelling exhibition, whose entire route—including Tallinn (2018), Vilnius (2020), and Riga (2020–2021)—was considered important. Each museum contributed its own perspective and research input. While retaining the overall concept and changing only details and emphases, each museum presented a different narrative—Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian versions of the saga of Symbolism.

Each of the national art museums in the Baltic states had already undertaken research and related activities on this theme. The project, which began as an investigative process into Symbolism, became an important catalyst for cultural exchange between the Baltic states and France. It was a definite success for the general curator, Rodolphe Rapetti (France), supported by the cooperation among the Baltic national art museums. The preparatory stage of the exhibition was especially productive, bringing many new discoveries as well as scientific conferences held in each of the participating countries.

This paper examines the research platform created in the Baltic countries, parallel publications and activities in France, and evaluates, with the benefit of hindsight, the resonance of the ideas generated through the project.

Keywords: Baltic Symbolism, National Romanticism, national identity, Musée d'Orsay, international exhibitions.

Introduction

Joint cultural projects among the Baltic states have a long tradition, as contacts in the museum sector and the art world more broadly were maintained continuously. Looking back historically, cultural diplomacy was already relevant during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, when, alongside political discussions, lectures, readings, publications, and cultural events became important instruments of influence. At the same time, they created an impression of the high professionalism of art in the newly established Baltic states.

The Francophile orientation in the art of the three Baltic countries remained a lasting source of influence, beginning with artists' encounters with Paris—the metropolis of Europe—in the early twentieth century. The orientation towards France continued among artists of the 1920s and the 1930s, reinforcing a sense of belonging to Western European culture. It enabled artists to perceive their work within a broader context and acquainted them with contemporary international trends. In the 1930s, France pursued a policy of actively expanding its cultural space in order to become an intellectual mediator among many different nations. The Baltic states were represented at the national level in Paris at the 1935 Applied Art and Ethnography Exhibition held at the Trocadéro Palace. The next joint cultural presentation of the Baltic states took place in 1937, when they shared a pavilion at the International Exposition *Art and Technology in Modern Life*. This proved to be the last presentation of Baltic art in France during the twentieth century; with the outbreak of the Second World War and the Soviet occupation, the names of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania disappeared from the European map for half a century. In the 1990s, after regaining independence, the Baltic states once again had to demonstrate their artistic presence in Europe, regardless of earlier achievements.

Looking back at the period following the renewed international recognition of the Baltic states after 1991, it must be acknowledged that the Baltic Symbolism project has been the most significant joint achievement in terms of mutual cooperation and representation among the three countries.

The joint Baltic exhibition took place in Paris, at the Musée d'Orsay in 2018. Thanks to the general curator, Rodolphe Rapetti, and the support of the president of Musée d'Orsay, Laurence des Cars,¹ the presentation of this project at one of the world's leading museums, while simultaneously celebrating the centenary of the Baltic states, once again underscored the importance of the joint cultural presence of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, particularly in the field of art and culture.

This exhibition invited the French public to discover Symbolism in Baltic art from the 1890s to the 1930s. The exhibition was not only an international cultural event attracting 236,079 visitors over 82 days (almost 3,000 per day), but also developed as a continuation of historical processes, emphasising France's role in the incorporation of the Baltic states into the broader context of European art.

The project, which initially began as an investigation into Symbolism (2015–2021), emerged as a significant catalyst for cultural exchange between the Baltic states and France, organised by the national art museums of the Baltic states.

The participating institutions included the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA, Riga), the Art Museum of Estonia, Kumu (Tallinn), with additional works loaned by the Tartu Art Museum, the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, the National Art Gallery (Vilnius), and the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art (Kaunas). It should be noted that Riga served as the organisational centre of the project during its preparatory phase, and that a joint initiative with the Musée d'Orsay in Paris was developed there.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to assess what such research and creative work has contributed and to address several key questions: how can the long-term significance of this project be assessed within the framework of cooperation among Baltic art museums? What is the role of cultural diplomacy in the conceptualisation and implementation of the project? How does the project contribute to Baltic art historical research, particularly in relation to the study of the Symbolist movement? The project began with research, continued with an exhibition tour, and concluded with further inquiry.

1 Musée du Louvre, *Laurence des Cars Appointed President-Director of the Louvre Museum*, 2021, www.louvre.fr (accessed 4 February 2026).

It is nevertheless clear that the initial idea evolved into a new level of quality, as the scientific work, which began as research in the visual arts, gradually became international and interdisciplinary, including history, literature, music, sociology, linguistics, as well as politics and cultural policy.

The aim of Baltic colleagues was to create a travelling exhibition, with significance placed on its entire route, encompassing Tallinn (2018),² Vilnius (2020),³ and Riga (2020–2021). Each participating museum contributed its perspective and research. While retaining the overall concept and making nuanced adjustments, each institution presented a distinct narrative: Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian versions of the Symbolism saga.

It should be noted that the project was developed in three phases. First, it emerged as research and its outcomes—exhibitions presented in each country separately. This was followed by the formation of a joint working group to represent the Baltic states and present the art of the three countries in an important cultural centre, Paris. The third stage was no less important: exhibitions and accompanying programmes in each of the Baltic capitals, which provided the Baltic neighbours with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one another's art.

Symbolism in Latvian art

Looking back now at the history of this Baltic project, the success story of Latvian Symbolism has been a significant factor.

The relative starting point can be traced to the beginning of the new millennium, when the then State Museum of Art (now the Latvian National Museum of Art) prepared the exhibition *Symbolism and Art Nouveau in Latvian Fine Art* (2000), curated by Dace Lambergā. During this time, many international partners showed interest in Symbolist art and in this historical period (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) more generally.

Latvian Symbolist art had already been successfully presented in a major international project—the exhibition *Taking to the Air. Art in Latvia at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, which took place in 2004 and 2005 at the National Museum in Szczecin, the Xawery Dunikowski

2 Tallinn, Art Museum of Estonia, 12 October 2018–3 February 2019.

3 Vilnius, Lithuanian National Museum of Art, National Gallery of Art, 25 July 2020–11 October 2020.

Sculpture Museum in Królikarnia, and the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas.⁴

In 2010 and 2011, works by well-known Latvian masters were shown at the Hôtel de Ville de Bruxelles. In Brussels, the exhibition was well received for its focus on Latvian identity and the national school. It was an international event, ranging from artistic representation and new discoveries in the visual arts to an emotional gesture: in honour of the exhibition, the symbol of Brussels, Manneken Pis, was dressed in Latvian folk costume.

The exhibition later travelled to the Musée national d'histoire et d'art Luxembourg (MNHA, now the MNAHA). The focal point of *The Time of Symbolism in Latvia* was Janis Rozentals's romantic painting *The Princess and the Monkey* (1913).⁵ The exhibition featured works by Latvian masters Janis Rozentāls, Vilhelms Purvītis, Johan Walter, and their contemporaries Jēkabs Belzēns, Aleksandrs Romans, Rūdolfs Pērle, Ādams Alksnis, Alise Dmitrijeva, Pēteris Krastiņš, Teodors Ūders, and Rihards Zariņš, drawn from the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art. In the catalogue, curator Dace Lambergā outlined the characteristic features of Latvian Symbolism:

The many-layered and saturated language of Symbolism and the stylistics of Art Nouveau were reflected in Latvian art in a more restrained way than in Western examples, however, local features created sufficiently original characteristics. To a large degree, the means of expression of both movements voice the moods of the age. They evoke reflections on the purposeful path of our national art on the way to a creative maturity ruled by two basic themes—nature and man. The human image is reflected both as a contemporary of the creator and as a hero of mythological stories and folklore. [...] Symbolism sprang from the cosmopolitan soil of the late 19th century, and its essence is linked to universal humanitarian ideas. However, in the world of Latvian art the movement undoubtedly became enriched with specific national features that came from the romantic world of folk tales, legends and folk songs.⁶

4 Wznosząc się o własnych skrzydłach. Sztuka początku XX wieku na Łotwie [*Taking to the Air. Art in Latvia at the Beginning of 20th Century*], ed. Irēna Bužinska (Riga: Valsts mākslas muzejs [Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs], 2005).

5 *L'Age du Symbolisme en Lettonie / The Age of Symbolism in Latvia*, ed. Dace Lambergā (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2010).

6 Ibid., 35.

Another internationally significant episode was the participation of the LNMA in the exhibition *Symbolism and Decadence* in Sweden in 2015–2016.⁷ The exhibition was held at Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, one of Stockholm's most prominent art museums, where works by Vilhelms Purvītis, Rūdolfs Pērle, Janis Rozentāls, Johan Walter, and Rihards Zariņš were exhibited alongside paintings by internationally renowned artists such as Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Edvard Munch, Eugène Carrière, and works from Paul Gauguin's Pont-Aven period.

The idea of a joint Baltic-Nordic exhibition, *Symbolism in the Northern Countries*, emerged on the basis of the aforementioned exhibition project, in which works from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia could be supplemented with compositions from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. The planned exhibition framework served as the basis for Rapetti's Baltic version, although a broader context would certainly have been interesting as a visual expansion of an already fragmented region.

Project background

The exhibition was undoubtedly also a success for the curator Rodolphe Rapetti, Conservateur général du Patrimoine, author of numerous publications on Symbolism and curator of several major exhibitions.⁸ He accepted the Baltic team's invitation with interest, and his collaboration

7 *Symbolism och dekadens* (Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, Stockholm, 19 September 2015–24 January 2016), ed. Anna Meister, Daniel Prytz, and Karin Sidén (Stockholm: Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, 2015).

8 Rodolphe Rapetti, Conservateur général du patrimoine, is a leading European researcher on Symbolism and author of the monograph *Le Symbolisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007). He has long been interested in Baltic art. His positions have included Curator at the Musée d'Orsay, Director of the Strasbourg City Museums, Director of the Muséum National Jean-Jacques Henner, and Deputy Director of the Museums of France. He has taught at the École du Louvre and the Université Paris Nanterre. Rapetti is the author of numerous books and articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. His research spans the period from 1860 to Marcel Duchamp. Major exhibitions he has curated include *Munch and France* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1991); *Gustave Caillebotte* (Grand Palais, Paris, 1994); *Unknown Horizons. Art in Finland, 1870–1920* (Galerie de l'Ancienne Douane, Strasbourg, 1999; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, 1999–2000); *Odilon Redon* (Grand Palais, Paris, 2011); *Van Gogh to Kandinsky: Symbolist Landscape in Europe, 1880–1910* (Amsterdam; Edinburgh; Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, 2012); and *Émile Bernard* (Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris; Bremen, 2014). Rapetti served as Director of the National Museums of Palaces of Compiègne and Blérancourt (2018–2026).

offered an exceptional opportunity to work alongside an outstanding professional. He brought extensive curatorial and research experience, having devoted many projects to European Symbolism. Rapetti's interest in Northern Europe was already evident in 1991, when he curated *Munch and France* at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and continued with an exploration of Finnish art of the period in the exhibition *Unknown Horizons. Art in Finland, 1870–1920* (Galerie de l'Ancienne Douane, Strasbourg, 1999; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, 1999–2000). Incidentally, Rapetti's interest in the Baltic region was already developing at that time, although a dedicated study came much later. In parallel with curated international exhibitions featuring artists from diverse geographical contexts, Rapetti published the monograph *Le Symbolisme* (2005), which offered a comprehensive and nuanced overview of European Symbolism.⁹ It should be noted that this study did not yet include the Baltic region within its map of Europe. It was precisely this absence that prompted further research into the region's Symbolist art.

In 2005, the author of this paper had the opportunity to represent Latvia and to further develop curatorial skills and professional competencies at the European Curators' Seminar (*Séminaire européen des conservateurs*) organised by France's Ministry of Culture and Communication, for which participants were selected through a competitive and highly selective process. The programme included approximately 30 curators from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Rapetti, representing the Directorate of Museums at the French Ministry of Culture, was among the organisers of the seminar. At the time, the author asked Rapetti whether it would be possible to hold an exhibition of Latvian art in Paris. He responded that such a presentation should be more than a conventional exhibition: it should constitute a prominent manifestation in a prestigious Parisian venue, and that, for this reason, it would be preferable to develop a broader project encompassing the entire Baltic region. This was followed by a question that also functioned as a proposition: why not an exhibition on Baltic Symbolism? At the time, the organisation of such a project still seemed unrealistic, yet the idea returned repeatedly as a compelling, if improbable,

9 Rodolphe Rapetti, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).

vision. A decade later, however, the concept of a Baltic Symbolist exhibition in Paris became not only feasible but also an active objective.

The Latvian National Museum of Art, in collaboration with the Latvian Ministry of Culture, began to review possible exhibition projects that could represent Latvia during the centenary of the state. An exchange of ideas led to the decision not to seek new partner institutions, but instead to renew established and proven contacts. The LNMA reviewed its international resources and approached Rapetti with the proposal that he act as curator of the exhibition.

The idea was set in motion in 2015, when preparations began for the centenary programme of Latvia (and more broadly of the Baltic States). In developing the concept of Baltic Symbolism, Rapetti sought to assess the readiness of museums to organise an exhibition at an international level. As an example of cooperation between the Baltic states and, more broadly, Eastern Europe, the exhibition *1914* proved particularly relevant. The exhibition was dedicated to the centenary of the First World War and, through visual language, reflected on the devastating consequences of war. It included modernist works (circa 1914–1924) from countries that had gained independence after the end of the First World War. The large international scope of the exhibition—eighteen museums from eleven countries—demonstrated the Baltic institutions' capacity to engage as professional partners in cooperation with prestigious European museums.¹⁰

The LNMA proposal had already been endorsed by the national museums of neighbouring countries in Tallinn, Vilnius, and Kaunas, and Rapetti's genuine interest was, from the outset, a significant asset to the collaboration.

Under Rodolphe Rapetti's leadership, work on the project began, bringing together all accumulated experience. The success of the project was ensured by a professional team of museum specialists from the three countries. The Symbolism section was curated by Dace Lambergā in Latvia, Liis Pählapuu in Estonia, and Osvaldas Daugelis and Lolita Jablonskienė in Lithuania, who selected works from the museums in Kaunas and Vilnius. Travelling from Riga, Rapetti and Laurence des Cars visited museums in

10 *1914* [exhibition catalogue], ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece and Natalja Jevsejeva (Riga: Neputns, 2014).

Tallinn, Tartu, Vilnius, and Kaunas. The selection of works was carried out through on-site visits and direct examination of the original works; each work was selected only after careful viewing and assessment.

The Baltic story at the Musée d'Orsay

The exhibition was widely promoted at the Musée d'Orsay as a unique manifestation of the Baltic states, yet the museum also assumed a degree of curatorial risk by presenting lesser-known or previously unfamiliar names from a relatively underrepresented region of Europe.

In the exhibition catalogue, Rodolphe Rapetti titled and framed his essay *Terra incognita*. He writes:

In the refined and sometimes so self-confident history of Western art, extensive territories have remained uncharted, inviting comparison with the lands that the ancient cartographers were unable to describe and accordingly referred to them as *terra incognita*, imagining them as the abodes of dragons and other fantasy creatures. [...] The historian must adopt a different approach when studying the art of the Baltic states, because in this case, with respect to the period from 1850 to 1950, one cannot apply the traditional and convenient contrast between French art and national art, necessitating other scales of value.¹¹

Rapetti's curatorial contribution represents the visible dimension of the project. The encounter with the Baltic region also marks a geographical extension of his research—towards the contours of European Symbolism and its key figures, including Arnold Böcklin, Ferdinand Hodler, Fernand Khnopff, and Gustav Klimt. His curatorial perspective, filtered through the prism of French Symbolism, is evident in his references to the theoretical platform—Jean Moréas's Symbolist Manifesto published in *Le Figaro* on 18 September 1886—the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, and the importance of French masters such as Gustave Moreau, Paul Gauguin, and Odilon Redon. This framework extends through central figures of northern Symbolism—Edvard Munch and Akseli Gallen-Kallela—before arriving

11 Rodolphe Rapetti, "Terra incognita," in *Nepieradinātās dvēseles. Simbolisms Baltijas valstu mākslā / Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece and Laima Slava (Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs; Neputns, 2018), 37.

at the terra incognita of the Baltic states, where Symbolism acquires different articulations and new contexts.

At the same time, the author implicitly challenges the idea of Francocentrism and the centre-periphery relationship in art historical interpretation. He demonstrates a deep understanding of the educational trajectories of Baltic artists, their memberships in artistic societies, and their studies at European academies, while simultaneously highlighting the individuality of each artist and situating their work within the map of Symbolism. One of the most significant findings, however, is the artistic quality of Baltic production, which proves comparable to the European standard. Emphasising the specificity of National Romanticism as a style within the context of Symbolism, Rapetti states:

However, it would be wrong to consider that this complex network of interaction, this map of locations in Europe where Baltic artists went to study and seek new inspiration, inevitably resulted in a kind of art limited to translating forms of expression created elsewhere into one's own language. The Baltic artists are endowed with great originality. For a long time, their work was not adequately appreciated, in the first place because the history of 19th and 20th century art, as described already, was, for a long time, oriented solely towards France and the areas of her influence; secondly, in the years of Soviet rule, Symbolism was disparaged. However, the most important artists of this period in the Baltic states with certain exceptions, are connected to the Symbolism movement.¹²

On display at the exhibition, with a large-format reproduction of Vilhelms Purvītis's landscape *Spring Waters (Maestoso)* (1910) forming the entrance to the galleries, were a total of 167 works. The concept of the exhibition did not envisage separate exhibition halls for each country but instead organised the works thematically, introducing multiple points of connection and dialogue within their arrangement. Baltic Symbolism, hitherto unknown to the Parisian public, marked the boundaries of artistic influence, within which artists developed a visual language corresponding

12 Rapetti, "Terra incognita," 41.

to their worldview. This visual language conveyed the emancipation of ideas and thought, closely connected to the search for identity and, simultaneously, to broader European currents. At the same time, it also told a story of the Baltic region, from its prehistoric narratives to enduring cultural strata that persist across time.

The exhibition addressed three main objectives: the revelation of the previously little known *terra incognita* of Symbolist art, a retrospective examination of the influence of European art and intellectual thought, and for a wider public, the most comprehensive possible interpretation of the Baltic cultural space. The introductory section of the exhibition—maps and historical chronology—fulfilled this educational function by situating the geographical and historical context and clarifying points of convergence and divergence between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The exhibition was structured around three sections: *Myths and Legends*, *Soul*, and *Nature*. These were constant themes which, while distinct, flowed into one another, creating a shared atmosphere and interpretation of collective memory.

The title of the exhibition *Wild Souls* was, undeniably, also a subject of debate, raising many questions, eliciting strong responses and even criticism. However, the romantic title has a specific background. The name *Wild Souls* originated in Riga during a meeting between Rapetti and the working group, when key conceptual terms of the exhibition were proposed. Remembering the exhibition *52 Souls. Landscape of Symbolism. 1880–1910*, held in Finland and based on the representation of fifty-two artists, Rapetti also sought to emphasise the notion of “soul” in the Baltic project as a defining characteristic of Symbolism—the subjective dimension of the visual image and its deepest essence. The adjective “wild” can, in turn, be traced to a quotation by Paul Gauguin from his notes on his journey to the Marquesas Islands in Polynesia: “I am a savage.”¹³ Gauguin uses the term “savage” in the sense of entering the unknown, engaging in deeper intellectual self-discovery, and seeking creative sources in the as yet unexplored depths of consciousness.

The exhibition designer Flavio Bonuccelli explained that the scenographic interpretation of the project contained a nuance that was not

13 Rodolphe Rapetti, ed., *Âmes sauvages: le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2018), https://books.google.lv/books/about/Âmes_sauvages.html?id=UKYGsVY-b4Q4C&redir_esc=y (accessed 7 February 2026).

immediately perceptible. The scenographic concept visually reinforced, and in part justified, the frequently discussed title of the exhibition—the notion of untamed, free, and wild souls. The works were displayed on shield-like configurations and labyrinthine structures, without touching the outer walls of the gallery space. Bonuccelli explained this design concept in the early stages of the preparation as follows:

As a people, you live among great nations, but you do not come into contact with them mentally and intellectually, so that you can preserve your identity and traditions. You are different from the great nations that have lived alongside you for centuries. Being in a sense separate, you can survive and stand against them in difficult periods of history.¹⁴

In this reading, the exhibition also encodes the hidden temperament of the North—untamed and different, with some degree of introversion. It further reflects the Baltic region's desire for freedom, its capacity to survive alongside empires and superpowers, as well as its pre-Christian, pagan heritage.

Incidentally, another nuance contributed to the atmosphere of “wildness” in the Baltic Symbolist narrative. The first work of the Latvian Symbolists with which Rapetti became acquainted was Janis Rozentāls's painting *After the Cockcrow* (c. 1905), which he compares in the catalogue to Arnold Böcklin, while also highlighting the pagan elements:

It must be added that, instead of the fauns that were the hallmark of the Swiss painter's work, this painting shows the Devil of Latvian folk tales, admittedly rather similar to the faun and other peasant deities, manifesting the primordial force of nature, its vigour and wildness.¹⁵

The title of the exhibition thus strikes a balance between attracting the audience's attention and encouraging reflection on the discovery of the unknown.

14 Ineta Sipunova, Flavio Bonuccelli, and Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, conversation in the scenographer's office, Paris, 8 December 2019.

15 Rapetti, “Terra incognita,” 43.

Baltic cultural intersections

The exhibition also provided an opportunity to reflect on the Baltic region, emphasising the specific characteristics of the artistic development, historical legacy, and traditions of each country.

The aim of the project was not only to present works of art but also to introduce the museums that partnered with the Musée d'Orsay in this particular exhibition. During the opening of the exhibition, a special event, "Meeting with Baltic Museum Directors," was organised on 10 April 2018. The discussion was moderated by Laurence des Cars and Rodolphe Rapetti.¹⁶ It focused on the history of museum development in the three countries, the formation of collections, and the transformation of museum practice from the Soviet period to the present. Additional topics included Baltic cultural policy in the museum field, as well as museological and museographical approaches.

To further familiarise the French public and specialists with Baltic art and culture, the Musée d'Orsay organised the international conference "National Romanticism and Baltic Symbolism" on 3 May 2018. Three speakers from each Baltic state were invited to address the relationship between Symbolism and the influence of National Romanticism, which characterises the region in comparison with Western Europe. Notably, the linguistic dimension was taken into account: each participant spoke in their mother tongue—Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian—so that these languages could be heard directly, with simultaneous French translation provided. The event, including the discussions, thus unfolded across four languages.

Latvia was represented by the Director of the Institute of Art History at the Art Academy of Latvia and Professor at the same institution, Dr. habil. art. Eduards Kļaviņš, who situated Latvian Symbolism within its European context. Dr. art. Silvija Grosa, Head of the Department of Art History and Theory of the Art Academy of Latvia, emphasised the characteristic features of Art Nouveau architecture in Riga. Dr. habil. philol. Benedikts

16 The discussion was attended by Sirje Helme (Chief Executive Officer of the Estonian Museum of Art), Lolita Jablonskienė (Chief Curator of the Lithuanian National Gallery of Art, a division of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art), Osvaldas Daugelis (Director of the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art), and Māra Lāce (Director of the Latvian National Museum of Art).

Kalnačs, Head of the Department of Literature and Senior Researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia, addressed Latvian literary phenomena of the period.¹⁷ The papers presented by Baltic scholars at the conference enriched the project's theoretical and analytical dimensions. Baltic Symbolism, or the narrative of *terra incognita*, is not merely about adding previously unknown artists or a region to the map of Western Europe. It is, first and foremost, an exploration of distinct historical and cultural experiences. While Western European Symbolism emerged as a reaction to Naturalism, its development in the Baltic states followed a different trajectory, shaped by specific local conditions. In his opening remarks at the conference, Rapetti posed a fundamental question:

What is it that joins Symbolism, an international movement, with National Romanticism, which has a highly national, almost identity-like character? Do these two movements combine or merely intersect, thus forming a chiasm? In my opinion, Symbolism in the Baltic States lies in the combination of both elements. On the one hand, it has an international character due to certain trends; on the other hand, it includes traits that indicate belonging to a certain culture: language, land, landscape, monuments, and national costumes.¹⁸

The conference, dedicated to theoretical aspects, highlighted the historical narratives and identity characteristics of each country and further examined the relationship with National Romanticism, which constitutes a fundamental difference from, for example, the history of French art. It should be noted that an initiative of the Riga working group resulted in the publication of the conference proceedings produced in collaboration between the Musée d'Orsay and the Latvian National Museum of Art: *Muzeja raksti* (Museum Writings) no. 7.¹⁹

17 Participants included Jaak Kangilaski, Linda Kaljundi, and Tiit Hennoste (Estonia); Eduards Kļaviņš, Silvija Grosa, and Benedikts Kalnačs (Latvia); and Laima Laučkaitė, Algė Andriulytė, and Rasa Žukienė (Lithuania).

18 *Nacionālais romantisms un Baltijas simbolisms / National Romanticism and Baltic Symbolism / Le romantisme national et le symbolisme balte*, *Muzeja raksti* 7, ed. Gundega Cēbere (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, 2019). Proceedings of the conference held at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 3 May 2018.

19 Ibid., 44.

The Baltic soul

The project's research and interdisciplinary capacity was also demonstrated through the Musée d'Orsay's extensive accompanying programme of events, including concerts, lectures, and meetings with cultural and art specialists.²⁰ In addition to providing its most prestigious exhibition hall, the museum also acted as a major financial partner in the organisation of both the exhibition and the catalogue publication. Another important dimension of the project was the Baltic Festival (22–29 May 2018), initiated by the museum as a broader exploration of the exhibition's themes. The programme brought ancient musical traditions and Latvian folk songs to life. Each country occupied a distinct place in the concert programme, which included a Kremerata Baltica performance conducted by the legendary violinist Gidon Kremer. Baltic choirs performed in the museum spaces, and a special discussion was organised featuring former president of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga and the French historian Julien Gueslin.

In collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay, the French-German cultural television channel ARTE / CinéTévé produced and distributed the documentary *Baltic Souls. Art, Legends and Landscapes* in French, German, and English.²¹ In the autumn of 2017, the film crew, led by director Stéphane Ghez, travelled to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In Riga, filming took place at the Latvian National Museum of Art and at the National Library of Latvia, where Krišjānis Barons's *Cabinet of Dainas* (Latvian folk songs) was documented. To capture scenes of the Baltic landscape, the crew travelled to Sigulda, where aerial footage was filmed using drones. The documentary recounts the path of the three Baltic states toward independence, emphasising the important role of music, poetry, and visual art in shaping the identities of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Former president and researcher of Latvian *dainas* Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga spoke about their importance for national unity. Historian Julien Gueslin explained how mythological thinking, art, and architecture contributed to the formation

20 *Célébration du centenaire de la Lettonie. France – Lettonie / Centennial Celebration of Latvia. France – Latvia*. Programme (Riga: Latvian National Museum of Art; French Institute in Latvia, 2018).

21 French Institute of Estonia, "Documentary: Baltic Souls, Art, Legends and Landscapes," blog post, <https://ife.ee/en/blog-arte-documentary-baltic-souls-arts-legends-landscape> (accessed 7 February 2026).

of cultural environments and strengthened collective self-awareness in the Baltic region during the emergence of statehood. The chief curator of the exhibition, Rodolphe Rapetti, drawing on works by Johan Walter and Janis Rozentāls, analysed in detail how rural people, previously represented in art as a disciplined and amorphous mass, acquired individual presence and agency. In 2018, the film reached audiences in Europe and continued to attract international interest. During the exhibition period, it was also screened in Riga. Another significant film, *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes*, was created by Loïc Salfati at the initiative of the French Institute in Lithuania. Produced in four languages—Lithuanian, Estonian, Latvian, and French—and employing a range of multimedia approaches, this documentary became an important complement to the Symbolism exhibition in the Baltic states.²² It is particularly valuable for documenting the process of creating the exhibition itself, while also capturing the atmosphere surrounding the project, the artworks, the museums, and the experts involved in its realisation.²³

Other publications on Baltic Symbolism

Parallel to the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, theorists, historians, and art historians approached Baltic Symbolism from different perspectives, providing contextual insights into the Baltic region. Alongside the catalogue, the Musée d'Orsay published additional materials dedicated to this project.²⁴ Their aim was to introduce the history of the Baltic countries, the museums that partnered in the project, as well as the identity of each Baltic nation, its most notable artists, and its national traditions.

Just as the exhibition's introductory section begins with an old map of Europe depicting the Baltics, historian Julien Gueslin introduces the region's complex history in his article *Le printemps des Baltes* ('The Spring of the Baltics'): "In 1918, Europe saw the birth of new countries on the ruins of the Russian Empire. Lithuania carried on the legacy of a vanished grand duchy. Further north, Latvia and Estonia claimed an original popular culture.

22 French Institute of Lithuania, "Documentary: *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes*," www.institutfrancais-lituanie.info/Amessauvages/#5-_Rencontre_au_Mus%C3%A9e_national_des_Beaux-Arts_de_Lettonie (accessed 8 May 2026).

23 Ibid.

24 *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: Beaux-Arts & Cie, 2018); *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: L'objet d'art, 2018).

Intellectuals ardently supported these national movements.”²⁵ Gueslin further explains the differences among these three peoples, which are also reflected in religion, the socio-political situation, and in culture and art.

The aforementioned publications pay particular attention to the myths of the Baltic peoples and their heroes, as well as to symbols requiring additional explanation; they also describe nature and the figures and imagery represented in portraits.

To facilitate a deeper understanding of the symbolic significance of the artworks, Guillaume Evin prepared a separate publication, *Les symboles baltes de A à Z*, containing an alphabetical list of unfamiliar terms and concepts accompanied by more detailed descriptions. The list includes such entries as “Arcadie,” “Chimère,” “Kalevipoeg” (the Estonian national epic), “Samogitie” (a historical region in Lithuania), “Serpent,” and “Saule” (the sun). The entry “Jūra” (the sea) is explained as follows:

The Baltic Sea as a metaphor for life, sometimes turbulent. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis was both a painter and a musician. In his eyes, these two arts were one and the same. This is why the most famous Lithuanian artist of the twentieth century named a series of paintings *Sonata of the Sea*, each depicting a different mood: one joyful, brilliant, allegro; another silent before the storm, andante; and a final one depicting a stormy sea engulfing fragile boats shaped like shark fins. Note that the foam of the huge wave forms the painter’s initials. At around the same time, before the First World War, the Latvian artist Sigismunds Vidbergs painted his sea cycle in Chinese ink. In 1915, his compatriot Rūdolfs Pērle presented his fantastic vision of reefs as if on fire.²⁶

25 Julien Gueslin, “Le printemps des peuples baltes,” in *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: L’objet d’art, 2018), 5: “En 1918, l’Europe voit naître de nouveaux pays sur les décombres de l’Empire russe. La Lituanie porte l’héritage d’un grand-duché disparu. Plus au nord, la Lettonie et l’Estonie revendiquent une culture populaire originale. Les intellectuels ont ardemment soutenu ces mouvements nationaux.”

26 Guillaume Evin, “Les symboles baltes de A à Z,” in *Âmes sauvages: Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: Beaux-Arts & Cie, 2018), 44: “La mer Baltique comme métaphore de la vie, tantôt tumultueuse. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis était à la fois peintre et musicien. À ses yeux, ces deux arts n’en formaient qu’un. Voilà pourquoi l’artiste lituanien le plus célèbre du XXe siècle a intitulé un ensemble de toiles Sonate de la mer, déclinées selon des temps différents: l’une joyeuse, brillante, allegro, une autre silencieuse avant l’orage, andante, et une dernière, finale, qui figure une mer démontée engloutissant de frères esquifs en forme d’ailerons de requin. Notons que l’écume de l’immense vague dessine les initiales du peintre. À peu près au même moment, avant la Première

Čiurlionis's name appeared repeatedly in the context of the exhibition, particularly as his work had already been introduced to French audiences through an exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay held from 8 November 2000 to 4 February 2001. For the French public, it was equally important to explain the origins and identities of lesser-known Baltic artists. Art historians Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Stéphanie Pioda write: "The history of art in the Baltic countries is very recent, and the painters exhibited at the Musée d'Orsay were rarely shown throughout the twentieth century. When they exhibited in Paris, they were even referred to as Russian painters. Through these five artists, immerse yourself in a world of construction."²⁷ The authors focused on the biographies of five selected painters—Kristians Rauds, Rūdolfs Pērle, Nikolai Triik, Petras Kalpokas, and Janis Rozentāls.

These publications demonstrate that the presentation of the Baltic states in Paris involved researchers from various fields and cultural backgrounds, many of whom had been engaged with the Baltic region as an object of research for a considerable period of time.

The Riga version of *Wild Souls*

Each of the national art museums in the Baltic states had already undertaken its own research and activities related to this theme. At the end of 2020, following presentations in Paris, Tallinn, and Vilnius, the exhibition *Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States* was shown for the fourth time, now in Riga.

The working group of the Latvian National Museum of Art developed its own exhibition design and visual identity for the narrative of Baltic Symbolism, adding a distinct Riga accent. The main idea of the exhibition was to emphasise the identity of Latvia while also positioning the project as a point of reference for the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay. The

Guerre, le Letton Sigismunds Vidbergs peint à l'encre de Chine son "cycle de la mer." En 1915, son compatriote Rūdolfs Pērle livre sa vision fantastique de récifs comme enflammés."

²⁷ Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Stéphanie Pioda, *Âmes sauvages: Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (Paris: Beaux-Arts & Cie, 2018), 46: "L'histoire de l'art des pays baltes est très récente, et les peintres exposés au musée d'Orsay ont été très peu montrés tout au long du XXe siècle. Lorsqu'ils exposaient à Paris, on les qualifiait même de peintres russes. À travers ces cinq artistes, plongée dans un monde de construction."

exhibition's chief curator, Rodolphe Rapetti, supervised the preparation process remotely, and, as before, all details were coordinated with him.

The exhibition retained its original concept and structure and continued to be organised around the three established sections: *Myths and Legends*, *Soul*, and *Nature*—comprising a total of 160 works. The list of exhibited works in the Riga version remained largely identical, with only minor changes.

Two works were added to the exhibition: Rūdolfs Pērle's painting *The Path of Life* (1916) and Janis Rozentāls's pastel *The Castle of Light. Sketch for the Stage Curtain of the Riga Latvian Society* (1910), both of which had originally been selected for the Paris exhibition but could not be transported due to conservation concerns. In addition, the organisers expressed gratitude to their colleagues in Kaunas for the loan of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis's thirteen-painting series *The Creation of the World* (1905–1906), which had not been shown in Tallinn and Vilnius because of the fragility of the pastel technique. The exhibition texts were supplemented by a chronology of shared Baltic history prepared by historian Pauls Daija, which was also published in the exhibition catalogue.

Unfortunately, the exhibition took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was impossible to present the project to visitors without restrictions. Nevertheless, every effort was made to ensure that the exhibition remained accessible to the public.

The tradition of documentary filmmaking connected with the project continued in 2020, when visitor access was limited due to Covid-19 restrictions. A working group from the public broadcasting channel LTV1, led by director Linda Veinberga, produced a documentary film devoted to this exhibition. The film expanded upon the theme of Symbolism as an artistic movement and explored its broader boundaries. Leading Latvian art historians and cultural figures—including Eduards Kļaviņš, Māra Lāce, Edvarda Šmite, Dace Lamberga, Kristiāna Ābele, poet Guntars Godiņš, musicologist Orests Silabriedis, and literary scholar Pauls Daija—reflected on the period, the development of art, and its contradictions.

The ambitious project concluded on 29 April 2021 with the international scientific conference “European Symbolism and the Identity of the

Baltic States,” held online. The conference brought together lecturers from France and the Baltic states who had participated in the development of the exhibition concept and catalogue, as well as in a range of professional discussions and forums connected with the project.

The conference emphasised both the shared and distinct expressions of Baltic national identities in history, culture, and art within the broader context of research on Symbolism. Particular attention was devoted to the importance of cultural centres in the Baltic region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to their influence on the formation and development of national art up to the present day.²⁸ The conference papers were later published in the LNMA edition *Muzeja raksti* no. 9.²⁹

In many aspects, the story of Baltic Symbolism began with the exhibition curated by Dace Lambergā at the Latvian National Museum of Art in 2000 and concluded with the publication of her monograph *Latvian Art in the Age of Symbolism*, which synthesised her research on Latvian Symbolism.³⁰

Continuation and modifications of the Baltic saga

When considering the project’s significance for future initiatives, it is important to note that it opened the way for numerous smaller projects, enabling a deeper understanding of the material and artists associated with Baltic Symbolism.

One continuation of the project was the exhibition *The Dark Arts. Aleksandra Waliszewska and Symbolism from the East and North*, which approached Symbolism from a contemporary perspective. The exhibition presented the work of the Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewska alongside Symbolist works from the Baltic region, as well as Polish and Czech art that

28 Conference “Symbolism in Europe and Baltic National Identity,” Latvian National Museum of Art, 29 April 2021. Participants included Algė Andriulytė (Vilnius Academy of Arts), Vaiva Laukaitienė (M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, Kaunas), Yves Plasseraud and Suzanne Pourchier-Plasseraud (France), Silvija Grosa (Latvian Academy of Arts), Eduards Kļaviņš and Kristiāna Ābele (Institute of Art History, Latvian Academy of Arts), and curators and researchers Dace Lambergā, Aija Brasliņa, Edvards Šmits, and Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece (Latvian National Museum of Art).

29 *Symbolisms Eiropā un Baltijas nāciju identitāte / Symbolism in Europe and the Identity of the Baltic Nations / Le Symbolisme en Europe et l'identité des nations Baltes*, *Muzeja raksti* 9, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, 2024).

30 Dace Lambergā, *Latvijas māksla simbolisma laikmetā* (Riga: Neputns, 2019).

served as a reference point and source of inspiration. The project was organised by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2022, and in 2023 it was also presented at the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas, accompanied by a printed catalogue.³¹

The exhibition comprised more than 200 works by thirty-six artists from Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states, spanning from the nineteenth century to the present day. The works were loaned from ten museums and even a hospital collection in Warsaw. Together, they were united by Symbolism and its associated themes: illness, fear, war, epidemics, and mythological monsters. The central axis of the exhibition was formed by works by the internationally renowned Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewska (b. 1976), who uses her art to immerse viewers in a compelling world of fantastical imagery. One of the most prominent figures on the contemporary Polish art scene, Waliszewska produces striking paintings that attract a broad audience extending beyond traditional art circles into alternative and popular culture spheres.

The dialogue between M. K. Čiurlionis and Rūdolfs Pērle has recurred in numerous international exhibitions as a parallel curatorial thread. At the same time, it reflects the gradual evolution from one project to the next, shaped by different curatorial concepts, interpretations, and scholarly perspectives. Of particular current relevance is the exhibition *From Amber to the Stars. Together with M. K. Čiurlionis: Now and Then* at the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in Kaunas, dedicated to the artist's 150th anniversary (21 March–12 October 2025).

Structured around three thematic sections—*Sea, Space*, and their unifying concept, *Navigation*—the exhibition brings together Čiurlionis and Pērle once again. The motifs of sea and space also resonate strongly in the work of US-based Latvian artist Vija Celmins, whose works form part of the contemporary section of the exhibition. The curatorial concept was developed collaboratively by Kathleen Soriano (United Kingdom), Vaiva Laukaitienė, and Greta Katkevičienė (Lithuania), who explain their approach as follows:

31 Alison M. Gingeras and Natalia Sielewicz, *The Dark Arts: Aleksandra Waliszewska and Symbolism* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2023).

The exhibition *From Amber to the Stars* celebrates the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Lithuania's most famous composer and Symbolist painter. In looking at his achievements and interests anew, the exhibition seeks to re-evaluate his relevance to contemporary art and the concerns of today, and to reflect on the two key themes in his work—the sea and the cosmos—and how, as a visionary, he saw a deep connection between the two.³²

Currently, Johan Walter's *Peasant Girl*, selected as the visual identity of the entire Baltic project, is once again on display, travelling from the Latvian National Museum of Art to Mons in Belgium. From 4 October 2025 to 25 January 2026, the Mons CAP/Museum of Fine Arts hosts the exhibition David Hockney: *The Song of the Earth*, a polyphonic journey that brings together painting, music, and poetry, with Gustav Mahler's symphony as its guiding thread. Curated by Isabelle Cahn, honorary curator at the Musée d'Orsay, the exhibition presents an exceptional collection of works by British artist David Hockney, including monumental canvases as well as compositions created on iPad. Alongside Hockney's work, the exhibition juxtaposes works by Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Constantin Meunier, and a selection of nineteenth-century Nordic Symbolist painters, including Finland's Albert Edelfelt and Estonia's Konrad Mägi (1878–1925). It explores the profound relationship between humans and nature—Mother Earth, fields, seasons, flowers, solitude, and poetry. Each gallery establishes a dialogue between painting, music, and text, echoing Mahler's *Song of the Earth*. Composed in 1907–1908, the work pays tribute to nature, its fragile beauty, and its vital force. Here, it functions as a unifying thread that connects the works and the artists and accompanies the visitor through an experience that is both visual and auditory.³³

32 Greta Katkevičienė, Kathleen Soriano, and Vaiva Laukaitienė, *Nuo gintarų iki žvaigždžių. M.K.Čiurlionis ir bendraminčiai / From Amber to the Stars. Together with M. K. Čiurlionis: Now and Then* [exhibition catalogue] (Kaunas: National M. K. Čiurlionis Art Museum, 2025), 9.

33 David Hockney, *Le chant de la terre. Avec Van Gogh, Munch, Mahler... Peinture, musique et nature en dialogue*, ed. Isabelle Cahn (Mons: CAP, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Mons, 2025). Exhibition details available at: www.museumpassmusees.be/fr/offre/exposition/eeab630d-062b-48bb-8371-7172cce014e1/david-hockney-le-chant-de-la-terre-avec-vincent-van-gogh-edvard-munch-gustav-mahler (accessed 7 February 2026).

A dialogue with Hockney's oeuvre and other European art classics is established by *Peasant Girl* (c. 1904) by the Latvian master Johan Valter, a work that previously served as the visual identity of the Musée d'Orsay exhibition *Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States* (2018). In the interpretation of curator Isabelle Cahn, Valter's peasant girl, presented in the section *Alma Mater*, emerges as a distinctly different, forward-looking figure when placed alongside peasant representations by artists such as Jean-François Millet (1814–1875) and Jules Breton (1827–1906). As Cahn notes, "peasant figures in rural landscapes sometimes convey a melancholic mood, characteristic of Northern European Symbolist works at the turn of the twentieth century."³⁴

Vilhelms Purvītis's painting *Autumn* (c. 1913) is displayed in the section *The Loner in Autumn*, where it resonates with the early genre scenes and still lifes of Vincent van Gogh, particularly through its treatment of light and its muted autumnal palette. Alongside the works of Edvard Munch, this Northern sensibility is further accentuated by the paintings of the Estonian artist Konrad Mägi.

Conclusions

Looking back on the project's development from a broader perspective, several conclusions can be drawn. One of the main findings of this article is that the Baltic Symbolism project would not have been possible without long-term collaboration among museums in the Baltic states, including exhibition exchanges, the lending of artworks, and the sharing of curatorial and scholarly perspectives. The author had previously addressed the question of museum cooperation at the Baltic Art History Conference held on 6–8 October 2016 in Riga at the Art Academy of Latvia, "Representing Art History in the Baltic Countries."³⁵ In the paper "Visibility and Interaction of Art History—the Baltic Context: Exhibitions and Permanent Displays in the Baltic National Art Museums (1990s–today)," museum practices over the past thirty years were examined, including those of the interwar period

34 Latvian National Museum of Art, "David Hockney: Song of the Earth," <https://lnmm.gov.lv/latvijas-nacionalais-makslas-muzejs/izstades/izstades-arpus-muzeja/deivids-hoknijs-dziesma-par-zemi-571> (accessed 7 February 2026).

35 "Conference of Baltic Art Historians," <http://archive.lza.lv/images/stories/nodalas/2016-CFP-BAH-Conference-Final.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2026).

(1918–1940). At the same time, the paper emphasised that an equally significant level of professional dialogue continued during the Soviet period. Of particular importance in this process was the continuity of information, intergenerational exchange, and the transmission of professional experience within the museum environment. These aspects constitute a separate yet essential field of research.

Another important conclusion is that the project benefited significantly from cultural diplomacy, as its inclusion in the centenary programmes of the three Baltic states contributed both to securing financial support and to increasing its public visibility. The exhibition was under the patronage of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, who hosted the presidents of the three Baltic states—Kersti Kaljulaid (Estonia), Dalia Grybauskaitė (Lithuania), and Raimonds Vējonis (Latvia)—at Musée d’Orsay. Furthermore, during the preparation of the project, the museums closely cooperated with French cultural institutes in each of the Baltic states, as well as with the Baltic embassies in France and the French embassies in the Baltic region.

Today, Baltic Symbolism as a concept is firmly established within the broader map of European Symbolism studies. However, it is important to emphasise that the trajectory connecting Western European centres with the Baltic region did not merely reproduce a binary of centre and periphery. On the contrary, the project is significant for the study of Symbolism in the history of Baltic art, precisely because it highlights both shared and distinctive cultural characteristics and contributes to the articulation of Baltic regional identities. An additional value lies in the increased attention of international researchers to the Baltic region, both in relation to specific artistic movements and in constructing a broader chronological perspective on Baltic art. A relevant example in this context is Serge Fauchereau’s monograph *L’art des Pays Baltes. XIX–XX siècles* (The Art of the Baltic States, 19th–20th Centuries).³⁶

Answering the question of when the history of Baltic art reaches a culmination point of research, one could argue that this moment was marked by the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay. However, it is important

36 Serge Fauchereau, *L’art des Pays Baltes. XIXe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions Cercle d’Art, 2021); Serge Fauchereau, *Art of the Baltic States: Modernism, Freedom and Identity* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022).

to note that the entire research and preparation process was equally significant, as the scholarly discussions initiated during the project's development continued in conferences, debates, forums, lectures, and other academic settings. The network of professional contacts and research platforms among scholars has expanded and diversified, while continuing to develop through various international projects.

Emphasising the interdisciplinary nature of the Baltic Symbolism project, it should be noted that its scope was defined not only by the positioning of Baltic art history within an international framework, but also by the integration of many disciplines—history, literature, folklore, classical music and folk song performance, and cinema. This interdisciplinary approach gave the project both breadth and resonance, reaching a broad audience as well as academic circles.

A special benefit of the project is the exhibition catalogue, which remains as a documentation of this ambitious undertaking. It was published in four bilingual editions—French, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian—each accompanied by an English translation.³⁷

It should also be emphasised that the participation of Baltic Symbolist artists and works in international projects will continue. At the same time, the project acted as a catalyst for a new qualitative stage of cooperation. During its development, partners within the Baltic ministries of culture became increasingly convinced of the need to establish a Baltic Culture Fund in order to plan and implement similar joint initiatives in the future. The Baltic Culture Fund was subsequently established in 2019 under the State Culture Capital Foundation.

Through conferences, publications, and numerous accompanying events, the project as a whole contributed to the broader discovery of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art. By fostering mutual engagement and deeper scholarly immersion, it helped to build an understanding of the

37 *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes*, ed. Rodolphe Rapetti (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2018); *Vabad hinged. Sümbolism Baltimaade kunstis / Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States*, ed. Liis Pählapuu. (Tallinn: Kumu, 2018); *Laukinės sielos. Baltijos šalių simbolizmo dailė / Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States*, ed. Algė Andriulytė and Eglė Mikalajūnė (Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, 2020); *Nepieradinātās dvēseles. Simbolisms Baltijas valstu mākslā / Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece and Laima Slava (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, Neputns, 2020).

distinct identities of each nation and their shared cultural identity. It also reinforced the recognition of Baltic culture within the European and global context—an endeavour that remains existentially important in these dramatic and disturbing times.

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Santrauka

Kas čia tokio laukinio? Simbolizmas Baltijos šalių mene (2018–2021): projekto vertinimas ir atgarsiai

Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Baltijos šalių simbolizmas, nacionalinis romantizmas, tautinė tapatybė, d'Orsay muziejus, tarptautinės parodos.

Projektą *Laukinės sielos. Simbolizmas Baltijos šalių mene* buvo sumanyta surengti 2018 m. Paryžiuje. D'Orsay muziejus ne tik paskyrė šiai parodai prestižiškiausią savo ekspozicijų salę, bet ir tapo pagrindiniu parodos bei katalogo leidybos finansiniu partneriu. Baltijos šalių kolegų iniciatyva projektas buvo išplėtotas į keliaujančią parodą, kurios maršrutas nusitęsė į Taliną (2018), Vilnių (2020) ir Rygą (2020–2021). Kiekvienas partneris prie projekto prisidėjo savita mokslinė perspektyva ir tyrimais. Išlaikydami bendrą koncepciją, bet subtiliai ją adaptuodami, muziejai sukūrė savitas simbolizmo pasakojimo versijas – estišką, lietuvišką ir latvišką. Kiekvienas Baltijos šalių nacionalinis dailės muziejus jau buvo sukaupęs reikšmingą įdirbį simbolizmo tyrimų srityje, todėl projektas, prasidėjęs kaip bendras simbolizmo reiškinių tyrimas, davė postūmį Baltijos šalių ir Prancūzijos kultūriniam mainams. Tai liudija sėkmingas generalinio kuratoriaus Rodolphe'o Rapetti (Prancūzija) pastangas ir Baltijos šalių nacionalinių dailės muziejų bendradarbiavimą. Ypač reikšmingas buvo kūrybinis parodos rengimo etapas, paskatinęs naujus mokslinius atradimus ir tarptautines konferencijas, surengtas kiekvienoje iš projekte dalyvavusių šalių.

Pagrindinis straipsnio tikslas – išanalizuoti kolektyvinę šio projekto sukurtą vertę ir įvertinti jo ilgalaikius rezultatus. Straipsnyje aptariama Baltijos šalyse suformuota tyrimų platforma, lygiagrečiai parengtos publikacijos ir vykdytos veiklos Prancūzijoje, taip pat nagrinėjamas šio bendradarbiavimo metu gimusių idėjų rezonansas, atsiskleidęs praėjus tam tikram laikui. Kadangi projektas tapo vienu iš impulsų įsteigti Baltijos kultūros fondą, straipsnyje keliama klausimai apie jo ilgalaikę reikšmę Baltijos šalių nacionalinių dailės muziejų bendradarbiavimui, kultūrinės diplomatijos vaidmenį formuojant bei įgyvendinant projekto koncepciją ir projekto indėlį į Baltijos šalių meno istorijos tyrimus, ypač simbolizmo studijas.