

Expressive, Intellectual, and In-Between: Lithuanians, Estonians, and Latvians at the Vilnius Painting Triennials during the Soviet Era

Kädi Talvoja

Estonian Academy of Arts

Põhja puistee 7, Tallinn 10412, Estonia

kadi.talvoja@artun.ee

ORCID: 0009-0004-0071-2486

The article examines how the Vilnius Painting Triennials (1969–1987) shaped perceptions of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian painting during the late Soviet period. Rather than treating the triennials primarily as manifestations of Baltic solidarity or cultural resistance to Soviet rule, the study argues that they functioned as a key comparative framework through which distinct national schools of art were constructed and negotiated. Drawing on close readings of exhibition reviews published in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the article traces the formation and persistence of recurring interpretative stereotypes: Estonian painting as intellectual, restrained, and rational; Lithuanian painting as expressive, painterly, and emotionally charged; and Latvian painting as occupying an intermediate position between the two. It also explores how these characterizations reflected differing artistic value systems and critical traditions rather than objective stylistic realities.

The analysis demonstrates that although the triennials fostered sustained artistic exchange, they also encouraged competition among the Baltic republics. Critics consistently interpreted their own national art through locally established aesthetic values while evaluating neighbouring schools from different perspectives. Over nearly two decades, these interpretative patterns proved remarkably resilient, even as artistic practices evolved. The article suggests that the persistence of such national typologies resulted not only from the structure of the triennials, organized as separate national presentations,

but also from the formalist methodologies of art criticism itself. Ultimately, the study argues that Baltic art criticism contributed as much to the construction of national artistic identities as the artworks it sought to describe, while simultaneously reinforcing distinctions that often overshadowed shared artistic developments.

Keywords: Vilnius Painting Triennial; Baltic art; Soviet art; art criticism; national identity; Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The Vilnius Painting Triennial was one of several joint exhibition series initiated by Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian artists during the late Soviet period, most of which took the form of triennials.¹ Among these, it was undoubtedly one of the most influential, shaping the perception of art in the Baltic republics² in ways that extended well beyond the field of painting. In retrospect, the proliferation of regional triennials in the 1970s and 1980s has often been portrayed as a manifestation of “Baltic separatism” and resistance to Soviet domination.³ To some extent, the intensive program of joint exhibitions organized by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania certainly reflected a desire to distance themselves from the rest of the Soviet Union. At the same time, it was precisely the Soviet notion of *Pribaltika*⁴—which

- 1 Altogether, I have identified thirteen recurring exhibition formats. Most were designated as triennials, but there was also one biennial and one quadriennial: the Tallinn Print Triennial (1968), the Vilnius Painting Triennial (1969), the Baltic Watercolor Triennial (1971), the Riga Sculpture Quadriennial (1972), the Baltic Stage Design Triennial (1974), the Baltic Poster Triennial (1974), the Baltic Triennial of Young Artists (1979), the Baltic Ex Libris Biennial (1979), the Baltic Triennial of Applied Arts (1980), the Baltic Triennial of Young Applied Arts (1980), the Riga Triennial of Small Graphics (1980), the Baltic Book Graphics Triennial (1981), and the Baltic Medal Art Triennial (1986). The designation “biennial” or “triennial” was not always applied consistently throughout these exhibition series.
- 2 In this article, I refer to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as the “Baltic republics” or simply the “republics” when discussing the Soviet period.
- 3 Laima Laučkaitė, “Introduction,” in *Aštuntoji Vilniaus tapybos trienalė / The Eighth Vilnius Painting Triennial* (Lietuvos dailės parodų direkcija, 1990); Eve Kask, “Introduction,” in *Tallinna XI graafikatriennaal / 11th Tallinn Print Triennial* (Eesti Vabagraafikute Ühendus, 1998).
- 4 Literally meaning “by the Baltic Sea,” the term *Pribaltika* carries Russian imperialist connotations, undermining the distinct national identities of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

treated the three republics as a single economic and cultural unit—that most firmly anchored their postwar cultural cooperation.⁵ Above all, the Baltic triennials appear to have functioned as a compensatory mechanism for the absence—or at least the severe limitation—of international artistic exchange within the Soviet Union. As Mart Eller, chairman of the Art Historians' Section of the Artists' Association of the Estonian SSR, observed in 1969, the primary shortcoming of Estonian art criticism was its lack of a comparative framework:

One of the most striking shortcomings in the thematic content of everything published is that it gives the impression that art develops in isolation in our republic. There is very little connection with artistic developments elsewhere, even in the closest regions, such as Latvia and Lithuania, to say nothing of Moscow and Leningrad. [...] Even the Vilnius Painting Triennial reached our press with a delay.⁶

In the following decades, as the Baltic triennials expanded and became established, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art increasingly served as one another's principal point of reference, playing a crucial role in shaping national artistic identities. Yet these exhibitions often unfolded in a highly competitive atmosphere, marked by a pronounced sense of rivalry among the Baltic republics, in which national schools were presented in critical discourse as asserting their own artistic prominence rather than demonstrating collective solidarity.

Although the close interaction among the Baltic countries is not fully reflected in art histories—which tend to follow the assumption that “art developed in isolation in our republic”—this competitive dynamic persisted into the post-independence period. It remained evident in the joint

5 Karsten Brüggemann, “The Baltic Provinces and Russian Perceptions in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Russland an der Ostsee. Imperiale Strategien der Macht und kulturelle Wahrnehmungsmuster (16. bis 20. Jahrhundert) / Russia on the Baltic. Imperial Strategies of Power and Cultural Patterns of Perception (16th–20th Centuries)*, edited by Karsten Brüggemann and B. D. Woodworth (Köln and Wien: Böhlau, 2012), 111–41.

6 Mart Eller, “Aastaraamatu asemel (IV). Kunstiteadus ja -kriitika,” *Sirp ja Vasar*, May 16, 1969. The first coverage of the Vilnius Painting Biennial—summaries of articles by the Moscow critic Jevgenia Butorina and the Lithuanian artist Jonas Mackonis—appeared in the same issue. To my knowledge, no Estonian critics wrote about the exhibition.

exhibitions of the 1990s and 2000s, now taking the form of an art-historical rivalry in which inherited hierarchies were subtly reproduced.⁷ These accounts—sometimes nostalgic, sometimes ironic—have been critically examined by the Latvian-born American art historian Marc Allen Svede, whose analysis offers a more nuanced understanding of the notion of “Baltic separatism.”

Svede interprets the recurring clichés found in reviews of the triennials published in the Latvian magazine *Māksla* during the Soviet period—Estonian art is precise and rational; Latvian art, monumental and classicist; Lithuanian art, colorful and expressive—as attempts to distinguish Latvians not only from *homo sovieticus* but also from *homo lituanus* and *homo estonius*.⁸ Similarly, according to Svede, the desire for distinction was also present in Lithuania and particularly pronounced in Estonia. As an outsider, Svede adopts a more critical perspective: he does not regard these stereotypes as occasions for nostalgia or amusement but as evidence of the persistence of former hierarchies within the historical narratives of Baltic art—hierarchies that risk flattening the diversity of individual artistic achievements.⁹

To avoid reproducing such reductive clichés, it is necessary first to understand how they were formed. This article therefore traces the construction of the images of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian painting during the Soviet period, as they emerged through mutual interaction and were reinforced by the reception of the Vilnius Painting Triennials. The seven triennials under consideration span nearly two decades of Baltic art (1969–1987), making it possible to observe both the persistence of interpretive patterns and the emergence of potential shifts in the broader images produced, the reviewers’ vocabulary, interpretive methods, and value orientations.

7 See, for example, Ant Juske, “Kunsti kadunud eripära otsimas. Balti kunstnike ühisnäitus ‘Personaalne aeg’ Varssavis,” *Eesti Päevaleht*, September 16, 1996; Johannes Saar, “Baltimaade külahullud Varssavis,” *Postimees*, September 17, 1996; Sirje Helme, “Nationalism and Dissent: Art and Politics in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania under the Soviets,” in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld and N. T. Dodge (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 6–16.

8 Mark Allen Svede, “When Worlds Collide. On Comparing Three Baltic Art Scenarios,” in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, edited by Alla Rosenfeld and N. T. Dodge (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 17–24.

9 Ibid.

The reception of Estonian art in Lithuania, based on reviews of the Vilnius Painting Triennials, has previously been addressed by Mari Nõmmela in her master's thesis.¹⁰ The present study compares reviews from all three Baltic states using the close reading method. By examining these texts, I focus primarily on the stereotypes outlined above. How and on what basis were the different national schools described? Were there significant differences in the descriptions that appeared over time and across the three republics? To what extent did value orientations diverge or converge? While ideological frameworks and strategies of accommodation or resistance have been widely discussed in relation to Soviet-era art criticism, this article acknowledges the Soviet context but deliberately sets these questions aside. Its aim is not to uncover ideological meanings or political subtexts, but rather to examine how Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian painting was described and differentiated in reviews of the Vilnius Painting Triennials during the Soviet period.

The corpus analyzed comprises reviews published in the press of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, although equal representation was not possible. The Estonian corpus is presumably the most complete, while the Lithuanian corpus—despite possible gaps—is considerably richer owing to Lithuania's role as the exhibition organizer.¹¹ Consequently, the Lithuanian perspective occasionally dominates the discussion. The selection of Latvian articles, compiled with the help of various databases, is the least comprehensive, although it still covers almost all of the triennials.

Thus far, few organizational documents relating to the Painting Triennial have been located, while jury protocols and transcripts of discussions remain largely inaccessible¹²; participants interviewed often have no clear recollection of the exhibitions' background. As a result, this article does not examine the triennial in depth as a distinct exhibition format, nor does it analyze the selection of participants. The study would undoubtedly

10 Mari Nõmmela, *Eesti kunsti retseptioon Leedus Vilniuse maalitriennaalidel 1969–1990* (master's thesis, Tartu Ülikool, 1993).

11 It should also be noted that while in Estonia and Latvia reviews of the triennials were written exclusively by critics, in Lithuania artists also contributed actively to the critical discourse.

12 I consulted materials in the National Archives of Estonia, the Latvian National Archives, the Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, and the archive of the Lithuanian Artists' Association.

benefit from a comparison of the triennial reviews with evaluations of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art in domestic survey exhibitions of the same period. However, this lies beyond the scope of the present article,¹³ and it should be acknowledged that the corpus analyzed represents a special case, which may or may not reflect broader patterns of Baltic art criticism during the 1970s and 1980s.

The seven triennials under consideration can be tentatively divided into several phases. The first three (1969, 1972, and 1975) may be described as the formative stage, the fourth (1978) as a period of heightened expectations, and the final three (1981, 1984, and 1987) as a phase of consolidation. Overall, the chapters of this article follow a chronological structure reflecting these phases.

Since the post-Soviet transition, the Vilnius Painting Triennials underwent significant evolution. While the VIII triennial of 1990 retained many of the formal conventions of its predecessors, it was organized by the independent Lithuanian Artists' Association, marking a decisive break with Soviet institutional control. From 1993 onward, responsibility for selecting the exhibited works shifted from official bodies to curators, transforming the triennials from nationally representative survey exhibitions into independently curated exhibitions. By the XI triennial in 2000, the event had adopted a clear thematic structure and fully embraced an international scope—a trend consolidated by the XVI edition, officially designated the International Vilnius Painting Triennial. Across these later editions, the exhibitions consistently explored the evolving formal and conceptual possibilities of painting while critically engaging with the dynamic relationship between art and society.

The Format of the Painting Triennial

The Vilnius Painting Triennials began in 1969, although the term *triennial* was consistently applied only from the fourth exhibition onward, in 1978. The first event was presented as a biennial, while the second and

13 The close-reading method adopted for this study proved extremely time-consuming and, in many respects, experimental: the Latvian and Lithuanian texts were translated into Estonian using various text recognition and machine-translation tools. To minimize the risk of misinterpretation, each text was processed several times using different software, and, where necessary, intermediary translations into English and Russian.

third were simply titled Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Painting Exhibitions.¹⁴ In Estonia, the concept of the Baltic triennials is generally attributed to Estonian graphic artists, with the Painting Triennial often regarded as an offshoot of the Tallinn Print Triennial, established in 1968.¹⁵ In Lithuania, however, the idea for the Painting Triennials is credited to the painters Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989) and Jonas Švažas (1925–1976),¹⁶ suggesting that the initiative emerged independently. Since the late 1950s, graphic art had been recognized as the driving force of Estonian art, while painting occupied that position in Lithuania. These differing emphases are not necessarily contradictory, however, as the ideas were simply circulating within the shared cultural milieu. Nevertheless, the differing accounts of the triennials' origin—or perhaps the differing ways in which they have been remembered—suggest a degree of competition over defining artistic interaction among the Baltic states and, potentially, over claiming a leading position in art history. While the joint painting exhibitions were officially presented as opportunities for acquaintance, the exchange of experience, and the cultivation of (international) friendships—and were portrayed as fostering mutual inspiration and contributing to the development of Soviet multinational art¹⁷—they primarily functioned, much like the Print Triennials, as an artistic competition among the three republics.

The arrangement of the exhibitions followed the logic of “national pavilions”: each republic selected its own artists and, in the case of the Painting Triennial, its own section designer. Although each participant exhibited individual works, they primarily represented their respective republic; every award or prize was given to an artist by name, but also indirectly to the republic itself. Moreover, both the Print and Painting Triennials contained organizational elements that clearly favored the host republic—whether it

14 *Vilniaus tapybos bienalė / Vilniusskaya bienale zhivopisi* (Lietuvos TSR dailės muziejus, 1969); *Estijos, Latvijos, Lietuvos tapybos paroda / Vystavka zhivopisi Estonii, Latvii, Litvy* (Lietuvos TSR dailės muziejus, 1972, 1975). However, reviews of the second and third exhibitions occasionally referred to them as “triennials.” See Mai Levin, “Vilniuse triennaal,” *Sirp ja Vasar*, May 26, 1972; Irena Kostkevičiūtė, “Pabaltijo spalvų pasauly,” *Kultūros barai*, no. 8 (1975): 11–17; and Rasma Lāce, “Dažas līnijas, dažī meti,” *Literatūra un Māksla*, April 12, 1975.

15 Interview with Jūri Hain by the author, June 5, 2013

16 Gytis Vaitkūnas, “Iš laiko distancijos,” *Dailė*, no. 22 (1981): 27.

17 See the introductory text in *Vilniaus tapybos bienalė / Vilniusskaya bienale zhivopisi* (Lietuvos TSR dailės muziejus, 1969).

was the role of the local exhibition designer in the Print Triennials,¹⁸ a heavily biased national prize jury, or, in the case of the Painting Triennials, the significantly larger representation of Lithuanians in the exhibitions.¹⁹

Information on the selection procedures of the Painting Triennials remains limited. In a review of the perestroika-era VII triennial (1987), Zigurds Konstants notes that, during a conversation with Estonian and Lithuanian representatives, the Latvian selection process appeared to be the strictest: a preliminary exhibition was organized, after which the expert commission of the Latvian Ministry of Culture made the final decision, excluding several “challenging” or overly experimental works. In Estonia, the process was reportedly the least rigorous: the Painting Section jury proposed works to the exhibition at its own discretion, and selected artists did not even have to be members of the Artists’ Association. In practice, the choice of works was largely entrusted to the artists themselves.²⁰

However, documents preserved in the archives of the Exhibition Department of the Art Fund of the Estonian SSR reveal that the procedure for selecting participants varied from one triennial edition to another. For instance, prior to the IV Triennial in 1978, a public pre-exhibition was organized in Estonia, featuring twenty-nine artists, of whom ten were ultimately selected to represent the republic. Although it would be premature to draw broad conclusions from this list alone, it is nevertheless evident that the youngest painters experimenting with geometric abstraction, as well as members of the older generation working in more traditional styles, were excluded. It is also notable that many of the works accepted for the triennial had already been acquired by public collections, suggesting that they had

18 During the Soviet era, most editions of the Tallinn Print Triennial were designed by the artist Enno Ootsing.

19 The number of participants and exhibited works varied from one triennial to another. The first triennial featured ten Estonian and ten Latvian artists, alongside twenty Lithuanian artists, each exhibiting five works. The second included the same number of participants, although each exhibited four works. The third presented fifteen artists from Estonia and Latvia and twenty-three from Lithuania, each showing three paintings. The fourth featured twelve Estonian artists (four works each), fifteen Latvian artists (three works each), and twenty-three Lithuanians (four works each). The fifth included fifteen artists from Estonia and Latvia and twenty-six from Lithuania; from this edition onwards, each artist exhibited three works. The sixth triennial presented fifteen painters from each republic, while the seventh increased the number to twenty per republic.

20 Zigurds Konstants, “Septītā Viļņas glezniecības triennāle,” *Literatūra un Māksla*, July 3, 1987.

passed both ideological screening and quality evaluation.²¹ The list of participants in the 1981 Triennial further shows that three of the four painters serving on the decisive jury succeeded in having their own works included in the exhibition.²² By 1984, however, interest in the triennial appears to have declined: only nineteen painters competed for fifteen available places.²³

In Lithuania, at least until 1981, local pre-exhibitions were held prior to the triennials, and the selection of works frequently sparked disputes. It appears that, as the host of the exhibition—and having secured the right to be represented by nearly twice as many artists as Latvia and Estonia²⁴—the triennial functioned somewhat differently within the Lithuanian art scene. In addition to presenting established artists, it also served as a legitimizing platform for emerging artists who had not yet received public recognition, as well as for works considered borderline experimental.²⁵ (As noted in some Estonian reviews, however, the organizers' privilege of exhibiting a larger number of works than the neighboring republics did not always benefit the exhibition: the surplus of works could create a monotonous impression of Lithuanian painting).

The organizers' advantage in awarding prizes, however, is clear. All prizes were funded by Lithuanian institutions; nominees were selected by the commission of the Lithuanian Artists' Association and the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, and the award jury—responsible for selecting laureates from among the nominees by secret ballot—consistently had a Lithuanian majority.²⁶ Consequently, it is unsurprising that, in five of the six Soviet-era

21 National Archives of Estonia, R-1954.2.373.

22 National Archives of Estonia, R-1954.2.458.

23 Estonian Public Broadcasting Archives, "Source Materials from 16mm Film: *Vikerkaar*. Vilnius Painting Triennial," 1984, <https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/vikerkaar-vilnius-maalitriennaal-heinz-vaalk-olev-subbi>.

24 According to Konstants, in 1987 the number of active painters was approximately the same in Lithuania and Estonia (ninety in each republic), whereas Latvia had more than two hundred.

25 This impression is reinforced by Leonardas Tuleikis's reflective essay in the catalogue of the X Vilnius Painting Triennial, which offers a retrospective—albeit somewhat idealized—account of the history of the triennials. See Leonardas Tuleikis, "Introduction," in *X Vilniaus Tapybos trienalė / X Vilnius Painting Triennial* (Vilniaus šiuolaikinio meno centras, 1996).

26 For example, the jury of the 1972 exhibition comprised thirteen Lithuanian members, one Estonian, and one Latvian. See *Estijos, Latvijos, Lietuvos tapybos paroda / Vystavka zhivopisi Estonii, Latvii, Litvy* (Lietuvos TSR dailės muziejus, 1972).

triennials, the Grand Prize of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture²⁷ was awarded to Lithuanian artists. Initially, there were five lower-tier prizes—the Artists' Association awards—of which three were awarded to Lithuanians on each occasion. From the IV triennial onward, however, one prize was allocated to each republic. Other prizes, presented by various institutions,²⁸ were also selected by the same nationally biased jury, at least until the III triennial, according to archival sources.

Unlike the Tallinn Print Triennial, which aimed to develop into an international art event, the Vilnius Painting Triennial consciously maintained a Baltic focus.²⁹ Beginning in 1981, a small number of guest participants from other regions of the Soviet Union were included in the exhibitions;³⁰ however, this inclusion was likely more a formal gesture—a nod to the authorities—than a substantive expansion of the program. These guest artists were rarely mentioned in critical reviews. Even in the 1990s, the exhibitions continued to focus primarily on Baltic painting, with only a few additional participants—this time from Western countries.³¹ The number of guest participants did not increase significantly until 2000, when the triennial began to embrace a more genuinely international scope.

Fostering Tradition

Although the art of neighboring countries was likely not entirely unfamiliar to reviewers by the time the triennials were established, the first three events (1969–1975) can be considered a phase of familiarization,

27 It amounted to 500 rubles. Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fond 146, inventory 1, file 582.

28 The Lithuanian Artists' Association awarded prizes of 250 rubles in 1972, 200 rubles in 1978, and 300 rubles at the other triennials. For example, in 1972, the Vilnius City Executive Committee awarded three additional prizes of 300 rubles each, while the magazine *Kultūros barai* and the weekly *Literatūra ir menas* awarded prizes of 200 rubles. In different years, prizes sponsored by the Council of Trade Unions and the plastics factory *Plasta* were also awarded. Lithuanian Archives of Literature and Art, fond 146, inventory 1, files 581–582, 794, 799, 807, and 819.

29 Interview with Aloyzas Stasiulevičius by the author, April 22, 2022.

30 The fifth triennial included three guest artists from Moscow and, somewhat unexpectedly, one from Riga; the sixth featured three artists from Armenia; and the seventh, three artists from Moldova.

31 At the eighth triennial (1990), the guest participants were two painters from Switzerland. The ninth was scaled back to an exhibition featuring only Lithuania and Estonia, while the tenth triennial (1996) hosted two painters from Sweden.

during which foundational understandings of the distinctive traits of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian schools were formed.

Already in his review of the I Triennial,³² Lithuanian artist Jonas Mackonis articulated the distinguishing characteristics of the art of the three countries. Estonian painting appeared to Mackonis as the least “pretentious” at the exhibition, as it “does not try to enchant viewers with large canvas formats, expressive brushstrokes, or the fireworks of contrasting colors.”³³ Keywords such as Northern reticence, moderate scale, and intimate subject matter correspond with familiar interpretations of the earlier period of Soviet Estonian art.³⁴ Nevertheless, Mackonis notes that Estonian artists were actively searching for original forms of artistic expression and demonstrated considerable diversity, including temperament, decorative line, an Impressionist style, as well as a sense of symbolism and allegorical meaning. In Latvian painting, Mackonis observes a persistent tendency towards “decorativeness,” whereas Lithuanian painting is characterized in more vivid terms: “Color, color, color! And also—expressively painted texture, deliberate deformation.”³⁵

By the II Triennial (1972), reviewers paid greater attention to identifying common features across the three republics. Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art appeared to observers to be at a comparable stage of development within the broader framework of Soviet art. Estonian critic Evi Pihlak argued that national schools and distinctive traits could primarily be discussed from a surface-level interpretive perspective, as their overall themes and subject matter largely coincided. She highlighted the dominant mode of expression as a grand, monumental depiction of human creative effort and struggle, with artists drawn to the celebratory aspects of life, accomplishments, triumphs, and an elevated sense of heroic pathos.³⁶

Lithuanian art critic Nijolė Tumėnienė situated the exhibition within the broader context of the 1960s, a period of intense searching and transformation in the art of all three republics: “The modern artist perceives the present as a complex, dialectical process of life, where not all

32 To my knowledge, this was the only review of the first triennial published in the Baltic press.

33 Jonas Mackonis, “Pirmieji įspūdžiai,” *Literatūra ir menas* (April 26, 1969).

34 Estonian art had already been characterized in similar terms at the All-Union Exhibition in Moscow in 1957 and at the Baltic exhibition of thematic painting held in Tallinn in 1959.

35 Mackonis, “Pirmieji įspūdžiai.”

36 Evi Pihlak, “Kolme maa maalijad,” *Kunst*, no. 3 (1972): 9.

phenomena have a definite form, thus painting sometimes raises issues that have no visual counterpart in life.”³⁷ Tumėnienė associated this growing tendency towards generalization, metaphorical content, and abstraction with the influence of monumental art that had emerged in the previous decade. Observers also noted that many painters’ works demonstrated complex associative connections, alongside an apparent increase in the joy of creation, as artists actively sought new means of expression.

At the III Triennial (1975), Latvian critic Rasma Lāce observed a blurring of genre boundaries, particularly within the Soviet genre of thematic painting, which she noted was being replaced by figure compositions incorporating elements of landscape, still life, or portraiture. The range of life phenomena addressed by artists appeared to have expanded. In themes such as man and space, humanity’s struggle for peace and progress, or the Vietnam War, a global dimension emerged, while the works simultaneously explored the nuances of human psychology.³⁸

A clearly defined national school was primarily attributed to Lithuanian painting. For instance, Mai Levin hesitated to offer a general characterization of Estonian art, suggesting that it might be more easily recognized from a distance by Latvians and Lithuanians. Nevertheless, she observed that “Lithuanian artists have so much in common in their approach to painting problems and styles that one might even speak of a school here.”³⁹

The perceived uniqueness and homogeneity of the Lithuanian painting tradition seem to have established a model of school-like unity, which early triennial critics applied when searching for similar traits in the art of other republics. This may explain why Latvian painting, which shared certain characteristics with Lithuanian art, was not perceived as exhibiting the same degree of internal coherence as the more distinctive Estonian art. Lithuanian critic Irena Kostkevičiūtė wrote: “Latvians form an intermediary link between their neighbors not only geographically but also in terms of artistic pursuits. In terms of logical structure, they are closer to the Estonians, but in terms of color solutions, closer to the Lithuanians.”⁴⁰

37 Nijolė Tumėnienė, “Pabaltijo tapyba – 72,” *Literatura ir menas* (April 29, 1972).

38 Lāce, “Dažas līnijas, daži meti.”

39 Levin, “Vilniuse triennaal.”

40 Kostkevičiūtė, “Pabaltijo spalvų pasauly,” 14.

Latvian art was therefore predominantly described through broad, general characteristics: professionalism, strong craftsmanship, and formal virtuosity. Occasionally, descriptors from the late 1950s—such as decorative or monumental—were repeated. Overall, Latvian painting was seen as multi-directional, represented by prominent individual artists, yet it attracted less attention from Estonian and Lithuanian critics than the art of their more dissimilar neighbors.

In contrast, Estonian painting was often framed through a clear dichotomy with Lithuanian art. Unlike the unified impression of Lithuanian painting, Estonian art appeared heterogeneous. Evi Pihlak observes: “Our artists differ from each other more strongly than Latvian and Lithuanian painters do from one another.”⁴¹ The persistence of Lithuanian tradition and its somewhat archaic orientation were contrasted with the openness of Estonian art to modern influences. Lithuanian painting was characterized by expressive manner and free improvisation, whereas Estonian painting was described as intellectual: “It appears that artists initially contemplate the course of their creative exploration before bringing it to life on the canvas.”⁴² In Lithuanian works, color, texture, and dynamic brushwork dominated; in Estonian paintings, color was subordinated to form, with smooth surfaces and precisely rendered figures. Critics also distinguished between color synthesis in Lithuanian painting and the dissonant use of hues in Estonian painting. The temperamental differences between the nations were repeatedly noted: Lithuanian works conveyed dramatic and tragic tones, while Estonian works were restrained and contemplative—where Lithuanians felt, Estonians philosophized.

When revisiting these texts after some time, the traits they highlight can sometimes appear narrowly obsessive. Yet, there are also intriguing and nuanced observations that invite a fresh perspective on the paintings of that era. For example, the distinguished Lithuanian painter Leonardas Tuleikis describes distinctive spatial qualities of Estonian painting that had gone unnoticed by Estonian critics:

Estonian painters prefer perspectives of distant horizons and strive to create a peculiar atmosphere, charged with tension and silence—spaces anxiously

41 Pihlak, “Kolme maa maalijad,” 13, 17.

42 Leonardas Tuleikis, “Apie kaimynus ir apie mus,” *Literatūra ir menas* (June 28, 1975).

awaiting an event. Estonian artists are characterized by an object-oriented way of thinking: ideas are expressed through the unexpected juxtaposition and arrangement of objects in space, which are given unexpected colors. This effort is often accompanied by a desire to enhance the surface of the painting, highlight beautiful details, and create an impression of aesthetic unity.⁴³

In general, the vocabulary used to describe national schools in the early triennials was strikingly similar among critics from all three republics. Observers focused on formal characteristics, stylistic features, and emotional tone rather than subject matter. Shifts in social life and broader social processes were mentioned but rarely explored in depth or linked explicitly to artworks. This focus on formal analysis can be understood as a reaction to an earlier period, when art was primarily interpreted in terms of its social function. The era of vulgar sociological interpretation was relatively brief in the Baltic States and had been widely criticized by the late 1950s. The formalist approach of the 1960s and 1970s was legitimized by the recognition that complex artistic processes were unfolding: relationships between art and reality, as well as the social system of art itself, were changing, and emerging phenomena could not always be immediately comprehended. As Kaalu Kirme noted in a 1968 discussion on art criticism:

Today, the thoughts and intentions of the artist are no longer expressed so concretely and simply, and as a result, the critic cannot always decipher the depicted in a primitive or straightforward manner. In this context, examining modes of expression and form becomes unavoidable. At the same time, we take it as a given that the ideas the artist draws from are the ideas of the Soviet people.⁴⁴

Conflicting Value Orientations

In the approaches to analyzing artworks or describing the characteristics of schools, no major discrepancies are apparent in the writings of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian critics during the first triennials. However, when it came to evaluating art, different, and at times even opposing,

43 Leonardas Tuleikis, "Vilniuje susitiko tapytojai," *Dailė*, no. 17 (1973): 19.

44 "Kõne all oli kunstikriitika," *Sirp ja Vasar* (March 8, 1968).

value orientations emerged. Here, Estonian and Lithuanian perspectives are particularly distinct once again.

In his review of the first triennial, Mackonis outlines the criteria for valuable art acknowledged in Lithuania: "Lately, the dominant belief has been that if a painting lacks painterly qualities, it is not considered fully valuable." Referring to Latvian artist Līvija Endzelina's small, simple still lifes, he notes that in Lithuania, critics would likely characterize the artist's work as naturalistic, and that such works might not even be accepted for an exhibition. While a certain degree of painterliness might be acceptable in sculpture or graphic art, an emphasis on drawing and form in painting was regarded negatively. Mackonis acknowledges that the "Gudaitis-like" expressionism,⁴⁵ in its various manifestations, had begun to repeat itself and become tiresome; nevertheless, at the biennial, Lithuanian painting still appeared highly impressive.⁴⁶

It seems that, during the first triennials, comparison with neighboring countries provided Lithuanians with a fresh perspective on their own art. Tuleikis notes that while the renewal of Lithuanian painting had stalled, qualitative development was possible not only through formal innovation but also through the refinement and expansion of existing approaches. As a result, he concludes, Lithuanian painting had in recent years become significantly richer and more diverse in both content and form.⁴⁷ Reflecting on the third triennial, Kostkevičiūtė likewise acknowledges that the earlier concerns about uniformity in Lithuanian painting did not appear justified at this exhibition.⁴⁸

The central value emerging from the Lithuanian perspective is the belief that paintings must evoke emotions: without emotional resonance, artworks lack depth and sincerity. Emotionality is primarily conveyed through the painterly surface of the work, with the artist's touch remaining visible in the brushstrokes. While acknowledging the professionalism and

45 The author is referring to Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989). Unlike in Estonia, the establishment of Soviet rule in Lithuania did not result in such a sharp break with tradition, as several representatives of the so-called Kaunas School continued teaching at the Vilnius Art Institute. Gudaitis was the most influential among them. Mackonis himself did not work in a painterly style, but his paintings were exhibited at the second and fifth triennials.

46 Mackonis, "Pirmieji įspūdžiai."

47 Tuleikis, "Vilniuje susitiko," 21.

48 Kostkevičiūtė, "Pabaltijo spalvų pasauly," 16.

beauty of detail in Estonian art, Lithuanian critics often perceived Estonian paintings as lacking depth due to their intellectual character. According to Tuleikis, rational exploration had led some Estonian artists to primitivism, while others had become immersed in “over-philosophized” problems or intrusive materialism.⁴⁹

In contrast, Estonian critics did not appear to fully trust the painterly color effects or reliance on emotional response. Mai Levin perceived Lithuanian art as excessively sentimental and confined within overly narrow frameworks for the modern era.⁵⁰ Evi Pihlak found that the temperament and expressiveness of Lithuanian painters sometimes appeared artificially intensified, with a sense of fabricated drama and excessively vivid colors, resulting in what she described as “an overstrained and overdramatized tone.”⁵¹ She noted that both color and form in these works were pushed to a sharpness that approached the level of a scream. Discussing the renowned Lithuanian artist Jonas Čeponis, she commented that although his paintings radiated with intense aniline hues, beyond the striking yet somewhat superficial color impressions, the artist failed to convey deeper meaning.⁵²

Pihlak believed that some Latvian painters also remained on the surface of their subjects: “Briefly capturing the joyful color impression of such paintings, the gaze finds no place to linger, and their artistic effect is quickly exhausted. [...] It seems that some fleeting form of decorative impressionism can no longer fully satisfy the late 20th-century viewer, who has become accustomed to far more concentrated artistic solutions.”⁵³ Interestingly, Tuleikis likewise found some Latvian color schemes overly superficial and merely decorative, expressing the hope for a greater sense of inner concentration in their works.⁵⁴

Perspectives on national art traditions also differed significantly. Both Latvian and Lithuanian critics viewed Estonians’ indifference towards national traditions as a weakness. In the stylistically diverse context of Latvian art, nationalism was described as a distinctive nuance or

49 Leonardas Tuleikis, “Apie kaimynus ir apie mus,” *Literatūra ir menas* (June 28, 1975).

50 Levin, “Vilniuse triennaal.”

51 Pihlak, “Kolme maa maalijad,” 13.

52 Ibid., 9.

53 Ibid.

54 Tuleikis, “Apie kaimynus ir apie mus.”

undertone of the works; for Lithuanians, however, the national character of art was more concretely connected to the ethnographic heritage of the past.

The criticism voiced by Kostkevičiūtė, reinforced through her quotation of Justinas Vienožinskis's 1937 review of an Estonian art exhibition in Lithuania, is particularly revealing:

Estonians may have followed Europe too closely, perhaps yielding too much to international art or, more precisely, to individual representatives of that art. Many Estonians, even very talented artists, could be criticized for taking too little into account the unique characteristics of their people and land.⁵⁵

This raises the question of whether alignment with international art could itself be understood as a tradition or defining characteristic of Estonian art.

In the Estonian critics' views on the influence of folk art, there is a noticeable sense of condescension. Terms such as ethnographic, folkloric, and archaic carry rather negative connotations in their writings. Accordingly, the only instances in which contemporary Estonian art is linked to artistic traditions in Estonian-language reviews of the triennial are those in which such connections are presented as flaws. Criticizing the reserved stance of Estonian artists, Ene Lamp observed in 1978:

This contemplative attitude of Estonian art is a legacy from the course of history and tradition. Could it be that a conscious or unconscious conformism, shaped in the past, has left a mark, alienating the perception of more serious problems as troublesome issues in the interest of self-preservation? [...] The peak of Estonian painting has been considered the 1930s, when the development of art turned towards calm and temperate realism. [...] Even the art of then-leading example France had no other ideals than a pleasant and peaceful view of life. [...] This painting ideal was, for many, a support upon which they relied to stand tall in the following decades, and it was treated with reverence. Its influence is still felt today. This influence from the 1930s can be found

55 Kostkevičiūtė, "Pabaltijo spalvų pasauly," 14.

56 Ene Lamp, "Kolme maa maalijad," *Kunst*, no. 1 (1978): 12.

not only in the work of those continuing the “Pallas” school tradition but also seems to define a broader mentality, guiding even those who claim to reject this style.⁵⁶

That differing value systems are at play is further suggested by another striking feature of these texts: when an artwork is criticized, the criticism is generally directed not at the individual artist’s weakness or failure but at perceived deficiencies of the school or artistic tradition from which the work emerged.

IV Triennial: Turmoil or Stagnation?

The differing value systems and perceptions of artistic development in Baltic painting became even more apparent at the IV Vilnius Painting Triennial (1978), which featured approximately 200 works and is regarded as a pivotal moment in the history of the exhibition series from a Lithuanian perspective. This assessment, however, was not necessarily shared by Latvian and Estonian critics.

Despite significant changes in the selection of artists from all republics, with younger artists replacing established ones, Estonian critics Sirje Helme and Evi Pihlak described the exhibition as stable and solid, offering little that was genuinely new. The perception of stagnation and doubts about the triennial’s sustainability may have been fueled by similar discussions in Estonia surrounding the Tallinn Print Triennial the previous year. Pihlak found the Lithuanian section particularly monotonous, arguing that even the younger generation failed to bring about any qualitative change:

While the generational differences among Estonian artists are clearly reflected in their artistic styles and themes, this was not always true for the Lithuanian exhibition. The works with loose, broad brushstrokes, rough textures, and intensely bright colors absorb the depicted subjects without going deeper than the surface. The themes, often revolving around nature, people, and human activity, are rarely complex and are chosen primarily for their aesthetic value.⁵⁷

57 Evi Pihlak, “Neljäntat korda Vilniuses,” *Sirp ja Vasar* (June 2, 1978).

In contrast, one Latvian review of the same triennial presented Estonian artists as exemplars of artistic inertia. Herberts Dubins remarked that while Olev Subbi's paintings were beautiful, refined, and skillfully executed, they lacked any genuine artistic challenge: "The selected motifs, their combination, and interpretation create a sense of salon-like idealization and boredom and of pseudo-optimistic illusions of life." Dubins also criticized Malle Leis, noting that her earlier provocative freshness had turned into mannerism, with her new paintings giving the impression of self-admiration. Although both artists were recognized as accomplished masters, Dubins suggested that their artistic development had imperceptibly shifted toward quantitative self-repetition.⁵⁸

Returning to the Estonian reviews, it is worth noting that although the differences in argument may not be immediately apparent, Sirje Helme, a representative of the younger generation of critics, shifts the discussion toward a more socially oriented analysis. She acknowledges that Lithuanian artists perceive their social role differently:

The central point around which all painterly and thematic values revolve is the artist's personality, especially in the expressionist tradition. The motif becomes valuable only to the extent that the artist has experienced it and transformed it according to their inner vision. In Lithuanian painting, the concept of the artist as a unique personality is very strong, reflecting a view that became fashionable in the previous century—that of the artist as a distinctive filter. What appears to be lacking, however, is the artist's critical attitude towards the surrounding contemporary world, and this makes the subject selection and its interpretation the defining feature of innovative Lithuanian painting.⁵⁹

These observations do not necessarily signal a shift in Helme's value judgments, as she concludes: "For those of us accustomed to the idea that new painting came with a change both in subject matter and painting manner, this combination of painterly form and more mundane motifs [of younger artists] was initially somewhat strange to follow."⁶⁰

58 Herberts Dubins, "Meklējumu amplitūda," *Māksla* (July 1, 1978).

59 Sirje Helme, "Vilniuse IV maalitriennaal," *Kunst*, no. 1 (1980): 12–19. Owing to the lengthy publication schedule of the *Kunst* almanac, the review did not appear until the 1980 issue.

60 Ibid.

The same issue of *Kunst* in which Helme's review appeared also included a translated article by the Lithuanian art critic Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, explaining the major shifts in Lithuanian art during the 1970s, particularly the changing choice of motifs and their artistic interpretation, which he characterizes as a movement from romanticizing to de-romanticizing. As editor of the almanac, Helme was probably responsible for including Andriuškevičius's article. However, even this detailed account of developments in Lithuanian painting did not seem to have substantially altered her critical assessment.

According to Andriuškevičius, artists of the older generation yearned for something distant and undefined, striving to elevate or aestheticize their motifs so as to make them appear more refined. In contrast, younger artists embraced everyday subjects more directly: "[...] objects are presented to the viewer with 'skin and hair,' without being cleaned of rust, dirt, or oil. Instead, painterly qualities are sought in the roughness of texture and "unpleasant" color tones."⁶¹ He also highlights the significance of close-up perspectives, explaining that enlarging objects makes them more accessible to viewers, thereby reducing their sense of mystery and distance. At the same time, Andriuškevičius notes that official cultural policy regards such explorations with considerable caution.

The Lithuanian reviews of the triennial reveal that the seemingly monotonous Lithuanian painting perceived by Estonian critics in fact concealed internal tensions. None of the Lithuanian reviewers structured their analyses around the differences between Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art; instead, they focused on the generational and individual dynamics, noting divergences and convergences, and expressing a wide range of opinions, at times even contradictory ones.

Gytis Vaitkūnas identified the source of this controversy as a sharp polemic surrounding the selection of works for the Lithuanian exposition. He explained that the issue was not so much the inclusion of younger artists—many of whom had already participated in the previous triennial—but rather a shift in many painters' understanding of the objectives of the triennial, which prompted several artists from the older generation to

61 Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, "Deromantiseerimine või uus romantilisus," *Kunst*, no. 1 (1980): 21–26.

present more experimental works at the pre-exhibition in Kaunas.⁶² Understandably, Vaitkūnas did not mention that the situation was further complicated by the intervention of the Minister of Culture. It was only about a decade later, during a discussion at the VIII Triennial, that artist Aloyzas Stasiulevičius, who had been closely involved in organizing the exhibitions, revealed that the Minister of Culture, Lionginas Šepetys (in office 1967–1976), had already attempted to exclude certain works and artists from the second and third triennials. According to Stasiulevičius, his successor, Jonas Bielinis (in office 1976–1989), whose tenure became associated with Stalinist attitudes and dictatorial tendencies, went even further by directly demanding the removal of a significant number of works from the 1978 pre-exhibition.⁶³ This situation ultimately escalated into a major conflict between political authority and the artistic community, ending in a victory for the artists. Interestingly, the number of participating artists was even increased.⁶⁴

According to Vaitkūnas, the competition results were considered controversial by many, but this only reinforced the perception of the IV Triennial as a turning point in Lithuanian art. It signaled cracks in both the cultural and political hierarchies and the long-standing professional discourse.

The Lithuanian reviews of the IV Triennial do not display the typical straightforward celebration of their own national school of painting. Instead, they are more reflective, with opinions that are often hesitant and value judgments more carefully qualified. Rather than drawing rigid distinctions between art schools, the critics increasingly recognize shared tendencies among Baltic artists, particularly Lithuanian and Estonian painters. For example, Nijolė Tumėnienė argues that the times seem to favor the approach characteristic of Estonian art. According to the critic, the intimacy

62 Vaitkūnas, "Iš laiko distancijos," 29.

63 Laima Kanopkienė, "Apie vertę ir prasmę," *Kultūros barai*, no. 9 (1990): 9. In addition to Kanopkienė and Stasiulevičius, the discussion also included the Lithuanian painter Arvydas Šaltenis and the Estonian painter Lemming Nagel.

64 The 1981 exhibition is generally regarded as the greatest controversy in the history of the triennials. Once again, major disagreements arose with the minister, eventually reaching the Communist Party, and the continuation of the triennials was briefly placed in jeopardy. The exhibition series was ultimately preserved thanks to an official protest letter issued by the Painting Section of the Lithuanian Artists' Association, although the exhibition opening was postponed from its customary spring date until the end of the year. See Kanopkienė, "Apie vertę ir prasmę," 9.

and highly individual perception of reality that characterize Estonian painting had previously been considered insignificant and secondary. These qualities were not fully understood or appreciated elsewhere because artistic discourse had focused more on broad social conflicts, large formats, intense emotions, and grand ambitions. Now, however, intellectual interests have shifted: “What seemed unimportant yesterday becomes significant today.”⁶⁵

Significantly, Tumēnienē seeks to identify common traits across Baltic art through characteristics she associates with Estonian painting, tracing their counterparts in Lithuania. These include a growing concern with individuality—that is, an increasing interest in the individual and in personal psychology—as well as the growing role of dreams, fantasy, and lyricism: “The sounds of pathos are muted, the drama of emotions is serious.”⁶⁶ Tumēnienē also notes that the impact of the scientific and technological revolution on artistic thinking is first discernible in Estonian art, with Lithuanian and Latvian painters subsequently responding to it in their own ways.

The critic’s observations also suggest that objectivity was becoming increasingly legitimized—a desire to look anew at the world of objects and an attempt to analyze reality and understand its underlying logic. In this context, Tumēnienē’s conclusion is particularly important: “Thus, not all works can be correctly perceived by relying solely on intuition; it is also necessary to know the artist’s position and their creative program.”⁶⁷

Jonas Umbrasas, in his review of the IV Triennial, asserts that it is no longer necessary to repeat the common clichés of Latvian painting as monumental and decorative, Estonian art as rational, or Lithuanian art as emotional and coloristic. The specific developments in painting across all three republics, he suggests, demonstrate that art, as a whole, is far more complex and multifaceted. He identifies one feature common to most artists: the construction of compositions according to the principle of montage, connecting different motifs, temporal moments, or spatial settings through associative relationships. Umbrasas groups the ambitions of younger Estonian and Lithuanian artists under the terms of “new objectivity” and “new materiality,” presenting them as a programmatic artistic movement.⁶⁸

65 Nijolė Tumēnienė, “Pabaltijo tapybos paroda,” *Pergalė*, no. 8 (1978): 162.

66 Ibid.

67 Tumēnienė, “Pabaltijo tapybos paroda,” 162.

68 Jonas Umbrasas, “Ketvirtosios trienalės balansas,” *Kultūros barai*, no. 7 (1978): 11–12.

In defining the principal aims of this movement, Umbrasas quotes the Lithuanian artist Algimantas Švėgžda, who argues that the artist's goal is to depict life without embellishment, as objectively as possible, and without the rich painterly surface effects traditionally associated with painting, so that the viewer does not perceive the work as a painting but rather a depiction of reality: "real and convincing, painted and presented in such a way that you feel a sudden encounter with this reality, this object [...] and understand it much more clearly than in everyday life." According to Švėgžda, this is how the complex relationship between modern people and objects begins to unfold.⁶⁹ However, Umbrasas questions whether viewers will truly grasp the connections between people and things when confronted with works representing this new objectivity. Instead, he sees the emergence of a refined yet emotionally detached aesthetic that focuses more on formal concerns than on the meaning of the image.⁷⁰

The most critical assessment of the IV Triennial comes from the artist Augustinas Savickas, whose paintings of the late 1950s played an important role in reviving the "Gudaitis-like" artistic values from the inter-war period. He regards the principal failing of Baltic art as its desire to be avant-garde, to intrigue viewers at any cost. He divides artists drawn to the avant-garde into three stylistic trends—"absurd painters," "photorealists," and proponents of "decorative décor"—and finds little in their work beyond technical devices and external form. He sees this as a means of escaping broader human concerns, "a kind of 'ivory tower' where, after closing oneself off in the armor of professionalism, it becomes convenient to distance oneself from eternal humanistic ideas." Savickas illustrates his point with the works of Jüri Arrak and Ando Keskküla: "With one, you first notice the 'scream' of colors, with the other, the objects. Only then do you start thinking about what the artists were trying to say with their works."⁷¹

Savickas then introduces a fourth category: the poetic-romantic wing, whose unity lies not in a shared style but in the artistic structure of paintings. According to him, in the works of these romantic painters, both content and form influence our consciousness simultaneously and harmoniously, forming an ideological and aesthetic whole. Unsurprisingly, this

69 Ibid., 16.

70 Ibid., 17.

71 Augustinas Savickas, "Avangarde?" *Literatūra ir menas* (June 17, 1978).

group consists primarily of Lithuanian painters. The central argument of Savickas's lengthy essay becomes fully apparent in its closing lines: true avant-garde means staying true to oneself.⁷²

The subsequent triennials no longer stand out for artistic innovation, which raises the question of how well Savickas's idea of "staying true to oneself" applies to prevailing images of Estonian and Latvian painting.

The 1980s: Full Circle

Beginning with the V Triennial in 1981, critics across all three Baltic republics agreed that the wave of artistic innovation had ended. This seems to have prompted a partial reorientation of art criticism. Although critics continued to identify distinct stylistic schools, their reviews increasingly adopted a meta-critical perspective. Sharing a common cultural background and aesthetic education with artists from their own republics, they tended to approach their republic's art through different evaluative frameworks.

Instead of declaring artists "winners" and "losers," critics increasingly sought to situate the exhibited works within the broader artistic context of each republic. This meta-critical turn also gave rise to new review formats. Although earlier reviews summarized opinions from across the Baltic republics,⁷³ from the V Triennial onward more articles were specifically commissioned from writers in other republics,⁷⁴ while multi-author texts bringing together different perspectives became more common.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See "Vilniuse maalibiennaalelt," *Sirp ja Vasar* (May 16, 1969) (Jevgenia Butorina from Moscow and Jonas Mackonis from Lithuania); "Leedulased maalitriennaalist," *Sirp ja Vasar* (August 1, 1975) (Galina Balčiūnienė and Leonardas Tuleikis from Lithuania); and "Teised meist," *Sirp ja Vasar* (May 19, 1978).

⁷⁴ See, for example, Rasma Lāce, "Otsing ja kinnistumine," *Kunst*, no. 3 (1978): 34–37; Mari Nymela [Nõmmela], "Lietuviu tapyba šiaurės kaimynų akimis," *Kultūros barai*, no. 10 (1983): 52–54; Petrusevičiūtė, "Kas toliau?"; Lāce, "Be aštriju kampų"; Evi Pihlak, "Raidos stabilumas," *Literatūra ir menas* (June 23, 1984); Andriuškevičius, "Deromantiseerimine," 21–26; and Viktoras Liutkus, "Iroonia ja grotesk Baltimaade maalikunstin," *Kunst*, no. 2 (1988): 10–13.

⁷⁵ "Po vernisažo," *Literatūra ir menas* (January 23, 1982) (Edvards Grūbe from Latvia; Augustinas Savickas and Leonardas Tuleikis from Lithuania; Aleksandr Morozov from Moscow; and Evi Pihlak from Estonia); "Vilniuse maalitriennaal," *Kunst*, no. 1 (1985): 2–10 (Aleksandr Morozov from Moscow; Ilze Strekavina from Latvia; and Algimantas Kuras from Lithuania); "Tapyba – gyvas procesas," *Literatūra ir menas* (June 6, 1987) (Nijolė Tumėnienė from Lithuania; Zigurds Konstants from Latvia; and Evi Pihlak from

At the same time, the perception of artistic stagnation in the triennials led to a reconfiguration of inter-Baltic artistic hierarchies. This is most evident in the somewhat diminished reputation of Estonian art, which had previously been among the quickest to respond to new artistic trends. Despite earlier skepticism toward the “new objectivity,” Estonian art from the 1970s now appeared almost radical in retrospect.⁷⁶ Even at the V Triennial, painters such as Ando Keskküla and Tiit Pääsuke gave rise to the new term “cautious art.”⁷⁷ By the following triennial in 1984, however, Latvian critics regarded the Estonian collection as having lost its sharp edges, predicting that Estonian art was entering a period of reassessment. As Rasma Lāce observed: “It seems that the Estonian journalistic pathos, the energetic and candid discussion of the tensions in modern man’s mental world, his nature, and the contradictions of his actions, which were noticeable at earlier triennials, has significantly diminished this time.”⁷⁸ Instead, she perceived a subdued passivity, sometimes inert and “distant” reflection, vague expressions of alienation and solitude, and nostalgic echoes of the lyricism that had once characterized Estonian painting.

As the wave of artistic innovation subsided, Lithuanian painting, which had traditionally approached innovation cautiously, came to be viewed in a more favorable light. According to the Latvian critic Aleksis Osmanis, Lithuanian painting had reached one of its high points by the time of the V Triennial, both in its own development and within the broader landscape of Soviet art. He argued that Lithuanian art’s “rustic worldview” provided a stabilizing framework for the diverse stylistic borrowings characteristic of younger painters, which appeared more rational and somewhat declarative in Latvian and Estonian art.⁷⁹

Somewhat unexpectedly, even Evi Pihlak, who had previously been skeptical of Lithuanian painting, seemed to revise her earlier assessment.

Estonia; compiled by Danutė Zovienė); “Septintoji Vilniaus trienalė,” *Gimtas kraštas* (June 25 and July 1, 1987) (Kazimieras Žoromskis and Arvydas Šaltenis from Lithuania; Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas from the United States; compiled by Julija Mušinskienė).

76 Andrejs Ģermanis and Aleksis Osmanis, “Glezniecība Viļņā recenzija ar atkapem,” *Literatūra un Māksla* (February 29, 1982).

77 Gražina Kliaugienė, “Pabaltijo tapybos trienalė,” *Pergalė*, no. 4 (1982): 150.

78 Rasma Lāce, “Sestajā Viļņas triennālē. Iespaidi un daži atzinumi,” *Literatūra un Māksla* (July 20, 1984).

79 Ģermanis and Osmanis, “Glezniecība Viļņā.”

In the context of the 1981 exhibition, she acknowledged being impressed by the spiritual potential of Lithuanian artists. By the VI Triennial, she recognized the growing strength of Lithuanian painting. The “renewal within the boundaries of school traditions” that had previously failed to convince her now received a different assessment: “Above all, the lively and colorful presentation style characteristic of Lithuanian painting has persisted, and in the current art situation that respects expressive means of expression, it seems more relevant than ever.”⁸⁰ This reassessment was likely influenced by the emergence of Neo-Expressionism and Transavantgarde in Western art during the late 1970s, which had already been discussed in Estonian art press and helped legitimize the expressive and tradition-oriented tendencies of Lithuanian painting.

As the artistic language of the Baltic republics remained relatively unchanged, critics sought new analytical approaches, yet the works themselves did not readily lend themselves to interpretation. Reflecting on how such analysis might begin, the Lithuanian critic Laima Marija Petrusevičiūtė ironically suggested that the easiest approach would be to showcase the stylistic diversity of the three republics and categorize the works accordingly: “emotional, expressive or rational, associative, unbalanced and dissonant, aesthetically pleasing and terribly grotesque, decorative and illustrative.”⁸¹ Petrusevičiūtė, however, questioned the usefulness of such an approach for either viewers or readers, concluding that it would be far more important to analyze the impact and conceptual force of the ideas underlying the artworks. Yet when she attempted to focus on individual works, she found herself confronted by their lack of social engagement, commenting: “You feel as if you have stepped into a theater—action is taking place in a stylized or artificial environment, and you wait for the curtain to fall—this is all just a play. Life, reality, is somewhere else!”⁸²

The triennials of the 1980s prompted considerable criticism of both their overall format and the selection of artworks. Critics sought to understand why Baltic art seemed to have entered a period of stagnation. In her assessment of the 1987 triennial, Eglė Kunčiuvienė articulated this sense of disappointment:

80 Evi Pihlak, “Kolme maa maali lahknevad teed,” *Sirp ja Vasar* (June 15, 1984).

81 Laima Marija Petrusevičiūtė, “Kas toliau?,” *Literatūra ir menas* (June 23, 1984).

82 Petrusevičiūtė, “Kas toliau?”

This was not the kind of art we were expecting. [...] It is hard to endure the spiritual loss of a person, even more so the signs of degradation. We seem to expect something else from works of art at all times—if not manifestations of spiritual strength, then at least something higher, something that supports humanity, hope, and faith.⁸³

Ultimately, critics returned to the familiar language of national schools. Once again, readers encountered the claim that Latvian art, situated both geographically and thematically between Estonian and Lithuanian art,⁸⁴ appeared somewhat overly decorative to its neighbors.⁸⁵ Lithuanian critics once again celebrated the coloristic qualities of their national school: “The suggestive harmony of colors, their tones, brushstrokes, the vibration of the paint layer possess such spiritual strength that, like a magical magnet, they draw you back to the same picture again and again.”⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Estonian critics again maintained that Lithuanian painting, while consistently high in quality, often verged on monotony, leaving the Estonian viewer longing for greater depth.⁸⁷ As one reviewer observed: “At the triennial, [...] one could often experience that the tension accompanying the emancipated use of color did not create a valuable painterly space in itself but instead left behind an empty patch of color.”⁸⁸ Once again, younger Estonian art seemed too rational and insufficiently expressive to Lithuanian critics, revealing all it had to offer at first glance.⁸⁹ The criticism that Estonian artists were overly preoccupied with Western artistic fashions also resurfaced.⁹⁰ In the end, critics could conclude with a certain satisfaction that the differences between the national schools had remained intact.

83 Eglė Kunčiuvienė, “Septintoji Vilniaus tapybos trienalė,” *Dailė*, no. 29 (1992): 32.

84 Konstants, “Septītā Viļņas glezniecības triennāle”.

85 Kunčiuvienė, “Septintoji Vilniaus tapybos trienalė,” 32.

86 [Nijolė Tumėnienė], “Tapyba – gyvas procesas,” *Literatūra ir menas* (June 6, 1987).

87 Evi Pihlak, “Kolme aasta maalilooming kolmelt maalt,” *Sirp ja Vasar* (May 29, 1987).

88 Eha Komissarov, “Vilniuse VII maalitriennaal,” *Kunst*, no. 1 (1988): 5.

89 Laima Marija Petrusevičiūtė, “VII Vilniaus tapybos trienalė,” *Pergalė*, no. 9 (1987): 151.

90 [Z. Konstanas], “Tapyba – gyvas procesas,” *Literatūra ir menas* (June 6, 1987); Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, “Į kultūros ištakas ir paribius,” *Kultūros barai*, no. 8 (1987): 32.

Afterword

In retrospect, over nearly two decades of the Soviet period in the history of the Vilnius Painting Triennials, the prevailing keywords and value orientations changed little, revealing the persistence of stable critical stereotypes. Why these school-oriented characteristics and evaluative attitudes proved so enduring can only be answered speculatively. Much of this continuity probably stemmed from the structure of the triennials themselves, organized as “national pavilions” that presented the art of each republic separately. It is worth considering whether a more integrated exhibition format—one that did not separate paintings according to national affiliation—might have prompted critics to highlight different aspects of the works.

Undeniably, the art of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania displayed distinctive characteristics during the 1970s and 1980s. The evidence presented here suggests, however, that the prominence of school-oriented interpretations cannot be explained solely by the exhibited works but was also largely shaped by the art-critical methods of the time. Although reviewers sought to break free from an endless cycle of repetition, they ultimately fell back on emphasizing the differences between the national schools. Throughout the period discussed in the article, criticism remained largely based on formal analysis—a mode of analysis that took shape in the nineteenth century, during the age of nation-building, and was deeply rooted in the idea of national form. It might therefore be more accurate to see the emphasis on national identity as deriving from the discipline of art history itself. Indeed, the school-oriented character of criticism deserves equal attention, as it consistently interpreted each republic’s art through its own evaluative framework and thereby cast it in a more favorable light. Whether the traits highlighted in this way should necessarily be understood through the lens of nationality is another matter. The triennial reviews acknowledged that the model of nationality found its most natural expression in Lithuanian painting, which remained committed to the style developed in the 1920s and 1930s—painterliness, expressive brushwork, and the power of color. By contrast, the Western influences evident in Estonian painting and the

stylistic diversity characteristic of Latvian art appear, at least retrospectively, less convincing as markers of national identity.

A separate issue emerging from this material concerns the noticeable hostility and intolerance to difference that can be detected in many triennial reviews. One might have expected a greater degree of solidarity and appreciation of diversity, especially in the context of late socialism, when the pressure of Russification threatened the national cultures of the Baltic republics. Could this defensive attitude be understood as part of a broader process of national identity construction, in which the affirmation of one's own distinctiveness often came at the expense of others? The critical discourse frequently reveals a desire to assert superiority and a limited openness to alternative artistic approaches, suggesting that national self-consciousness was articulated more through contrast than through dialogue.

In this sense, triennial criticism appears to run counter to the ideal of Baltic solidarity—it tended to amplify differences rather than emphasize commonalities. While the Soviet ideological context undoubtedly shaped these debates, it does not fully explain the competitiveness and lack of empathy that emerge in these reviews. It is possible that the latent pressure on national cultures contributed to a defensive cultural posture, in which asserting the value of one's own national art became inseparable from distancing it from the artistic traditions of neighboring republics.

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Santrauka

Išraiškinga, intelektualu ir tai, kas tarp jų: lietuviai, estai ir latviai sovietmečio Vilniaus tapybos trienalėse

Kādi Talvoja

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Vilniaus tapybos trienalės, Baltijos šalių menas, sovietinis menas, meno kritika, tautinė tapatybė.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Vilniaus tapybos trienalų (1969–1987) vaidmuo formuojant Estijos, Latvijos ir Lietuvos tapybos sampratą vėlyvuju sovietmečiu. Nors retrospektyviai šios parodos dažnai interpretuojamos kaip Baltijos šalių solidarumo arba pasipriešinimo sovietinei kultūrinei hegemonijai išraiška, straipsnyje teigiama, kad svarbiausia jų funkcija buvo sukurti lyginamąją sistemą, padėjusią apibrėžti trijų „Pabaltijo respublikų“ menines tapatybes per jų tarpusavio santykį.

Tyrimas grindžiamas Estijoje, Latvijoje ir Lietuvoje publikuotų parodų recenzijų analize. Užuoat sutelkus dėmesį į ideologinį turinį ar politines potekstes, nagrinėjama, kaip meno kritikai apibūdino ir vertino trijų nacionalinių tapybos mokyklų meninius bruožus ir kaip šie apibūdinimai kito per septynias 1969–1987 m. surengtas trienales. Analizė atskleidžia, kad jau ankstyvuju laikotarpiu susiformavo stebėtinai stabilus stereotipinių apibūdinimų rinkinys, kuris iš esmės nekito visą aptariamą laikotarpį. Estų tapyba nuosekliai sieta su racionalumu, intelektualumu, santūrumu ir formaliais eksperimentais, lietuvių – su ekspresyviu potėpiu, emociniu intensyvumu, spalvingumu ir tapybiškumu, o latvių tapyba dažniausiai apibūdinta kaip užimanti tarpinę poziciją tarp šių dviejų polių ir pasižyminti profesionalumu, dekoratyvumu bei stilistine įvairove.

Straipsnyje parodoma, kad šie skirtumai atspindėjo ne tik meninėje praktikoje išryškėjusias tendencijas, bet ir skirtingas estetines vertybes, vyravusias kiekvienoje respublikoje. Lietuvių kritikai pirmenybę teikė emocinei raiškai ir tapybiškumui, o Estijos – labiau vertino conceptualų aiškumą, struktūrinį tikslumą ir intelektualinį gilumą. Todėl tie patys meniniai bruožai vienoje šalyje galėjo būti vertinami palankiai, o kitoje – kritiškai. Latvijos kritikai dažnai užėmė tarpinę poziciją, tačiau kartu laikėsi savitos vertinimo sistemos.

Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas ketvirtajai Vilniaus tapybos trienalėi (1978), kuri tapo lūžio tašku lietuvių meno raidoje dėl kartų kaitos ir institucinių konfliktų, kilusių atrenkant kūrinius parodai. Nors Lietuvos kritikai šią trienalę vertino kaip reikšmingo atsinaujinimo ženklą, Estijos recenzentai joje daugiausia išvėlgė tęstinumą ir sąstingį, taip atskleisdami skirtingas Baltijos šalyse vyravusias kritines perspektyvas. XX a. 9 deš. kritikai vis dažniau reflektavo nusistovėjusių interpretacinių modelių ribotumą, tačiau ir toliau rėmėsi nacionalinėmis tipologijomis, nepaisydami vis didesnės meninės raiškos įvairovės.

Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad nacionalinių stereotipų tęstinumą lėmė tiek trienalė organizacinė struktūra, pagal kurią kiekvienos respublikos ekspozicija buvo pristatoma atskirai, tiek formalistinės meno kritikos tradicija, paveldėta iš XIX a. nacionalinių mokyklų sampratos. Užuo vien dokumentavę meninius skirtumus, kritikai juos aktyviai konstravo pasitelkdami tarpusavio lyginimus. Todėl Vilniaus tapybos trienalės tapo svarbia Baltijos šalių meninio tapatumo derybų erdve, kurios kritiniame diskurse dažniau buvo pabrėžiama konkurencija ir skirtumai nei solidarumas ar bendra kultūrinė patirtis.