

Were the 1960s and 1970s Truly the Golden Age of Lithuanian Painting?

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The article examines Lithuanian painting from 1965, the year in which the exhibition of Baltic art was held in Moscow. In all likelihood, this prompted the idea of organising joint exhibitions of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian art independently of Moscow. In Estonia, this contributed to the establishment of the Tallinn Graphic Art Triennial (1968); in Lithuania, the Vilnius Painting Triennial (1969); and in Latvia, the Baltic Watercolour Triennial (1968) and the Riga Sculpture Quadriennial (1972).

The period covered extends to 1987, the year of the 7th Vilnius Painting Triennial. The article examines the presentation of official Lithuanian art within the context of Baltic art, particularly at the Vilnius Painting Triennials, and the canon of Lithuanian painting. An elite of official painters emerged during this period, and their roles, artistic aspirations, and achievements are discussed.

Among the representatives of official art were talented artists whose overall creative trajectories include works of considerable artistic value. Although the ideology associated with some of these works is unacceptable today, their artistic contribution cannot simply be dismissed. The article draws attention to important works of the second half of the twentieth century that were exhibited at the Vilnius Painting Triennials—works that are significant to the history of Lithuanian painting but received little attention from critics at the time and were largely overlooked in reviews and other critical texts.

Keywords: Vilnius Painting Triennials; Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian painting; progressive artists; the painting canon; socially engaged art.

This article discusses the state of Lithuanian painting, occasionally comparing it with the works and artists of Latvia and Estonia. It also briefly considers figures who have remained largely absent from the established narrative of Soviet-era painting.

The article employs historiographical methods, the history of socially engaged art, and formal analysis, drawing on Aleida Assmann's concepts concerning the transformations between history and memory, collective memory and collective identity,¹ and her theory of the seven "forms of forgetting."² While it is important to acknowledge the full range of experiences of those who lived through the traumatic Soviet era, this study primarily focuses on the following forms: *preservative forgetting* (visiting the archive) as the second form; *selective forgetting* (memory frameworks and their meaning) as the third; *punitive and repressive forgetting* (*damnatio memoriae*) as the fourth; *defensive forgetting* as the fifth; and *constructive forgetting* as the sixth, understood as a *tabula rasa* and a new political or biographical beginning.³

During the interwar period, the only exhibition that featured art from the three Baltic states was the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Paris, where Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia shared a joint pavilion. By contrast, only Lithuania and Estonia participated in the 1939 New York World's Fair, each presenting its national art in a separate pavilion.

The first modernist artists' group, Ars, was established in Kaunas, the temporary capital, in 1932 and remained active until 1935, when its members joined the Lithuanian Artists' Association. Like their Estonian counterparts, Lithuanian artists adopted social themes only selectively, finding Expressionism the most suitable means of articulating their thoughts and emotions. Therefore, the Lithuanian painting tradition initiated by the Ars group and extending into the second half of the twentieth century has generally been associated with emotional intensity, expressive gesture, and

1 Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 49–72.

2 Aleida Assmann, *Užmaršties formos* [Forms of Oblivion], trans. Inga Bartkuvienė (Vilnius: Kultūros barai, 2021), 22–51. Originally published as *Formen des Vergessens* (Wallstein Verlag, 2016.)

3 Assmann, *Užmaršties formos*, 11.

explorations in colour, which functions both as a means of modelling form and as a compositional device. From the perspective of Lithuanian art historians, Latvian painting occupied an intermediate position between the Estonian and Lithuanian traditions.

An exhibition that challenged the “grand” narrative of Latvian art history opened in Riga at the end of 2010 under the title *And Others: Movements, Explorations, and Artists in Latvia 1960–1984*. It featured not only artists well known from the Vilnius Painting Triennials, such as Miervaldis Polis and Liga Purmale, but also figures who had occupied marginal positions in the art world, as well as lesser-known and previously overlooked works. Alongside established names, the exhibition presented works by little-known or completely unknown artists.

The recent exhibition *Unframed: Leis, Tabaka, Rožanskaitė*, skilfully curated by Anu Allas and Laima Kreivytė, offered an interesting cross-section of painting from the three Baltic states. Rather than focusing exclusively—or even primarily—on the three late Soviet Baltic women artists who, although recognised, remain underappreciated—Malle Leis (1940–2017), Maija Tabaka (1939), and Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė (1933–2007)—the exhibition invited reflection on broader themes that had also emerged in the Vilnius Painting Triennials.

Recent scholarship suggests that Estonian art historians are seeking to position Estonian art within the broader history of twentieth-century modernism and the avant-garde, as well as within the artistic developments of the second half of the century, by establishing connection with artistic processes and contexts in countries such as Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Germany. In Lithuania, by contrast, individual foreign artists are typically presented in solo exhibitions, often organised to mark anniversaries, while sustained collaboration with the state art institutions of other countries—with the exception of Poland—remains largely absent.

Several Estonian artists who participated in the Vilnius Painting Triennials were subsequently represented at the São Paulo Biennial, including Jaan Toomik and Leonhard Lapin (1994), and Ando Keskküla (1996). In 1999, Ando Keskküla also represented Estonia at the Venice Biennale

together with Jüri Ojaver and Peeter Pere. In the Lithuanian exhibition landscape, there remains a tendency to privilege the new while paying relatively little attention to reflecting on the past.

The Hopes and Illusions of the Khrushchev Thaw

At the beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw, Lithuania was renowned within the artistic life of the Soviet Union for its achievements in graphic art, stained glass, and sculpture. By contrast, in 1959 and 1960, many prominent Lithuanian artists, especially painters, had not yet succeeded in freeing themselves from the constraints of Stalinist socialist realism, which had long stifled artistic expression.⁴ In 1960, the Russian art historian Svetlana Chervonaya, a specialist in the art of the Baltic countries, and the Estonian critic Boris Bernstein both assessed Lithuanian painting as the weakest among the three states.

The Thaw, which began in the late 1950s, created new opportunities for artists to develop a more individual painting style, allowing them to break more rapidly with the rigid conventions of socialist realism and pursue their own artistic paths. Recent graduates of the Lithuanian SSR State Institute of Art (renamed the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 1990) joined this process, including Silvestras Džiaukštas (1928–2022), Jonas Švažas, Vincentas Gečas (1931–2020), Jonas Čeponis (1926–2003), Aloyzas Stasiulevičius (b. 1931), Leopoldas Surgailis (1928–2016), Augustinas Savickas (1919–2012), together with senior artists and teachers such as Algirdas Petrulis (1915–2010), Leonas Katinas (1927–1984), and Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989). Initially, their approach remained grounded in the Impressionist tradition; as their confidence grew, however, they increasingly explored various forms of Post-Impressionism, particularly Cézannism, as well as Expressionism and the connections between folk art and modernism. These concerns had already been central to the artists of the Ars group (1932–1935), especially to the painter Antanas Gudaitis, one of its principal organisers and leading figures. Widely regarded as one of the most prominent Lithuanian painters and highly respected by both students and

4 In this article, the term *socialist realism* is used to refer to exhibitions held and presented in public spaces during the first postwar decade of the Stalinist era. Beyond this period, the term is applied only to specific ideologically and politically engaged works, predominantly thematic in nature (at that time referred to as “genre” paintings).

colleagues, Gudaitis was nevertheless transferred from the Painting Department to the Textiles Department at the Art Institute in the post-war period. Such reassignments were not exceptional. Several distinguished painters and significant figures in the Lithuanian artistic life were unable to teach in the Painting Department: Leonas Katinas and Algirdas Petrulis taught painting as a secondary subject in the Graphics Department, while others were assigned to the Drawing Department.

During the Khrushchev Thaw, there were hopeful signs that the limits of modernist expression tolerated by the socialist regime might be expanded.⁵ In 1964, the Russian translation of *Le Réalisme qui ignore les frontières*⁶ by the French Marxist philosopher Roger Garaudy (with an introduction by Louis Aragon; the French edition was republished in 1966 under the slightly revised title *Le Réalisme sans frontières*) raised considerable hopes among modernist-oriented artists across the Soviet Union.

As the writer Vytautas Martinkus later recalled, “To call the work of Pablo Picasso, Franz Kafka, and artists close to them ‘realism’ was a heady provocation.”⁷ Indeed, Garaudy’s attempt to broaden the concept of realism—forcing Cubism, Abstraction, Surrealism, and other modernist movements into the narrow Procrustean bed of socialist aesthetics—was a bold intellectual gesture. It came from a philosopher regarded as a reliable Marxist-Leninist scholar not only in France but, more importantly, in the Soviet Union. Garaudy also wrote on Marxist humanism and the question of freedom. His *Marxist Humanism: Five Polemical Essays* was published in Lithuanian translation in 1961,⁸ following its appearance in France in 1957.⁹ Thus, the beginning of the Thaw coincided with the growing availability of translations of contemporary French Marxist thought.

5 Vytautas Martinkus, “Keli žodžiai jaunojo Icchoko Mero portretui” [“A Few Words on the Portrait of the Young Icchok Mer”], *Metai*, no. 12 (2004), accessed 19 December 2021, www.zurnalasmetai.lt/?p=389.

6 Roger Garaudy, *D'un réalisme sans rivages: Picasso, Saint-John Perse, Kafka* (Paris: Plon, 1963).

7 Martinkus, “Keli žodžiai jaunojo Icchoko Mero portretui.”

8 Roger Garaudy, *Marksinis humanizmas: penkios poleminių apybraižos* [Marxist Humanism: Five Polemical Essays], trans. J. Montrimas (Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1961). Originally published as *Humanisme marxiste: cinq essais polémiques* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1957).

9 Garaudy, *Humanisme marxiste*.

The artist Vytautas Valius recalled the artistic climate of the early Thaw:

I remember a painful letter from Balys Sruoga¹⁰ to Petras Cvirka¹¹ and Albert Camus' speech on receiving the Nobel Prize.¹² At the time, these profoundly meaningful texts became, for us young people, something like an imperative—to endure, to persist in the face of absurdity, to resist dehumanisation with dignity.¹³

Foreign artists and architects were generally accepted in the Soviet Union only if they belonged to the Communist Party. The architect Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012), for example, was a member of the Brazilian Communist Party, and his work was therefore presented without criticism: although modernist, it was regarded as progressive.¹⁴ The Soviet authorities waged an ideological campaign against Cubism and Surrealism, yet in 1956, a solo exhibition of Pablo Picasso's work was held in Moscow. Picasso, a native of Catalonia, had been a member of the French Communist Party since 1944 and was one of the principal supporters of its newspaper, *L'Humanité*. Although Cubism and Surrealism were generally condemned, the Cubist and Surrealist works of progressive artists posed no ideological difficulty, provided they were not explicitly described in those terms. Allies belonged to the "left," while those beyond the Soviet sphere were assigned to the "right." This distinction shaped not only political discourse but also the interpretation of artistic practice.

- 10 Balys Sruoga (1896–1947) was a renowned Lithuanian poet, playwright, literary and theatre critic, and translator. He completed his studies in Munich, earning a doctorate in philosophy in 1924. From 1943 to 1945, he was imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp. He later served as a professor at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas and Vilnius University.
- 11 Petras Cvirka (1909–1947) was a prominent Lithuanian writer. Following the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940, he joined the Communist Party, became a deputy of the puppet People's Seimas, and participated in the Sovietisation of Lithuania.
- 12 In December 1957, it was claimed that Camus should accept this great honour "at a time when other European writers—not only the great ones—are forced to remain silent, while their native lands are ravaged without mercy."
- 13 Vytautas Valius, quoted in Vladas Žukauskas, *Jonas Švažas atsiminimuose* [Jonas Švažas in Memoirs] (Vilnius: Vilnius University Press, 2003), 153.
- 14 The terms "progressive" artist and "progressive" art—outdated and historically imprecise—are used in this article to indicate that an artist's work was approved by Soviet cultural ideologues.

In 1961, an exhibition of works by Renato Guttuso was organised in the Soviet Union, followed in 1963 by a retrospective of the French artist Fernand Léger. The work of these modernist artists was not merely tolerated but actively promoted. Soviet ideologues seized every opportunity to champion the French painter André Fougeron (1913–1998), who had been a member of the French Communist Party since 1939 and served as one of its leading artistic representatives, alongside Boris Taslitzky. Louis Aragon, a frequent critic of abstractionism, regularly contributed catalogue texts for Fougeron's exhibitions. Internationally, Fougeron's work was associated with *Nouveau Réalisme*, whereas in the Soviet Union he was presented *simply* as a realist and as a prominent representative of the global network of "progressive" artists. His later work, however, attracted little attention, as he increasingly drew on Hyperrealism and comics, incorporated photographic techniques and—most importantly—shifted his focus away from political engagement towards broader forms of social engagement.¹⁵ Today, his large-scale multiframe canvases have gained scholarly interest, and his work is represented in the permanent collections of Tate Modern, London.

Renato Guttuso (1911–1987), whose articles, monographs, and exhibition catalogues were published in the Soviet Union, called for resistance to what he described as the "dictatorship of abstractionism." The paintings and drawings of this Sicilian Expressionist were presented in Soviet criticism as products of Italian Neorealist cinema—a Western cultural phenomenon regarded as "progressive" by the USSR but interpreted as having been shaped primarily by the Russian Soviet avant-garde. The term *Expressionism*, with its associations with German modernism, remained ideologically unacceptable. In 1950, Guttuso was awarded the International Peace Prize in Warsaw, and in 1972 he received the Lenin Peace Prize, one of the Soviet Union's highest honours for those considered loyal to its political course. He was actively involved in politics, standing for election and serving in the Italian Senate. Shortly before his death, however, he converted to Catholicism, shocking many of his party comrades, as he had been known throughout his life as a committed atheist.

15 André Fougeron, "Engagé, peintre: Entretien avec Bruno Gaudichon," *LM Magazine*, www.lm-magazine.com/blog/2014/03/01/entretien-avec-bruno-gaudichon/.

Other exemplary artists, although not members of communist parties, were likewise regarded as progressive and trustworthy. These included the Romanian painter Corneliu Baba (1906–1997), the Lithuanian-born American artist Ben Shahn, and others. The American painter Rockwell Kent (1881–1972), who served as chairman of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship from 1957 to 1971, enjoyed the exceptional privilege of solo exhibitions at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, and museums in Kyiv, Odessa, and Riga in 1957—an opportunity granted to very few “progressive” artists. He was elected an honorary member of the Soviet Union’s Academy of Arts and was awarded the International Peace Prize in 1967.

In the euphemistic vocabulary of Soviet art criticism, terminology itself carried an ideological charge. *Transformation* signified developments acceptable in Soviet culture or among “progressive” Western artists, whereas *deformation* referred to undesirable characteristics associated with the supposedly decadent art of the West. A similar distinction applied to the terms *international* and *cosmopolitan*: the former carried the positive connotations.¹⁶ As the Soviet Union continued to expand its military power, official discourse increasingly revolved around the language of peace. According to the terminology of the time, “peace” primarily signified defence against both imperialist and internal enemies.

In 1967, the art historian and Soviet functionary Lionginas Šepetys published *Modernizmo metmenys* (The Outline of Modernism),¹⁷ in which he became the first to introduce the movements of classical modernism into Lithuanian art-historical discourse. The book was widely read, and fifteen years later, republished in an expanded edition with a revised title that

16 For more, see Heinrihs Strods, “Sovietisation of Latvia 1944–1991,” in *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940–1991*, vol. 14 (2005): 233, https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID151.pdf.

17 Lionginas Šepetys, *Modernizmo metmenys: Tapyba* [The Outline of Modernism: Painting] (Vilnius: Vaga, 1967). Published in a print run of 10,000 copies. Five years later, it appeared in Russian as *Ot zhizni – v nichto: (Modernizm – cho eto takoe?)* [From Life to Nothingness (Modernism—What Is It?)], trans. A. Berman (Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya, 1972).

18 Lionginas Šepetys, *Modernizmo metmenys: Pagrindinių krypčių analizė ir kritika* [The Outline of Modernism: Analysis and Critique of the Main Trends] (Vilnius: Vaga, 1982). This revised and expanded edition, with an index of artists’ names and a Russian language summary, was published in a print run of 20,000 copies.

reflected the ideological demands of the period: *Modernizmo metmenys: pagrindinių krypčių analizė ir kritika* (The Outline of Modernism: Analysis and Critique of the Principal Trends).¹⁸ With the ambivalence characteristic of a Central Committee secretary and art historian, Šepetys presented modernist art in an educational and analytical manner while simultaneously subjecting it to ideological critique. Conversely, when a modernist artist was “reduced to dust,” they were immediately rehabilitated. Šepetys’s work can be read through the concept of *ketman*, as formulated by Czesław Miłosz in relation to Eastern European intellectuals. In this framework, the author skilfully negotiates and manipulates compromises and declarations of outward loyalty. As Miłosz writes, “The official order is to evince the greatest horror of the West. Everything is evil there: [...]. If you hear the name of a Western writer, painter, or composer, you must scoff sarcastically, for to fight against ‘cosmopolitanism’ is one of the basic duties of a citizen.”¹⁹

Miłosz uses the term *ketman* to describe the intellectuals of Eastern and Central Europe in the twentieth century, particularly within the so-called people’s democracies. It denotes a mode of *survival* under conditions of ideological coercion, in which individuals seek to protect themselves within a totalitarian system. Mastery of *ketman*—which may take multiple forms—allows one to conceal intentions, worldview, values, and emotions, not only from ideological adversaries but also from friends and close associates. Various strategies are used for this purpose, including deliberate contradiction, calculated ambiguity, and the use of imprecise syllogisms.

Inspiration from foreign art was considered acceptable only when drawn from “progressive” sources, which is why one of the few areas of Western art history tolerated by Soviet ideologues was Mexican muralism.²⁰ Within the narrow and relatively impoverished field of foreign art discourse in the Soviet Union, it offered a vivid and widely disseminated presentation of non-European art within the socialist realist framework. Lithuanian artists, however, often regarded it with scepticism, whether in its “local”

19 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 43.

20 For more information, see Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė, “Muralistų dailė – egzotiškas sovietmečio dailės inspiracijų šaltinis ir žvalgybininkai: dailininkai ir jų kūrybos tyrinėtojai” [Mural Art—An Exotic Source of Inspiration for Soviet Art and Explorers: Artists and Researchers of Their Work], *Lituanistica* 68, no. 3 (129) (2022): 181–99.

revolutionary variant (i.e., narratives from the Soviet Union) or in its exotic, romanticised interpretations. It was adopted selectively by a small number of individuals—either openly loyal to the Soviet authorities or seeking awards and membership in the Artists’ Association—sometimes because their own work lacked artistic quality. In such cases, adaptation was the most straightforward path. Mexican muralism, in particular, was ideologically and politically convenient, as it aligned with Soviet attempts to “shorten” global art history to revolutionary history, especially the Mexican Revolution.

In the first post-war decade, Western European art critics and curators also emphasised the vitality and dynamism of figurative composition in Mexican art. The triumph of Mexican muralism was consolidated at the 1950 Venice Biennale, when the first prize was awarded to Henri Matisse and the second to David Alfaro Siqueiros. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Western art discourse remained largely focused on figural art and had not yet decisively shifted toward emerging art movements such as abstractionism.

Among the three major muralists—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—the latter acquired particular prominence as the most loyal friend of the Soviet Union, a kind of intelligence operative who carried out some missions that have since been declassified and others that remain unknown. Siqueiros and the art historian Ilya Grigulevich, the leading Soviet scholar of Mexican art, are linked by their shared involvement in intelligence activities.

The Vilnius Painting Triennials and Their Background

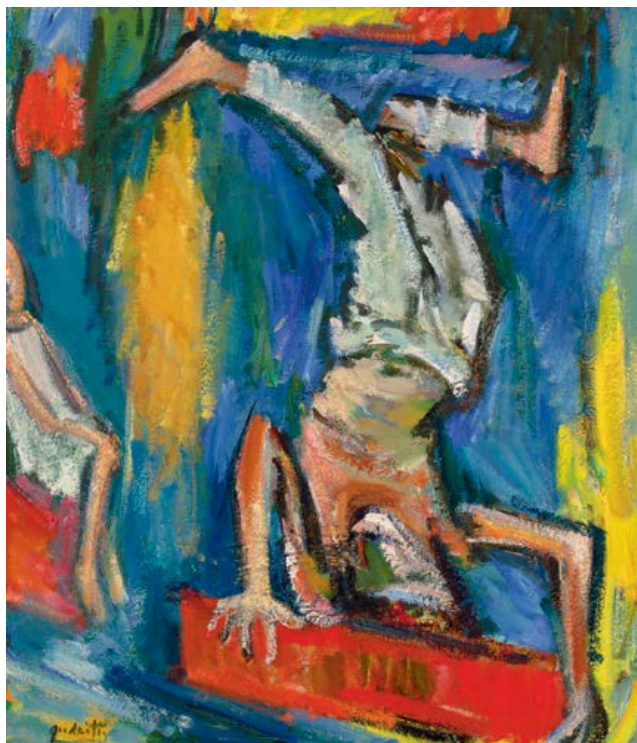
The Vilnius Art Exhibition Hall (architect Vytautas Čekanauskas), completed in 1967, played a decisive role in shaping artistic and exhibition practice in Lithuania. Prior to its construction, art exhibitions in Vilnius were held in the Town Hall, which belonged to the Lithuanian SSR Art Museum (renamed the Art Museum in 1990 and, from 2020, the National Museum of Art of Lithuania). The Town Hall housed a permanent display of visual art, with limited space available for temporary solo exhibitions. The new Exhibition Hall had a direct impact on the scale of painting, a tendency further reinforced by Lithuanian participation in exhibitions in

Moscow (particularly at the Manezh exhibition hall, with its approximately 5,000 square metres of exhibition space, where major Soviet exhibitions were held), Leningrad, and other centres. In such expansive environments, smaller-format Lithuanian works tended to “disappear” visually.

If one were to identify the principal narrative of the period, it would be that of official art, presented in republican exhibitions and, most prominently, in the Vilnius Painting Triennials of the Baltic states. Works of the triennial participants associated with the official artistic establishment can be considered part of the grand narrative of Soviet art, while alternative tendencies formed a series of smaller complementary narratives, including Surrealism,²¹ Op Art, Pop Art,²² Constructivism, and various strands of abstract art. Together, these formed a partial opposition to the official mainstream. Emerging in the post-Khrushchev Thaw period, these tendencies were partially incorporated into the Vilnius Painting Triennials.

In 1969, at the initiative of Jonas Švažas,²³ the Art Exhibition Hall in Vilnius began hosting a triennial exhibition of painting from Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, known as the Vilnius Painting Triennials.²⁴ These events created new, previously unseen opportunities for the display of artworks in a purpose-built modern exhibition space designed by Vytautas Čekanauskas.

- 21 In 2013, the exhibition *Dienos svajos, nakties košmarai* [Daydreams, Nightmares], curated by Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė, was held at the Titanikas Exhibition Halls of the Vilnius Academy of Arts. No catalogue was published.
- 22 Sirje Helme. *Popkunst Forever. Eesti popkunst 1960. Ja 1970 aastate vahetusel* [Pop Art Forever. Estonian Pop Art at the Turn of the 1960s and 1970s] (Tallinn: Estonian Art Museum, Kumu, 2010). An exhibition catalogue devoted to Lithuanian graphic art was later published: Deima Žuklytė-Gasperaitienė, *Hei, poparte! Lietuvos grafikų kūryba XX a. 7–8 dešimtmečiais* [Hey, Pop Art! Lithuanian Graphic Art in the 1960s and 1970s] (Vilnius: Grafikos meno centras, 2020).
- 23 From 1963 to 1969 and again from 1973 to 1974, he served as chair of the Painting Section of the Lithuanian Artists' Association. He also taught in the Department of Art Education at the Lithuanian State Art Institute.
- 24 According to the website of the Vilnius Painting Triennials created by the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius, the history of the triennials began in 1979. At that time, alongside the Vilnius Painting Triennials, Young Artists' Painting Triennials also emerged, including those of the Baltic states. These exhibitions were presented as more modern and innovative. Art critic Ramina Jurėnaitė, who served on the organising committee, convinced her younger colleagues that this approach was “better.” At the same time, she downplayed painter Jonas Švažas's contribution as the organiser of the Vilnius Painting Triennials and advanced her own interpretation. Yet, viewed in the broader context of the Soviet cultural system, both the Young Artists' Painting Triennials and the Vilnius Painting Triennials were subject to the same mechanisms of ideological oversight and censorship.



1. Antanas Gudaitis
(1904–1989), *The Acrobat*,
1973, oil on cardboard,
Lithuanian National
Museum of Art T-6411,
LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Antanas Gudaitis
(1904–1989), *Akrobatas*,
1973, kartonas, aliejus,
Lietuvos nacionalinis
dailės muziejus, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026

The organising committee of the first triennial consisted of twelve painters out of the total of thirteen members, together with the director of the Art Museum, Pranas Gudynas. The vice-rector of the Art Institute, Vincentas Gečas, had already been awarded the title of People's Artist of the Lithuanian SSR, while Antanas Gudaitis [Fig. 1] held the title of Merited Artist of the Lithuanian SSR. The exhibition thus appears to have been fundamentally structured as a painters' exhibition; accordingly, members of the Lithuanian Artists' Association's Painting Section played a decisive role in shaping the Lithuanian contribution: there were ten artists each from Latvia and Estonia, compared to eighteen from the host country.

The works of Estonian art critic Malle Leis (1940–2017), who had trained as a stage designer and worked in television, made a strong impression. Her vividly coloured, decorative canvases depicting flowers, fruit, vegetables, and women exemplified what might be described as “genre

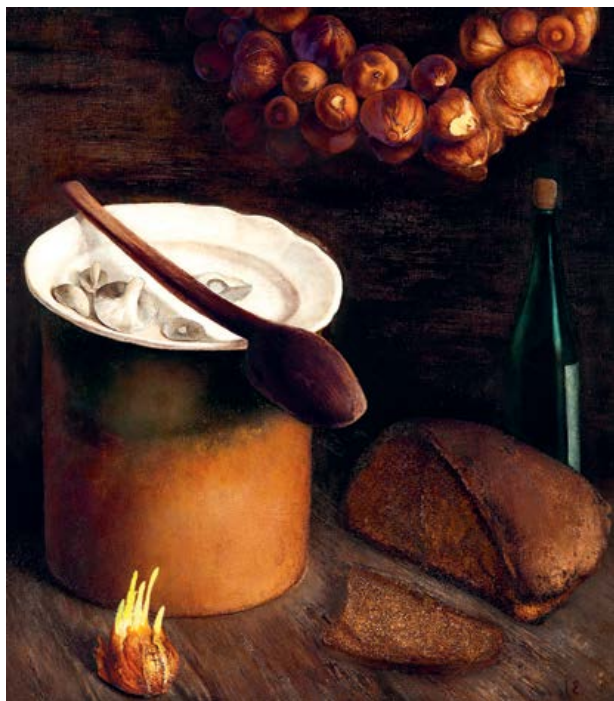


2. Biruta Baumanė (1922–2017), *Three Generations of Fishermen*, 1976, oil on canvas, 101 × 101. Latvian National Museum of Art VMM AG-964, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Biruta Baumanė (1922–2017), *Trys žvejų kartos*, 1976, drobė, aliejus, 101 × 101, Latvijos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

impurity.” At the time when the Vilnius Painting Triennials were first being organised, such tendencies were not yet associated with Surrealism. Works such as *Portrait of Kersti Kreismann* (1978), like many of Leis’s compositions, depict unusual situations, “discrepancies” between real and depicted scale, and scenes that resist straightforward description.

The paintings of Olev Subbi (1930–2013) were closely observed and widely admired. Focusing exclusively on painting and working primarily in tempera, he distinctively combined the genres of the nude, still life, interior, and landscape. Works such as *Nude in a Blue Interior* (1968) and *Pentaptych* (1967) exemplify this approach. The era of genre hybridity was only just beginning, and it proved stimulating to Lithuanian painters. Subbi’s unusually spacious yet intimate environments, populated by female nudes, suggest mysterious personal experiences and narratives. He was awarded first prize at the Vilnius Painting Triennial in 1969. Lithuanian painting at the time also registered one of the earliest depictions of figures not engaged in industrial or collective farm labour, in Silvestras Džiaukštas’s *Rest* (1967).



3. Līvija Endzelina (1927–2008), *Still Life with Bread and Onions*, 1973, oil on canvas, 81 × 73.5, Latvian National Museum of Art VMM AG-3051, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Līvija Endzelina (1927–2008), *Natiurmortas su duona ir svogūnais*, 1973, drobė, aliejus, 81 × 73,5, Latvijos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026



4. Džemma Skulme (1925–2019), *Folk Song*, 1969, oil on canvas, 120 × 149, Latvian National Museum of Art VMM AG-2399, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Džemma Skulme (1925–2019), *Liaudies daina*, 1969, drobė, aliejus, 120 × 149, Latvijos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

The Latvian section attracted attention with the large-scale works of Biruta Baumane (1922–2017) [Fig. 2], Līvija Endzelīna (1927–2008) [Fig. 3], and Džemma Skulme (1925–2019, including *Folk Song* [Fig. 4].

In the Lithuanian section, alongside a reverential nod to Soviet history, were Vytautas Mackevičius's *Revolutionary Vilnius* (1967) and Vincencas Gečas's formally accomplished *Passions* (1969), executed using photographic techniques. Portraits by Antanas Martinaitis, Valerija Ostrauskienė, and Leonardas Gutauskas also played a prominent role. The latter two, in particular, remained outside the canon of Lithuanian painting: Gutauskas's portraits, characterised by pulsating, graphic, and highly stylised ornamental linework, included depictions of the poet Sigitas Geda, his wife, and Ūla. Ostrauskienė's paintings were more symbolic in nature, marked by traces of Surrealism. In subsequent triennials, as the representational image of painting became increasingly "purified," the works of these painters were rarely included.

The catalogue of the second Vilnius Painting Triennial carried the motto "Fiftieth Anniversary of the USSR." The organising committee was no longer composed of members of the Painting Section but instead drawn from the board of the Lithuanian Artists' Association, indicating that the event had become a matter for the Association as a whole rather than for the single Painting Section. The committee comprised fifteen members: the chairman of the Lithuanian Artists' Association and graphic artist Jonas Kuzminskis; his deputies, painters Vincencas Gečas and Stasys Jusionis; the Party organisation secretary and ceramist Algirdas Laucius, and two painters without formal positions in the Association, Sofija Veiverytė [Fig. 5] and Antanas Gudaitis. Representatives from Estonia and Latvia were also present, unlike at the first triennial: Olav Maran, chairman of the Estonian Artists' Association Painting Section, and Indulis Zariņš, chairman of the Latvian Artists' Association Painting Section. Pranas Gudynas represented the Art Museum, to which the Vilnius Art Exhibition Hall was subordinate; notably, he also held a second role as executive secretary of the Lithuanian Artists' Association.

Once again, ten painters from each Latvia and Estonia participated, alongside a Lithuanian delegation twice as large. Of the twenty Lithuanian



5. Sofija Veiverytė
(1926–2009),
Portraits of Painters,
1985, oil on canvas,
200 × 219, Lithuanian
National Museum of
Art T-7497, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026

Sofija Veiverytė
(1926–2009),
Tapytojų portretai,
1985, drobė, aliejus,
200 × 219, Lietuvos
nacionalinis dailės
muziejus, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026

participants, six were involved in organisational work, five served on the jury, and the painter Bronius Uogintas acted as the catalogue editor. Alongside Romualdas Paškevičius's opportunistic canvases, several of the accomplished painters from the first triennial—such as Martinaitis and Cipijauskas—reappeared, while Vincas Kisarauskas made his debut.

Silvestras Džiaukštas exhibited a series of sombre works addressing the theme of war, including *War Refugees* (1970), *Arsonists* (1971), and *Destroyed Culture* (1969). These paintings contain no ideological markers; instead, they are characterised by generalisation, in which the distinction between the “Reds” and their adversaries is dissolved, and the figures assume abstract forms. Although most of Džiaukštas's paintings on themes of the “revolutionary past” and “post-war class struggle,” where roles are clearly assigned to opponents and victors, entered the collections of the Lithuanian Art Museum, his paintings depicting the “consequences and effects of war” were less readily acquired. Works such as *The Fallen God of War* (1968–1971), *Prostheses (Striptease)* and *Air Pirate* (both 1970), *The Angel of War* (1970–1972), *Aggression*, and *Vampire* (both 1972) were acquired



6, 7. Vincentas Gečas
(1931–2020), *Art
and Events. I, II*, 1972,
oil on canvas, 195 ×
175, Private property,
LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Vincentas Gečas
(1931–2020),
Menas ir įvykiai I, II,
1972, drobė, aliejus,
195 × 175, privati
nuosavybė, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026



8. Edvards Grūbe (1935–2022), *Mother*, 1971, oil on canvas, 101 × 66, Latvian National Museum of Art VMM AG-821, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Edvards Grūbe (1935–2022), *Motina*, 1971, drobė, aliejus, 101 × 66, Latvijos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

by private collectors only relatively recently, following Džiaukštas's solo exhibition at a private gallery.

Lithuanian artists nevertheless identified the narrowly circumscribed space in which it was possible to depict bodies ravaged by war—works that justified a turn towards transformation and even deformation of form. This tendency can be observed in Leopoldas Sargailis's *War Angel* and Šarūnas Sauka's diploma work *Hiroshima* (1982).

The Lithuanian Art Museum did not acquire Vicentas Gečas's *Art and Events* (1972) [Figs. 6, 7], a large-scale diptych offering a symbolic portrayal of American life, including scenes of protest against the Vietnam War. While certain elements of its critique of capitalism may appear overstated, the work is filled with complex subtexts and symbolism. At the Second Vilnius Painting Triennial, Gečas was awarded the Ministry of Culture Prize and attracted significant attention from art critics.



9. Olev Subbi (1930–2013), *Town on a River*, 1974, empera and oil on cardboard,, 122 × 155, Art Museum of Estonia M 5189

Olev Subbi (1930–2013), *Miestas prie upės*, 1974, kartonas, tempera, aliejus, 122 × 155, Estijos dailės muziejus

In the Latvian section, one can observe Nikolajs Kormašovs's subtle manipulation of the number of works exhibited, a strategy also discernible among Lithuanian and Estonian artists. While most participants presented three paintings, Ojārs Ābols showed five, including the triptych *To the Victims of War*. Biruta Baumanė, Džemma Skulme, and Edvards Grūbe [Fig. 8] occupied a prominent position among the Latvian artists, employing thickly applied ochre tones and strongly abstracted forms, which Lithuanian critics perceived as especially close to the Lithuanian tradition. Baumanė's paintings are dominated by semi-dry brushwork, as though executed with a limited supply of paint—an economical, sketch-like manner that demonstrates undeniable mastery. Her scenes of everyday life—festivities, musicians, ballet (her long-standing aspiration), and circus performances in the small towns of Kurzeme—stood out for their thematic focus. She had already appeared in the first exhibition of young artists in Riga in

1956, signalling the arrival of a new generation that embraced the ideas of the Khrushchev Thaw. The permanent collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art today includes her group portrait of artists from 1969, depicting Boriss Bērziņš (1930–2002), Aleksandrs Stankēvičs (1932–2015), Vilis Ozols (1929–2014), and Gunārs Cīlītis (1927–2007). The painting still retains a certain austerity and rigidity associated with a strict style, particularly evident in the painter's self-portrait.

In the Estonian section, Olev Subbi's wall-less interiors again attracted attention—open to air, nature, and wind: *Summer Interior*, *Autumn Interior* (both 1970), and *Girl in a Chair* (1971). These works are notable for their modernity and their articulation of the environment of the contemporary subject [Fig. 9].

Ludmilla Siim's (b. 1938) portrait of Mati Unt (1975) appears to move in a stylistic direction parallel to portraits by the Lithuanian painter Vytautas Ciplijauskas: relatively sombre, realistic, and expressive. However, whereas Ciplijauskas tended towards a neo-classical idiom, Siim's approach represented the modernisation of portraiture. Equally striking at the time was Siim's *Portrait of Andres Tolts* (1971), distinguished by its vivid colours and design-oriented composition, in which fashionably dressed figures and contemporary objects play a central role.

At the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, Estonian painters Kristiina Kaasik, Jüri Palm [Fig. 10], Tiit Pääsuke, Ludmilla Siim, Olga Terri, and others turned their attention to the environment as a subject of artistic inquiry.²⁵ Their works were selected for the exhibition *Art in the Age of the Anthropocene*, which was recognised as the best art exhibition of the year at the Estonian Museums Annual Competition. The exhibition brought together young artists whose work addressed the environmental crisis and its modes of representation. This ecocritical perspective, with its shifting approach to the environment, also included established painters of the older generation who had participated in the Vilnius Painting Triennials. Already in the late Soviet period, these artists were looking beyond conventional genres, painting not only landscapes, exteriors, or interiors, but also the environment as an all-encompassing whole.

25 *Art in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2023), curated by Linda Kaljundi, Eha Komissarov, Ulrike Plath, Bart Pushaw, and Tiiu Saadoja. See <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/art-in-the-age-of-the-anthropocene/>.



10. Jüri Palm (1937–2002),
Grand Still Life No 1, 1976,
mixed media on canvas,
75.2 × 75.2, Art Museum of
Estonia M 5142

Jüri Palm (1937–2002),
Didysis natūrmortas Nr. 1,
1976, drobė, mišri technika,
75,2 × 75,2 Estijos dailės
muziejus

Scenes of space exploration, so relevant in the 1960s and 1970s, appeared in Miko Leppo's (1911–1978) *Man and Space* (1971). At the first Vilnius Painting Triennial, Igoris Piekuras exhibited *Cosmonauts*. While *Girls* (1972) by Enn Põldroos (1933–2025)²⁶ offered a comparatively conventional treatment of the subject, his *Three Boys* (1971), depicting Soviet-era superheroes in spacesuits and cosmic gear contemplating a small female nude seen from behind, was a remarkably bold artistic statement for its time.

Less than a year after the Second Vilnius Painting Triennial, an exhibition of Baltic art was organised in Moscow in 1973. It featured the expressive and visually powerful works of Džemma Skulme and Maja Tabaka [Fig.11]. Many of the works shown at the Second Vilnius Painting Triennial were subsequently selected for display in Moscow. During this period, Aili Vint (b. 1941), Toomas Vint (b. 1944), and Lembit Sarapuu (b. 1930) increasingly turned towards primitivism. According to Anders Härm, the curator of the exhibition, Sarapuu was associated exclusively with naïve art during the 1960s and 1970s, and only later came to be linked with

26 A retrospective exhibition at the Kumu Museum demonstrated the versatility of the Estonian painter's artistic practice: *Enn Põldroos: Museum of Obsessions*, curated by Anders Härm.



11. Maija Nora Tabaka,
(b. 1939), *Dance Ensemble
Daile*, 1973, oil on canvas,
195 × 175, Latvian
National Museum of
Art VMM AG-843, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026

Maija Nora Tabaka
(g. 1939), *Šokių ansamblis
„Dailė“*, 1973, drobė,
aliejus, 195 × 175, Latvijos
nacionalinis dailės muziejus,
LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Transavantgarde and postmodernism. His nudes and mythological scenes are imbued with sexuality, brutality, grotesque imagery, allegory, and irony.²⁷ At the Vilnius Painting Triennials, however, he exhibited only small-scale portraits, a genre that in Lithuania was associated with amateur and folk painting rather than with professional artistic practice.

The Vilnius Painting Triennials were prepared with considerable care. Rather than relying on standard exhibition notices, each triennial was accompanied by specially commissioned artistic posters designed by Juozas Galkus, Mikalojus Vilutis, and others. Medals were also produced for each edition, with designs by Gediminas Karalius, Stanislovas Kuzma, Kęstutis Musteikis, and other artists. The exhibition design for the Third Vilnius Painting Triennial was created by the architect Valentinas Vizgirda.

The introduction to the catalogue of the Third Vilnius Painting Triennial adopts the triumphalist rhetoric, celebrating the completion of the Ninth Five-Year Plan and the forthcoming Twenty-Fifth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Lithuanian representation comprised twenty-three painters, while the number of Estonian and

27 From curator Anders Härm's wall text in Lembit Sarapuu's solo exhibition *Reality and Actuality*, Kumu Museum, Tallinn, 29 April–18 September 2022.



12. Jüri Arrak (1936–2022), *Circus*, 1977, oil on canvas, 140 × 200, Art Museum of Estonia M 51422, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Jüri Arrak (1936–2022), *Cirkas*, 1977, drobē, alieļus, 140 × 200, Estijos dailēs muzieļus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Latvian participants increased from ten to fifteen. The organising committee brought together the chairmen of the Painting Sections of the respective Artists' Associations: Olev Subbi (Estonia), Edvards Grūbe (Latvia), and Aloyzas Stasiulevičius (Lithuania).

The Fourth Vilnius Painting Triennial, held in 1981, demonstrated the extent to which artistic production in Lithuania had become subject to censorship. In an attempt to ensure that the exhibition appeared sufficiently "serious," the organisers postponed its opening while waiting for Vincentas Gečas, Augustinas Savickas, and Sofija Veiverytė to complete works that had not yet been submitted to the jury. Meanwhile, paintings from Estonia and Latvia had already arrived and remained in storage at the Vilnius Art Exhibition Hall. As a result, the triennial was delayed by almost eight months. The Estonian Jüri Arrak remarked at the opening: "If the engine breaks down in Lithuania, why does the whole Baltic region feel it ...?"²⁸ [Fig. 12].



13. Ludmilla Siim (b. 1938),
Portrait of Jaak Kangilaski,
1973, oil on canvas,
130.5 × 153.3, Art Museum
of Estonia M 4971, LATGA,
Vilnius 2026

Ludmilla Siim (g. 1938),
Jaako Kangilaskio portretas,
1973, drobė, aliejus,
130,5 × 153,3, Estijos dailės
muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius
2026

In 2024, marking the centenary of Surrealism, the Estonian National Museum in Tartu presented the exhibition *Surrealism 100: Prague, Tartu, and Other Stories*, organised in collaboration with the National Gallery in Prague. The inclusion of works previously shown in the Vilnius Painting Triennials was revealing, even though there had been relatively little engagement with Surrealism and the surreal in Lithuania. In the Estonian display, Jüri Palm's (1937–2002) *Transparent Woman* (1979; Tartu Art Museum) and Tiit Pääsuke's (b. 1941) *Woman on a Balcony* (1971; Art Museum of Estonia), Tiit Pääsuke's *Still Life with Colours* (1978; Tartu Art Museum), and Ludmilla Siim's (b. 1938) *Portrait of Jaak Kangilaski* (1973; Art Museum of Estonia)²⁹ [Fig. 13] were associated primarily with Photographic Realism, objectivity, and Pop Art, largely bypassing the influence of Surrealism, although from today's perspective that influence appears unmistakable. Recontextualising works produced during the Soviet era and originally exhibited at the Vilnius Painting Triennials offers new possibilities for interpretation. In terms of Aleida Assmann's sixth form of forgetting,³⁰ such recontextualisation enables a constructive forgetting of established frameworks and makes it possible to create a new beginning.

29 "Surrealism 100: Prague, Tartu, and Other Stories," <https://tartmus.ee/en/surrealism-100/>.

30 Assmann, *Užmaršties formos*, 43–47.

Conclusions

The first half of the 1960s marked a turning point in Lithuanian painting. Once again, Lithuanian artists found themselves in a position remarkably similar to that of the members of the Ars group in 1932. Rather than rejecting the living tradition of Lithuanian folk art outright, they gradually turned away from it in search of alternative artistic traditions and new sources of inspiration.

For many years, the Lithuanian art world upheld the belief that an artist who approached painting through rational observation and intellectual reflection was *not a true artist*. The dominant ideal was that of the Expressionist painter: driven by an initial creative impulse and working spontaneously and impulsively, so that both the process and its outcome remained partially unpredictable. Without the display—whether genuine or ostensible—of artistic temperament, one could scarcely be regarded as an authentic painter. Conversely, when painting resembled a disciplined studio work grounded in knowledge and expertise, it was often dismissed as insufficiently artistic. Only in the initial stages of the creative process, through drawing techniques, rational and intellectually structured composition, and painting methods, could the work gradually approach its intended form, yet at that stage it was not considered artistic. Works developed through gradual refinement rather than sudden inspiration frequently provoked mistrust among both painters and critics, who doubted that such a process could produce genuinely significant art.

Although the Khrushchev Thaw had come and gone, Lithuanian painting in the mid-1960s remained firmly rooted in what had effectively become the dominant artistic tradition established by the Ars painter Antanas Gudaitis. This orientation persisted as the colourist movement—including Jonas Švažas, Leopoldas Surgailis, Jonas Čeponis, and others—became established, continuing through the “Group of Four” and, a decade later, the “Group of Five.” It was only during the first decade following the restoration of independence that Lithuanian painting began to move beyond the dominance of the Gudaitis tradition. What had been a vital and innovative artistic language in the 1930s gradually became, after the Thaw, a



14. Algimantas Švėgžda (1941–1996), *A Green Box*, 1979, oil on cardboard, 90 × 122, Lithuanian National Museum of Art T-6127, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Algimantas Švėgžda (1941–1996), *Žalia dėžė*, 1979, kartonas, aliejus, 90 × 122, Lietuvos nacionalinis dailės muziejus, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

rigid system that shaped Lithuanian painting for several decades. It remains an indispensable framework for understanding the development of Lithuanian painting; yet its prolonged dominance also narrowed the range of artistic possibilities, encouraging some artists to pursue formalist explorations, even when these yielded important artistic discoveries. Painters associated with the Gudaitis school worked with broad, expressive brushstrokes and large hog-bristle brushes. Using fine sable brushes, painting without brushstrokes, favouring smooth surfaces and restrained colour contrasts was considered incompatible not only with painting itself but, more specifically, with Lithuanian painting. As a result, the history of Lithuanian painting has often been constructed as a sequence of distinguished individual artistic biographies, each interpreted through the same Gudaitis-centred understanding of tradition. In this context, formal qualities came to be valued above all as the decisive alternative to mimetic representation.



15. Peeter Mudist (b. 1942), *Work and Pleasure*, 1974, oil on canvas, 144.5 × 115.5, Art Museum of Estonia M 5016

Peeter Mudist (g. 1942), *Darbas ir malonumas*, 1974, drobė, aliejus, 144,5 × 115,5, Estijos dailės muziejus

Today, increasing attention is being paid to artists who pursued independent artistic paths, including Kazė Zimblytė, Eugenijus Antanas Cukermanas, Juzefa Čeičytė, Linas Leonas Katinas, Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė, Igoris Piekuras, Algimantas Švėgžda [Fig. 14], Juozas Algirdas Pilipavičius, and others. Antanas Gudaitis and the remarkable painters associated with his school of painting left an immense legacy, yet that tradition was also expanded by members of the “Group of Four,” the “Group of Five,” and subsequent generations of artists. Algimantas Švėgžda’s early work, for example, was characterised by compelling painterly experiments inspired by broader shifts in worldview and artistic sensibility. Equally significant was the transformation of subject matter, since revising—and ultimately transcending—the Lithuanian painting canon also depended on the renewal of its iconographic programme. The 1960s and 1970s may therefore be regarded as a “golden age” not of Lithuanian painting as a whole, but of the painting tradition established by Gudaitis.

For art historians with three or more decades of professional experience and living memory, the canvases of Estonian artists long admired by many Lithuanian professionals still stand out, particularly those of Peeter Mudist [Fig. 15], Olev Subbi, and Jüri Arrak, as well as the works of Latvian artists Edvards Grūbe, Džemma Skulme, and others. At the same time, we are increasingly coming to appreciate the creative ideas of other painters whose stylistic and iconographic innovations have left such a lasting impression. We are also beginning to see the paintings of Maja Tabaka and other artists from the neighbouring Baltic countries in a new light.

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Santrauka

Ar tikrai XX a. 7 ir 8 dešimtmečiai buvo Lietuvos tapybos aukso amžius?

Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Vilniaus tapybos trienalės, Lietuvos, Latvijos ir Estijos tapyba, progresyvieji dailininkai, tapybos kanonas, socialiai angažuota dailė.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama lietuvių tapyba nuo 1965 m., kai Maskvoje buvo surengta Baltijos šalių dailės paroda, kuri, ko gero, įžiebė idėją rengti bendras Estijos, Latvijos ir Lietuvos parodas be Maskvos. Estijoje tai padėjo atsirasti Talino grafikos trienalei (1968), Lietuvoje – Vilniaus tapybos trienalei (1969), o Latvijoje – Baltijos šalių akvarelės trienalei (1968) ir Rygos skulptūros kvadrienalei (1972).

Lietuvių tapybos tyrimo laikotarpis yra iki 1987 m., kai įvyko 7-oji Vilniaus tapybos trienalė. Tyrinėjamas Lietuvos oficialiosios dailės pristatymas Baltijos šalių, t. y. Vilniaus tapybos trienalų ir Lietuvos tapybos kanono, kontekste. Šiuo laikotarpiu susiformavo oficialiosios tapybos elitas, kurio vaidmuo, kūrybiniai siekiai ir rezultatai aptariami straipsnyje. Tarp pastarosios dailės atstovų buvo talentingų tapytojų, o bendrose jų kūrybos trajektorijose yra meniškai sėkmingų kūrinių, nepaisant jų nepriimtinos ideologijos. Straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į tapybos istorijai svarbius XX a. antros pusės dailės kūrinius, eksponuotus Vilniaus tapybos trienalėse, tačiau beveik nepatraukusius tuomečių kritikų dėmesio, išsprūdusius iš recenzijų ir kitų tekstų.