

Research on Art Nouveau Architecture in Riga in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: History and New Approaches

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Riga's Art Nouveau architecture has been extensively explored in Latvian art-historical literature. By the late twentieth century, a certain canon had emerged in the interpretation of the subject, shaped by the research, publications, and authority of Jānis Krastiņš. However, the early twenty-first century has introduced new aspects and additions in terms of terminology, contextual understanding, factual material, and interpretation.

In recent years, the digitisation of periodicals by the National Library of Latvia has significantly expanded the available body of factual information. Knowledge derived from the periodical press has been further enriched by archival research, including studies by younger art historians. Contributions from scholars not only in Latvia but also from Lithuania (Dalia Klajumienė), Estonia (Karin Hallas), and the United Kingdom (Jeremy Howard) have greatly enhanced this field. The perspective of Eduards Kļaviņš serves as an intriguing and complementary element in the interpretation of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture.

Keywords: Riga, Art Nouveau, architecture, publications.

This article presents a historiographical overview of the study of architecture around the turn of the twentieth century in Latvian art history and outlines possible directions for future research.

The period around the turn of the twentieth century—the age of Art Nouveau, Neo-Romanticism, and Symbolism—has left a rich legacy in Latvian literature, painting, music, and, above all, architecture. It was during this period that Latvian national culture emerged and experienced its first major flourishing despite difficult socio-political conditions.

Art Nouveau reached Riga shortly before 1900, at a time when the city was undergoing rapid growth and developing into a metropolis within what was then the Russian Empire. This expansion, marked by social and political contrasts, was reflected in accelerated industrialisation, the development of prestigious urban districts, and the urbanisation of peripheral areas alongside the growth of working-class neighbourhoods. Although a variety of public buildings were erected, the apartment block remained the dominant architectural type. In art history, Art Nouveau is distinguished by its realignment of the traditional hierarchy of art forms, granting unprecedented prominence to the decorative arts. Although Historicism retained its importance in Riga until the very end of the period, when interest in the Classical artistic heritage revived, the years from 1898 to 1914 may be described as the city's Art Nouveau period.

Within the urban fabric of every city, historic architecture and buildings provide a distinctive character and embody its cultural and historical significance. Riga's Art Nouveau architecture has been examined in numerous publications since the second half of the twentieth century and is today recognised internationally as a significant cultural asset. Since 1997, the historic centre of Riga, with its well-preserved medieval and later urban structure, nineteenth-century wooden architecture, and remarkable concentration of Art Nouveau buildings, has been included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Significant architecture dating from the turn of the twentieth century is also found beyond the boundaries of the city's historic centre, throughout Riga's former suburbs. However, the significance and uniqueness of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture within the broader context

of European art derives not merely from the quantity of surviving buildings but from the diversity and high architectural quality of their exterior decoration. Architects and designers engaged with a wide spectrum of stylistic currents—including diverse variants of Historicism and Art Nouveau, Nordic National Romanticism, Heimatstil, and Neo-Classicism—and combined these influences while avoiding stylistic extremes.

In Latvian art history, Riga's architecture of the Art Nouveau period is among the most extensively studied subjects, and new research continues to emerge. To understand the current state of scholarship, it is useful to return to the period in which this heritage was created. Contemporary intellectuals and architects initially received the new style with caution. Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), the most prominent art historian in Latvia at the turn of the twentieth century, who later became an architect and director of the Riga City Art Museum, devoted most of his scholarly attention to monuments of earlier periods. Nevertheless, he also considered contemporary artists, bringing together his principal observations in the “biographical sketches” of his 1902 volume *Baltic Painters and Sculptors of the Nineteenth Century*.¹ This work remains one of the most important sources of information on Baltic German artists. In the field of the history of architecture, one of the most important early twentieth-century contributions was the publication *Riga and Its Buildings*, issued jointly by the Riga Technical Society and the Riga Society of Architects, which presents typologically grouped descriptions and illustrations of important sites. Several years later, the Riga Society of Architects began publishing the periodical *Yearbook of Baltic Art* (literally, *Yearbook of Fine Art of the Baltic Provinces*, 1907–1913).² The journal featured designs of important buildings, illustrations of completed structures, results of architectural competitions, and historical studies. It also reproduced numerous works of fine art and applied art, many of which have acquired unique significance in cases where the original objects have not survived. This publication constitutes one of the principal sources of visual information. As Eduards Kļaviņš has observed, one of its most important characteristics was its inclusive editorial policy: artists were not selected on the basis of ethnic background or

1 Wilhelm Neumann, ed., *Baltische Maler und Bildhauer des XIX. Jahrhunderts* (Riga: A. Grosset, 1902).

2 *Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*, 7 vols. (Riga, 1907–1913).

place of residence; rather, the sole criterion for inclusion was participation in the artistic life of the Baltic region.³

The names of the architects responsible for buildings erected in Riga can generally be established from surviving building records. Much more problematic is the attribution of architectural decoration, since the names of the artisans contributing to its execution do not appear in archival records. Likewise, the names of companies specialising in decorative art or architectural decoration can usually be traced only through address directories, advertisements, announcements, and, to some extent, periodicals of the time, including the local German-, Latvian- and Russian-language press. Most of this material, however, provides only superficial information. References to specific structures are usually limited to the names of the client and the architect, the materials used, and technical costs, while the creators of architectural decoration are mentioned only occasionally. In this context, where the available literature provides only basic information, the series of articles on new buildings in Riga published by Arend von Berkholz (1863–1937) in the 1903–1906 volumes of the yearbook *Rigascher Almanach*⁴ constitutes a particularly valuable source. Along with the names of architects, Berkholz also identifies architectural decoration workshops. He may have been following the model of contemporary German architectural journals, which provided similar information. However, his approach was not entirely consistent: among the forty-three buildings discussed in his publications, the creators of the architectural decoration are identified in only four (!) cases. Another important source is the catalogue of the Grand Industrial and Crafts Exhibition of 1901, held to commemorate Riga's 700th anniversary. These publications, along with contemporary guidebooks to Riga and catalogues, serve mainly as sources of illustrative material, offering an insight into examples of sculpture and painting of the period and proving valuable for stylistic analysis and attribution. The same applies to the small number of surviving catalogues presenting a range of industrially manufactured products.

3 Eduards Kļaviņš, "Foreword," in *Art History of Latvia. Period of Neo-Romanticist Modernism, 1890–1915*, ed. Eduards Kļaviņš (Riga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art; Art History Research Support Foundation, 2014), 14.

4 Arend Berkholz, "Moderne Rigasche Neubauten," in *Rigascher Almanach* (Riga: W. F. Häcker, [1902–1906]), (1903): 131–46; (1904): 151–63; (1905): 137–49; (1906): 120–36.

Periodicals published around the turn of the twentieth century also contain reflections on architecture in the form of essays by architect Eižens Laube (1880–1967), artists Janis Rozentāls (1866–1916), Gustavs Šķilters (1874–1954), and Jūlijs Madernieks (1870–1955), as well as publicists Arend von Berkholz and Jānis Asars (1877–1908).⁵ Issues relating to local Art Nouveau architecture and decorative art occupy only a secondary place in these writings, and their interpretation tends to be fragmentary, empirically based, shaped by personal opinion, and, in most cases, distinctly critical. It should be noted that a similarly sceptical attitude toward Art Nouveau is evident in the handbook of the history of styles by Karl Otto Hartmann, whose Russian translation, published in 1915, was one of the few publications on the subject available in Riga at the time.⁶

In the following decades, the disapproving attitude towards Art Nouveau and its architectural heritage that characterised the broader European context of the 1920s and 1930s was also evident in Latvia. Publications devoted to individual architects often sought either to bypass this period altogether or depict their Art Nouveau works as concessions to the public tastes of the time. However, the professionalisation of art history during the interwar period led to the first systematic, albeit still concise, assessments of turn-of-the-century architecture in Latvia, specifically in Riga. A characteristic example is architect Jānis Rutmanis's (1894–1978) article in the chapter "Latvian Architecture" of the *History of Art* edited by Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945).⁷ Through his critical remarks on Mikhail Eisenstein and "the secessionist modernism that was blazing in the West at the time,"⁸ Rutmanis offered one of the earliest evaluations of Riga's early twentieth-century architecture in Latvian art history. His interpretation was not entirely free from the influence of the official ideology promoted by the authoritarian regime of the time. Rutmanis regarded favourably only the so-called second generation of ethnic Latvian architects, who, in his words, "engaged in a search for marks of national character after the example of the

5 Jānis Asars, "Mākslas amatniecība," *Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts*, no. 7 (1904): 523–31; no. 8: 596–605; no. 9: 689–96.

6 Karl Otto Hartmann, *Stili. Stili ot Renessansa do nashikh dnei*, pt. 2 (Riga: Nauka i zhizn', 1915), 128–41.

7 [Jānis Rutmanis], "Latviešu arhitektūra 19. un 20. gs.," in *Mākslas vēsture*, vol. 1, eds. Vilhelms Purvītis and Valdemārs Peņģerots (Riga, [1934]), 255.

8 Ibid.

so-called Nordic Style constructed in Finland by L. Sonck, A. Lindgren, and E. Saarinen. There, in conditions similar to our own, forms proceeding from the logic of vernacular wooden architecture are taken as the basis, highlighting the national material, while turning to ethnography for the ornamentation.”⁹ Consequently, his account not only presents a one-sided interpretation of their work but also entirely overlooks the contribution of Baltic German architects, whose buildings constitute a major part of Riga’s architectural heritage from this period. Rutmanis also describes a model of stylistic development in architecture that was expected to follow: “Within the same generation, this movement, essentially related to romantic and secessionist modernism, soon encountered opposition in the form of influence from the rigour of the Russian Imperial style (...), with a classical balance, harmony of forms, and structural clarity that attracted even the most fanatical adherents of the Nordic movement.”¹⁰

The interwar period also saw the publication of several biographical studies on architects active around the turn of the twentieth century,¹¹ as well as discussions of specific practical issues relating to the architecture of the period.

During the first decades after the Second World War, architecture and decorative art from the turn of the twentieth century were not the subject of systematic study in Latvia. Nevertheless, these art forms inevitably appeared in general overviews and monographic studies examining the work of individual artists. Under the influence of Soviet ideology, Art Nouveau was generally interpreted as a manifestation of decadence and degeneration. A notable exception is the factually rich article by art historian Jānis Pujāts (1925–1988), published in the 1957 almanac *Latvian Fine Art*, in which he traced the history of stained glass in Latvia, while also bringing together data on stained glass workshops in Riga at the turn of the century.¹²

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Pauls Kampe, “A. Vanaga dzīve un darbs,” *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts*, no. 5–6 (1929): 497–516; Pauls Kundziņš, “Profesors Dr. arch. h. c. Eižens Laube 60 mūža gados,” *Latvijas Arhitektūra*, no. 4 (1940): 102–4; Eižens Laube, “Celtnieks Jānis Alksnis †,” *Latvijas Arhitektūra* 1939, no. 1: 9.

12 Jānis Pujāts, “Meti latviešu vitražas jaunākā posma vēsture,” in *Latviešu tēlotāja māksla*, ed. I. Kreituse (Riga: Latvijas Valsts Izdevniecība, 1957), 87–126.

Individual publications on the subject also appeared within the Latvian émigré community. Characteristically, however, their assessments of Art Nouveau architecture and architectural decoration largely adhered to the negative attitudes established during the interwar period, a tendency reflected both in the scope and content of their interpretations. Thus, as late as 1980, in the second volume of his monograph *Latvian Art. 1800–1924*, Jānis Siliņš (1896–1991), the most authoritative Latvian art historian in exile, devoted only a brief chapter to the architecture of the period preceding the First World War and expressed a critical view of Art Nouveau. In his words, “Belated and in many cases banalised imitations of Art Nouveau appear on the buildings of Riga. Tastelessly oversaturated and exaggerated décors of sheet metal and plaster are seen on the facades of the buildings by engineer Mikhail Eisenstein (...) on Alberta iela and Elizabetes iela. (...) the emulation of examples and fashions is also evident in the output of other architects in Latvia.”¹³ Although Siliņš discussed the work of several individual architects and acknowledged that “Germans still played the decisive role”¹⁴ in architecture at the turn of the century, his interpretation largely followed the model established in interwar scholarship. He focused primarily on the work of Eižens Laube and Aleksandrs Vanags, positively evaluating those buildings that reflected the influence of “Finnish National Romanticism” and expressed “a Nordic perception.”¹⁵

The systematic and sustained study of architecture and visual art from the turn of the twentieth century began in Latvia only during the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, it should be remembered that during the period of Soviet occupation access to periodicals published in Latvia during the early twentieth century required special permission, which inevitably meant that scholarly research was based on fragmentary information. Despite these restrictions, the first attempt to objectively analyse Art Nouveau architecture in Riga was undertaken in 1971 with the diploma thesis *Art Nouveau in Riga Architecture*, defended at the Latvian Academy of Art by Edgars Dubiņš (1937–2022).¹⁶ The thesis marked an important step in the scholarly

13 Jānis Siliņš, *Latvijas māksla: 1800–1914*, vol. 2 (Stockholm: Daugava, 1980), 365–66.

14 Ibid., 382.

15 Ibid., 373.

16 Edgars Dubiņš, *Jugendstils Rīgas arhitektūrā* (diploma thesis, supervised by Eduards Kļaviņš, Latvijas Mākslas akadēmija, 1971).

rehabilitation of Art Nouveau. Particular credit should be given to its supervisor, Prof. Eduards Kļaviņš, whose role in the process of preparing this thesis was crucial. Kļaviņš's publications¹⁷ are especially important in Latvian art history, both for their stylistic assessment of the material and for their development of methodologically pluralistic interpretation. To this day, his work remains among the most significant sources for the study of artistic life and stylistic trends in Latvia around the turn of the twentieth century.

The first major study of Art Nouveau architecture in Riga within the broader context of urban development was the dissertation defended in 1973 by architect Jānis Krastiņš (1943–2025).¹⁸ This was followed in 1980 by the publication of his book *Art Nouveau in the Architecture of Riga*,¹⁹ which laid the foundation for his subsequent research on the city's architecture. In the course of these studies, Krastiņš expanded the available body of knowledge, identifying architects responsible for individual buildings, reconstructing quantitative data on construction activity in Riga, and demonstrating the scale of urban development during this period.²⁰ Krastiņš's publications encompass Historicism—consistently referred to by the author as “Eclecticism”²¹—as well as Art Nouveau in its narrower, conventional sense, along with National Romanticism, Neo-Classicism, and Rationalist architecture. Through a series of articles and books on Riga's Art Nouveau architecture, supplemented with new information and illustrations, Krastiņš established himself as a central authority on the history of Riga's architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and his interpretations have often acquired an almost canonical status. However, certain aspects of his concept have subsequently been reinterpreted. The present author addressed this issue in the article “Rethinking National Romanticism in the

17 Eduards Kļaviņš, *Latvijas XIX gs. beigū, XX gs. sākuma tēlotājas mākslas ikonogrāfija un stilistiskais raksturojums* (Rīga: Mācību iestāžu metodiskais kabinets, 1983); idem, *Rietumu 19. gs. beigū, 20. gs. sākuma tēlotājas mākslas un arhitektūras vispārējās vēstures jautājumi* (Rīga: Mācību iestāžu metodiskais kabinets, 1985); idem, *Latviešu portreta glezniecība: 1850–1916* (Rīga: Neputns, 1996); idem, *Džo: Jāzepa Grosvalda dzīve un māksla* (Rīga: Neputns, 2006).

18 Jānis Krastiņš, *Razvitie arhitektury Rigi vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachala XX vekov* (PhD diss., Rīga, 1973).

19 Jānis Krastiņš, *Jugendstils Rīgas arhitektūrā* (Rīga: Zinātne, 1980).

20 Jānis Krastiņš, *Rīgas arhitektūras meistari: 1850–1940* (Rīga: Jumava, 2002); idem, *Rīga – jūgendstila metropole* (Rīga: Baltika, 1996).

21 Jānis Krastiņš, *Eklektisms Rīgas arhitektūrā* (Rīga: Zinātne, 1988).

Architecture of Riga at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,”²² addressing the interpretation of National Romanticism in Riga’s early twentieth-century architecture, with particular attention to the development and applicability of the term. The study situates the phenomenon within the broader cultural-historical context of early twentieth-century Riga, where—as in many European peripheries—the search for a national style unfolded within a Neo-Romanticist framework typical of the period. It further considers whether what is referred to in Latvian architectural historiography as Latvian National Romanticism can indeed be understood as an expression of aspirations for a Latvian national style, given both the participation of Baltic German architects in its formation and its often critical reception in early twentieth-century Latvian periodicals. The article also notes that architects of Latvian origin advanced ideas that regarded the Classical heritage as a possible paradigm for national art.

It may be noted that Krastiņš’s narrative largely reflects the perspective of the practicing architect. In his publications, architectural decoration is not the central focus and is addressed only through general observations. This approach—albeit slightly modified in recent years²³—derives from his initial conception, which in turn was influenced by the work of the Russian architectural historian Evgenia Kirichenko (1931–2021). In her interpretation, the functional aspect of Art Nouveau is treated as fundamental, while ornamentation and décor are relegated to a secondary role. This provided the basis for the present author to develop an alternative approach to the decorative aspects of Art Nouveau architecture in Riga. Drawing on the methodological foundations of Western art history—particularly formal analysis and iconography—the author proposed a different interpretation of the stylistic assessment of Riga’s architecture and its terminology. The results of this research have been published in several articles and were consolidated in a doctoral dissertation defended in 2009, which subsequently formed the basis for the monograph *Décor in the Architecture of Riga of the Art Nouveau Period* (2019).²⁴

22 Silvija Grosa, “Rethinking National Romanticism in the Architecture of Riga at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 21, nos. 3–4 (2012): 56–75.

23 Jānis Krastiņš, *Rīgas jügendstila ēkas / Art Nouveau Buildings in Riga* (Riga: ADD projekts, 2023).

24 Silvija Grosa, *Dekors Rīgas jügendstila perioda arhitektūrā* (Riga: Neputns, 2019).

Specific aspects of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture have also been addressed by researchers whose interests lie in earlier architectural periods or in specialised aspects of nineteenth-century architecture. Notable among these are the studies by Jānis Zilgalvis on the Neo-Gothic architecture²⁵ in Latvia and the work of Dainis Bruģis,²⁶ who has made a major contribution to the research on Historicist manor houses of Latvia. Equally significant is Imants Lancmanis's monograph on the Liepāja architect Bertschy,²⁷ as well as the contribution of Jānis Lejnieks (1951–2026), long-serving editor of the magazine *Latvijas Arhitektūra*, who has examined various aspects of Riga's architecture and whose most recent monograph is devoted to architect Paul Mandelstam,²⁸ thereby also engaging with the Art Nouveau period.

The interpretation of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture has been further advanced by the British scholar Jeremy Howard. His monograph on European Art Nouveau,²⁹ published by a major international publisher in the late 1990s, was the first to incorporate material from Latvia, thus allowing Latvian turn-of-the-century architecture and art to be viewed as part of the general process of European art and contributing to its subsequent recognition in several major publications on Art Nouveau.³⁰ A further milestone in the international recognition of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture was the 1997 international scholarly conference "Art Nouveau: Time and Space; the Baltic Sea Countries at the Turn of the Twentieth century," which played a decisive role in the eventual inscription of the historic centre of Riga on the UNESCO World Heritage List. A bilingual, richly illustrated volume of articles was published two years later under the same title.³¹ The contributions of twenty-three authors not only showcased the Art Nouveau architecture of Riga but also offered a broader overview of the Art Nouveau period in the Baltic region.

25 Jānis Zilgalvis, *Neogotika Latvijas arhitektūrā* (Riga: Zinātne, 2005).

26 Dainis Bruģis, *Historisma pils Latvijā* (Riga, Sorosa fonds – Latvija, 1996).

27 Imants Lancmanis and Angelika Bertschy, *Berči / Bertschy* (Riga: Valters un Rapa, 2011).

28 Jānis Lejnieks, *Arhitekta Paula Mandelštama trešais stils* (Riga: Jumava, 2025).

29 Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau: International and National Styles in Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

30 Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau: 1890–1914* (London: V & A Publications, 2000).

31 Silvija Grosa, ed., *Jugendstils. Laiks un telpa: Baltijas jūras valstis 19.–20. gs. mijā / Art Nouveau. Time and Space: The Baltic Sea Countries at the Turn of the 20th Century* (Riga: Jumava, 1999).

Monographs on visual art—including painting, graphic art, and applied art—have also played a significant role in the study of architecture and decorative arts from the turn of the twentieth century, as well as in elucidating the broader artistic trends of the era. Since the final years of the twentieth century, major monographic studies and collected volumes have been published on leading artists of the period, including Janis Rozentāls,³² Johann Walter,³³ Vilhelms Purvītis,³⁴ and others. At the same time, the field has been expanded with publications on less well-known painters and graphic artists. As already mentioned, Eduards Kļaviņš has made a major contribution to the study of art from the turn of the twentieth century, as has Kristiāna Ābele. Her articles on the artistic life of the time, as well as her monographs and studies on painters such as Johann Walter, Voldemārs Zeltiņš,³⁵ Pēteris Krastiņš,³⁶ and Vilhelms Purvītis, have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the art scene of this period. For her achievements, she was recently awarded the Great Gold Medal of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, becoming the youngest recipient of this award in the history of the Academy.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the accumulated body of research on the turn-of-the-century period had become sufficiently extensive that, when embarking on the monumental project *Art History of Latvia* (seven volumes), Prof. Eduards Kļaviņš, as editor-in-chief, chose not to follow a chronological sequence. Instead, he placed the volume devoted to this particular period at the beginning of the series. Accordingly, Volume 4, published in 2014,³⁷ became not only the first volume in the series but also the most comprehensive overview at the time of Latvian art and architecture from the turn of the twentieth century, including Riga. It is important to note that this volume is not merely a synthesis of existing scholarship. In the course of its preparation, the range of factual information was significantly expanded, made possible by the ambitious digitisation of

32 Inta Pujāte, *Janis Rozentāls* (Riga: Neputns, 2014).

33 Kristiāna Ābele, *Johans Valters* (Riga: Neputns, 2009).

34 Laima Slava, ed., *Purvītis* (Riga: Neputns, 2022).

35 Kristiāna Ābele, *Voldemārs Zeltiņš* (Riga: Neputns, 2021).

36 Kristiāna Ābele, *Pēteris Krastiņš* (Riga: Neputns, 2006).

37 Eduards Kļaviņš, ed., *Art History of Latvia. Period of Neo-Romanticist Modernism, 1890–1915* (Riga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art; Art History Research Support Foundation, 2014).

press publications undertaken in recent decades by the National Library of Latvia.³⁸ It may be argued that the digitisation of periodicals and previously inaccessible publications, combined with the application of artificial intelligence, constitutes a paradigmatic shift in the field, as it essentially enables a reassessment of established interpretations of art from the turn of the twentieth century.

Architecture forms part of the broader understanding of art in this period, a perspective that has been enhanced—both prior to the publication of the relevant volume of *Art History of Latvia* and subsequently—through the preparation of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral theses at the Latvian Academy of Art. These studies address various art forms characteristic of the Art Nouveau period, including painting, graphic art, photography, and decorative arts in relation to architecture—for example, Laura Lūse's work on the history of wallpaper³⁹ and Inta Pujāte's (1957–2025) dissertation on photography in Latvia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁰

In Latvian art-historical literature, the study of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century period remains methodologically grounded in established art-historical approaches. This orientation is also evident in thematic publications and in the proceedings of conferences held in conjunction with major exhibitions of the last decade at the Latvian National Museum of Art, the Art Museum Riga Bourse, and the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, all of which can be regarded as significant events in Latvian cultural life. A particularly important example was the exhibition *Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States*, presented at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in 2018 and subsequently shown at the national art museums in Tallinn, Vilnius, and Riga. This exhibition was accompanied by an extensive programme of conferences, followed by a series of publications.⁴¹ For her role in organising this event, Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece was awarded the Baltic Assembly Prize in 2019.

38 Digital Library of Latvia, <http://periodika.lv>.

39 Laura Lūse, *Tapetes Latvijā: 18. gs.–20. gs. 1. puse* (doctoral dissertation, supervised by Silvija Grosa, Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijā, 2016).

40 Inta Pujāte, *Fotogrāfija Latvijā 19. gadsimta beigās un 20. gadsimta sākumā* (doctoral dissertation, supervised by L. Bremša, Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijā, 2024).

41 Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece and Laima Slava, eds., *Nepieradinātās dvēseles. Simbolisms Baltijas valstu mākslā* (Riga: Neputns, 2020); Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, ed., *Simbolisms Eiropā un Baltijas nāciju identitāte*, *Muzeja raksti*, no. 9 (Riga, 2024).

One of the most recent major events in the study of Riga's Art Nouveau Architecture was the international scholarly conference "Konstantīns Pēkšēns and His Time,"⁴² held in January 2022, for which a collection of articles was subsequently prepared. The conceptual origins of this event can be traced back to the conference "Art Nouveau: Time and Space; the Baltic Sea Countries at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," organised twenty-five years earlier, thereby also continuing an ongoing research narrative in terms of methodology and interpretation. In contrast to the earlier conference, the 2022 event focused on the personality and creative legacy of the well-known Latvian architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns, situating his work within the broader cultural patterns and diverse artistic practices of the period. The conference brought together experienced researchers (Jānis Krastiņš, Kristiāna Ābele, Daina Lāce, Mārtiņš Mintauris, and others) and doctoral candidates. The intention was to foreground Latvian material, clarify factual issues, and examine questions that had either received limited scholarly attention or had remained outside the scope of previous research, or had reached a certain impasse after acquiring a seemingly incontestable, and in a sense canonical, status. It should also be noted that the conference benefitted significantly from contributions by researchers from Lithuania and Estonia. Their papers addressed new and previously unexplored aspects, reaffirming the continued importance of international cooperation in Baltic art-historical research, given the shared historical context of the region within the Russian Empire during the period under study.

In the early twentieth century, Riga was one of the major industrial centres of the region, with a substantial proportion of production destined for export. However, concrete case studies illustrating these processes remain limited. In this respect, the study by Dr. Dalia Klajumienė offers an important insight into this topic. Building on her earlier monographs *Interior Décor Elements of Vilnius Residential Houses from Classicism to Modernism* (2015) and *Makers and Makers' Marks of Local and Imported Stove Tiles in Lithuania from the 1800s to the 1960s* (2024), she has further developed the research on the export of building decoration elements from

42 Silvija Grosa, ed., *Konstantīns Pēkšēns un viņa laiks* (Riga: Latvijas mākslas zinātnieku un kuratoru biedrība, 2025).

Riga to Lithuania and their dissemination in Lithuanian architecture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dr. Klajumienė's article⁴³ presents an overview of industrially produced goods from Riga—stove tiles, plaster elements, and flooring materials—used in the interior decoration and heating systems of buildings in Vilnius. Where source material permits, she also reconstructs the routes of their dissemination. In a related contribution, Estonian architecture researcher Dr. Karin Hallas-Murula examines the role of Riga Polytechnic in early twentieth-century Estonian architecture, focusing on the participation of its graduates in architectural competitions in Estonia.⁴⁴

Among the contributors to the forthcoming volume is also Jeremy Howard, whose work has already been mentioned above. His analysis of two educational and healthcare buildings designed by Konstantīns Pēkšēns is based on a comparative methodology and situates these works within a broader European framework. This example shows the value of re-examining previously studied material from a new perspective, drawing attention to aspects that have previously received limited consideration in Latvian scholarship. It should be noted that digitised publications held by the National Library of Latvia, as discussed above, play a significant role in Howard's study.

Among further contributions to the volume, Dr. Baiba Vanaga's article on early female decorative artists focuses on the feminist aspect, which has until recently received relatively limited attention in Latvian art history. A similar perspective is, to some degree, present in Dr. Valda Vidzemniece's publication on the beginnings of modern dance in Latvia, as well as in Dr. Edīte Tišheizere's article on the emergence of theatre, which also addresses the contribution of the first ethnic Latvian woman playwright, Marija Pēkšēna.

Prof. Eduards Kļaviņš's approach offers a model of formal analysis and interpretation, concentrating on expressive forms in Riga architecture.⁴⁵ In his analysis, the comparatively brief emergence of expressive forms raises questions about their position within a broader European context. While

43 Dalia Klajumienė, "Production of Riga Factories in Vilnius Interiors at the End of the 19th and Early 20th Century," in *Konstantīns Pēkšēns un viņa laiks*, 292–309.

44 Karin Hallas-Murula, "Latvian Projects in Architectural Competitions in Estonia, 1860s–1920s," in *Konstantīns Pēkšēns un viņa laiks*, 214–27.

45 Eduards Kļaviņš, "The Phenomenon of Expressive Forms in the Riga Architecture of the Early 20th Century," in *Konstantīns Pēkšēns un viņa laiks*, 202–13.

acknowledging the risk of terminological overextension, he asks whether certain features might be understood as a form of a local proto-Expressionism. In Kļaviņš's view, the autonomy of expressive forms, their heightened dramatisation, Gothic verticality, and the aesthetics of towers and caves bring them closer to canonical European Expressionism, as it was later defined in art-historical discourse.

Doctoral candidate Agnese Tambaka examines industrially manufactured tiles, while Anete Ulmane analyses wooden residential buildings designed by Pēkšēns and his collaborators, a topic that will be further elaborated in her forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

In preparing a biographical study of Konstantīns Pēkšēns, the present author has particularly benefitted from access to digitised publications, which have made it possible to expand the factual material on the buildings designed by the architect outside Riga. At the same time, researchers working on monographic studies of Pēkšēns and other Riga architects continue to face a shortage of additional sources, including notes, correspondence, diaries, personal photographs, and office records. As a result, the primary form of documentary evidence remains the architect's signature in building records associated with individual structures. In Pēkšēns's case, Jānis Krastiņš documented approximately 250 such examples; however, the presence of a signature does not permit us to determine whether a given design held in the archive was executed by the architect himself or by his assistants.

In recapitulating this historiographic overview, several key developments in twenty-first century research can be identified. These include not only the contributions of architects and art historians, including the ambitious volume of *Art History of Latvia* devoted to this period, but also the advent of artificial intelligence, which has facilitated access to digitised texts and illustrative material, thereby significantly augmenting the factual record. This brings to the fore questions of interpretation, methodological approaches, and the limits of art history.

There is no doubt that the Latvian art-historical literature on the turn-of-the-twentieth-century period remains methodologically dominated by a positivist approach. As Eduards Kļaviņš observes, this approach:

relies on the general concept of art history as the study of the past of art, obtaining and communicating new information, without seeking to subordinate these processes to some specific theoretical ideas or tendentious convictions. The interpretation of works of art is based mainly on stylistic analysis, sometimes associated with subjective value judgements or proceeding from these.⁴⁶

In his 1996 essay “The Crisis of ‘Art History,’” the American art historian Irving Lavin (1927-2019) reflects on the global condition of the discipline of art history. According to Lavin:

The subsequent flood of interpretive ‘strategies’ (...)—structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, symbolic anthropology, patronage, rhetoric (...), collective social history (...), microhistory, new historicism, cultural studies, critical theory, reception theory, feminism, queer studies, multiculturalism—has enriched the field beyond measure. (...) The interest and value of art-historical studies are now determined almost in direct relation to the methods and terminology they display that have been appropriated from elsewhere.⁴⁷

Two decades after Lavin’s publication, is it worth asking whether his view retains its relevance when examined within the wider development of art history as a discipline. Considerable discussion has taken place on these new strategies, and a range of opinion has been expressed regarding art history as a global discipline. James Elkins, widely regarded as one of the leading contemporary scholars in art studies, points out in his analysis of possible methodological directions that the fundamental unity underlying art history is based on methods such as formal analysis, periodisation, and iconography. These methods, as already discussed, are precisely those most widely employed in publications on Riga’s architecture and art from the turn of the twentieth century, and in this sense they sustain the identity and continuity of the discipline. Within the context of the research material, continued cooperation with Lithuanian and Estonian researchers remains essential and will, hopefully, further develop in the future. Likewise, it is to be hoped that the field will be expanded through the involvement of young

46 Eduards Kļaviņš, “Foreword,” in *Art History of Latvia*, 15.

47 Irving Lavin, “The Crisis of ‘Art History’ in Art History and Its Theories,” *The Art Bulletin* 78 (1996): 13–15.

art researchers interested in specific questions relating to the architecture and interiors of the period under discussion, thereby offering the prospect that research into art from the turn of the twentieth century will not only continue but also bring significant new discoveries.

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Santrauka

XX ir XXI a. Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros tyrimai: istorija ir nauji požiūriai

Silvija Grosa

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Ryga, *Art Nouveau*, architektūra, publikacijos.

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros tyrimų istoriografija nuo XX a. pradžios iki šių dienų. Aptariama mokslinių tyrimų prieigų raida, išskiriami pagrindiniai Rygos architektūros paveldo interpretavimo etapai ir įvertinamas reikšmingiausių Latvijos bei užsienio tyrėjų indėlis. Tyrimo tikslas – atskleisti, kaip laikui bėgant kito Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros samprata, ir nustatyti naujas tolesnių tyrimų kryptis.

Straipsnyje parodoma, kad Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros tyrimus formavo keli skirtingi istoriografiniai etapai. Ankstyvosiose publikacijose buvo dokumentuojama miesto architektūros stilistinė įvairovė ir meninė kokybė, o vėlesniuose tyrimuose suformuota architektų, architektūrinio dekoru, stilistinių tendencijų ir *Art Nouveau* bei šiaurietiškojo nacionalinio romantizmo santykio analizės sistema. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas novatoriškiems Jānio Krastiņio tyrimams, kurių publikacijos padėjo pamatus šiuolaikinei Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros istoriografijai, taip pat Eduardo Kļaviņio metodologiniam indėliui – platesnei Latvijos dailės istorijos interpretacijai, paskatinusiai naujas architektūros tyrimų prieigas. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariami kitų Latvijos ir užsienio tyrėjų darbai, išplėtę žinias apie architektūros simboliką, ornamentiką, miesto kultūrą ir tarptautinį Rygos architektūros kontekstą apie 1900 m.

Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas XXI a. tyrimų raidai. Latvijos nacionalinės bibliotekos vykdomas istorinių laikraščių ir periodinių leidinių skaitmeninimas reikšmingai išplėtė tyrimų šaltinių bazę, suteikdamas galimybę patikrinti ankstesnes prielaidas ir į mokslinę apyvartą įtraukti anksčiau nepastebėtus šaltinius. Kartu intensyvėjantis tarptautinis bendradarbiavimas sustiprino lyginamuosius Baltijos šalių architektūros tyrimus ir paskatino plačiau suvokti Rygos vietą Europos *Art Nouveau* judėjime.

Straipsnyje aptariama ir didėjanti skaitmeninių humanitarinių mokslų, kaip istorinių šaltinių apdorojimo ir architektūros tyrimų priemonės, svarba.

Tarptautinę Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros reikšmę liudija jos įtraukimas į vieno žymiausių pasaulinių *Art Nouveau* tyrėjų Paulo Greenhalgho neseniai išleistą knygą *Art Nouveau: The Architecture of Modern Life* (London, 2025). Nors leidinyje Rygai skirtas atskiras poskyris ir jis gausiai iliustruotas fotografijomis, jame esama ir nemažai faktinių netikslumų. Tai rodo, kad medžiagos apie Rygos architektūros paveldą sklaidą tarptautiniu mastu ne visada spėja paskui naujausius mokslinius tyrimus. Šis pavyzdys išryškina tebesitęsiančio kritinio istoriografinio vertinimo ir pirminiais šaltiniais grindžiamų tyrimų poreikį.

Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad Rygos *Art Nouveau* architektūros tyrimuose ir toliau remiamasi nusistovėjusiais dailėtyros metodais, tačiau vis dažniau pasitelkiamos tarpdisciplininės prieigos, tarptautinis bendradarbiavimas ir skaitmeniniai tyrimų metodai. Šios tendencijos suteikia naujų galimybių gilinti Rygos unikalaus architektūros paveldo ir jo vietos platesnėje Europos *Art Nouveau* istorijoje sampratą.