

Strand 2: The Decorative Programmes of Buildings (Homes, Hospitals, Factories, Institutions, etc.)

The Search for National Identity in the Décor of Residential and Public Buildings of the Riga Art Nouveau Architecture

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Abstract

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Baltic provinces, including the territory of Latvia, were part of the Russian Empire. Riga, the main centre of the Art Nouveau style in the region, was the third largest city in the Russian Empire, and its economic and cultural life had a very complex socio-political background. The national self-affirmation of Latvians as an indigenous nation under the political regime of the Russian Empire, the formation of Latvian national consciousness, and the flourishing of capitalist economy were reflected in the architecture of Riga, and in particular in the symbolic messages of its architectural décor.

Inspecting the décor of buildings designed by the prominent Latvian architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns and his workshop during Riga's Art Nouveau period, it is possible to identify a number of elements that represent Latvians' search for national identity. A close examination of these elements enables us to assess both the general tendencies in the architectural and decorative manifestations of this search, and the specificities of the stylistic transformations that went along with it.

Keywords: Riga, Art Nouveau period, Nordic national romanticism, Neo-classicism, national self-affirmation

The turn of the 20th century was a time of radical changes in world art and architecture. In the last decade of the 19th century, the search of artists and architects in different countries for a new artistic style had borne fruit. Art Nouveau, which flourished in the period around the turn of the last century, incorporates a number of innovative elements, including seemingly incompatible features. Shortly before the beginning of the 20th century, the new style reached Riga, which became its main centre in the territory of Latvia, demonstrating the full spectrum of its diversity.

The geographic location of Latvia in the Baltic Sea region has determined the context of its history, which since the Middle Ages has been influenced by the rivalry between many great powers - Germans, Poles, Swedes, and Russians - for control over the region. In the 18th century, the territory of Latvia came under the administration of the Russian Empire, becoming a part of the so-called Baltic governorates, where the traditionally privileged position of the German-Baltic nobility was preserved. Only in the middle of the 19th century was serfdom abolished and the Latvian national movement began. In the second half of the 19th century, the formation of the Latvian national culture proceeded in difficult political conditions as the relations between the central government and the Baltic nobility had worsened as a result of the Russification policy introduced by the Russian Empire. For the Latvians, who basically belonged to the peasant class, it was difficult to move up the steps of the social hierarchy. It was only in the 1880s-1890s that Latvians' economic situation improved and they acquired greater opportunities for intellectual attainment¹.

In the second half of the 19th century, Riga had become the third largest industrial centre in the Russian Empire, a metropolis where the population had almost quintupled in a relatively short period of time (from 1867 to 1913), as former peasants flocked here in search of a better life and work. Among the indicators of the city's economic growth were industrialization and the expansion of the prestigious residential area, as well as suburban urbanization and the growth of

¹ Ķikusts T. "The Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896", *Latviešu etnogrāfiskā izstāde 1896 =Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. Neputns (Riga) 2016.* p. 17-87: 31.

working-class districts in the suburbs². The economic growth at the turn of the 20th century took place against a very complicated socio-political background. The efforts of the rapidly growing bourgeoisie (including Latvians) to assert themselves, as well as the huge social inequality characterize Riga in that period as a multi-ethnic city of contrasts, which “characterised not only by ethnic and linguistic diversity, but also entrenched divisions between ethno-social groups, and the resulting rivalry between Germans, Latvians, Russians and others. A distinctive feature of the Baltic provinces was the concordance of linguistic and social division (the Baltic German elite, Latvians as the peasants) which during the latter half of the 19th century in towns was gradually replaced by complex divisions of national, ethnic and linguistic nature, facets of a new identity.”³ In Riga, a large part of the wealthy citizenry, as well as the intelligentsia, were Baltic Germans, who occupied predominant positions in the city administration and in construction supervision. That is why it was difficult for Latvians to gain political influence in Riga even when they had an opportunity to improve their social and economic status: “Latvian economic achievements, public activities or cultural life was reminiscent of breaking into a fortress that had been closely guarded for centuries – those who entered into it inevitably had to prove their right to be there on equal basis.”⁴ It was only in the first years of the 20th century that Latvians got an opportunity to become more actively involved in the economic life of Riga, gradually becoming the dominant group among small entrepreneurs and landlords. City dwellers, regardless of their ethnic origin or native language, were united by a way of life corresponding to their social status. Under the political regime of the Russian Empire, however, Latvians increasingly perceived themselves as a unified ethnic group possessing a unique identity. Their longing for an independent country and their growing self-confidence were reflected in their search for a new style of architecture and in the symbolic messages of its décor. This search became an important catalyst for stylistic changes in the buildings of the Riga Art Nouveau

2 Grosa S. “Architecture”, Art History of Latvia. Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art (Riga) 2014. P.405-549: p. 407.

3 Ķikusts T. “The Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896”, Latviešu etnogrāfiskā izstāde 1896 =Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. Neputns (Riga) 2016. p. 17-87: 31.

4 *Idem.*

period. An examination of these changes enables us to assess both the general tendencies in the architectural and decorative manifestations of this search, and the peculiarities of individual architects' styles.

A typical example in this regard is the lodging houses built at intervals of a few years for the nouveau-riche Berg family, owners of the first commercial arcade in Riga, according to the project of architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns (1859-1928), which show how the customer's taste and political affiliation could change in a short time - from decorative excesses (Krišjāņa Barona iela 7/9 (1900)) and emphatic traditionalism (Krišjāņa Barona iela 11 (1901)) through modernism, Art Nouveau and symbolism (Marijas iela 6 (1904)) to self-conscious simplicity and incorporation of Latvian folk motifs into the interior of the lobby of the building at Krišjāņa Barona Street 5 (1909).

Architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns was one of the most important Latvian architects of this period in Riga, whose life and work are a typical example of the process of overcoming social barriers. He was born into the family of a Latvian farmer and merchant in the Vidzeme countryside. After the family moved to Riga, he studied at the Riga Polytechnic, qualifying as an architect. During his studies, he got involved in public life and became one of the founders of the first Latvian student corporation "Selonija". Pēkšēns was an active member of the Riga Latvian Society, but later became a Riga councillor and businessman. Several important Latvian architects started their career in Pēkšēns' construction office. The buildings they would later design, just like those designed by Pēkšēns himself, belong to the golden fund of Riga architecture.

At the beginning of the late Art Nouveau period in architecture (1905/1906 – 1914), when the Nordic National Romanticism became important in the architecture of Riga⁵, regional ethnographic material became an important source for the creation of décor. In preparation for the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition in Riga and for the 10th All-Russian Archaeological Congress, the exhibition of the Museum of the Latvian Society of Riga was opened to the public in 1894⁶. Actively supplemented henceforth, it made Latvian folk ornaments available to the general public. The exhibition acquainted its visitors with the history and culture of the Latvian people and became the first event of its kind.

Nordic National Romanticism as a stylistic trend in the architecture of Riga is most closely related to Finnish architecture. The architects of Finland - at that time an autonomous region of the Russian Empire - managed to create a vivid visual form to express their national identity, drawing upon various sources, including the so-called Richardsonian Romanesque, and supplementing them with traditional Finnish figurative ornaments, such as sun signs, stylized birds and fish, and anthropomorphic and floral motifs. At the beginning of the 20th century, for a few years, Finnish Art Nouveau architecture became quite influential. It influenced, among others, the architecture of St. Petersburg, the capital of the Russian Empire. The Russian architectural historian Vadim Bass described this process as a vivid example of an "importation of style", which contributed to the short period of the flourishing of Nordic Art Nouveau (*severnij modern*)⁷. Bass aptly uses a biblical analogy with the battle of David and Goliath, while emphasizing that the style imported from the small land of Finland, which fascinated local

⁵ Grosa S. "Architecture", Art History of Latvia. Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art (Riga) 2014. P.405-549: p. 530.

⁶ Stinklule S. "Let us hurry thence where roads converge, small and large, to Riga – to Latvian exhibitional!" Latviešu etnogrāfiskā izstāde 1896 =Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. Neputns (Riga) 2016. p.117-170: p. 119.

⁷ Басс В.Г. "Давид и Голиаф. Финский национальный романтизм и петербургский северный модерн: к вопросу о механизмах архитектурного импорта". [Bass V. "David and Goliath. Finnish National Romanticism and St. Petersburg Northern Modern Style: the Mechanism of the Architectural Import"]. Архитектура эпохи модерна в странах Балтийского региона. (2014). Коло (Ст.Петербург) p. 80-86:80.

Petersburg architects, was followed by the emancipation of artistic forms in the capital of the empire, freeing it from national connotations and focusing on purely formal techniques⁸.

In Riga, unlike in St. Petersburg, the influence of Finnish architecture split into two formally similar but ideologically different directions. One of them, no less powerful than in St. Petersburg, became a purely formal exercise in technique determined by dominant fashion trends and separate from all national interests and concerns: this form was gladly used by the German-Baltic architects of Riga. A typical example is the personal lodging house of the architect Eduards Bušs on Skolas Street 12a (1908), where the massive rustication of the facade is complemented by deliberately rough and simplified representations of human and monkey figures, most likely intended as an illustration of the evolutionist ideas characteristic of the period.

The second direction was represented by several young Latvian architects who started their careers in the construction office of Konstantīns Pēkšēns. Similar to the Finns, they searched for a national style based on romantic myths of the ancient history of Nordic lands and of Baltic tribes. One of them, Eižens Laube (1880-1967), wrote in his article in the magazine "Zalktis" (Grass Snake) in 1908: "Thanks to our collections of ancient things, we, Latvians, have been given the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the spirit of our ancestors, and the more we do this, the more the old spirit will renew itself within us and in a renewed, powerful way take over each of us and all our lives and works. Then our buildings will also show a character that will be completely independent, Latvian"⁹. However, the search for a national style and expression in the architecture of Riga is not limited only to the absorption and interpretation of the Finnish architects' works; it permeates the entire architecture of the Art Nouveau period, including its final phase, when there was a return to classical values.

⁸ Idem. p.8 l.

⁹ Laube E. "Par būvniecības stilu" [About the construction style], Zalktis, Nr. 4, (1908) p. 143-148:147.

One early example that illustrates the range of experimentation by Latvian architects in the given period is Pēkšēns' own personal lodging house at 12 Albert Street, built in 1903-1904. It had been designed by Pēkšēns together with Eižens Laube, who worked in Pēkšēns' office and was still an architecture student at that time. The house stands out for its picturesque arrangement of volumes. Its façade is decorated with a variety of plaster textures and elements of half-timbering. Its refined decorations are based on the Art Nouveau principle of composition according to which undecorated and decorated planes are carefully balanced. It is significant that for the first time in Riga the motif of pine branches and cones was used in the décor of the Pēkšēns House, both emphasizing the idea of pantheism and creating a fabulous forest fairy-tale. The motif reoccurs in the interior of the central lobby and stairwell, where it is reproduced in stencil paintings on the walls.

Natural motifs are abundantly present in the decoration of the façade. The friezes between the branches and cones even include forest scenes with squirrels and birds, similar to the decoration of the Finnish pavilion, which gained fame at the 1900 Paris exhibition, about which the well-known Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls (1866-1916) said that what was most impressive about it was the use of “decorative motifs from Finnish forests, where squirrels run up and down pine trees and dreadful bears roam through thickets; from lakes, where water lilies grow and funny frogs bask on their broad leaves”¹⁰. There is no doubt that the décor of the house is designed to glorify Latvia's nature, even despite the fact that its central element is based not on the common pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) found in Latvia, but on the European pine (*Pinus cembra*), which is not native to Latvia, but can be seen in popular sample albums available in Riga at that time, such as Anton Seder's *Naturalistische Decorationsmalerei* (Ernst Wasmuth (Berlin) 1897). Architecturally, Pēkšēns' House is undoubtedly one of the most successfully realized apartment houses built around the year 1903, that is in the heyday of Art Nouveau.

An artistically significant architectural example of the Nordic Art Nouveau style of the late Art Nouveau period is the Ķeniņu school building at Tērbatas Street 15/17, designed by

¹⁰ Rozentāls J. “Par Somijas mākslu” [About Finnish art] Vērotājs Nr. 4 (1905) p. 491-502: 492.

Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eižens Laube - one of the few public buildings of this style in Riga. Although the five-story building looks like an ordinary apartment house in terms of its general structure, the design of the facade is complex and refined as it includes such decorative elements as an alternation of symmetrically arranged, varied sections; a monumental three-part upper floor crowned by gambrel roofs; and a varied rhythm of trapezoid windows. The main decorative effect of the facade is determined by the texture contrasts created by the use of different finishing materials. Most of the interior decoration and some of the decorative elements of the façade have been lost in numerous renovations. The hall interior known from the photographs taken at the beginning of the 20th century shows the influence of the vernacular tradition. Paintings play an important role in the decorative scheme of the hall. They show stylized birds flying towards the sun, which symbolize the desire for spiritual enlightenment and which accord well with both the general function of the building and the practical use of the hall. The interior design of the hall was supplemented by a number of inscriptions on its walls, including the patriotically inspiring lines of poetry by the school director, Latvian writer and publisher Atis Ķeniņš (1874-1961).

Another important building designed by Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eižens Laube in the late Art Nouveau period is the lodging house, which also rented space to some shops, at 10 Kronvalda boulevard (1907). Its decoration interweaves Nordic and Latvian folk motifs. Its façade is similar to the facade of the Ķeniņi school as it is also based on the principle of contrasting the textures of different natural finishing materials (limestone, granite, red brick) and plaster. The volume of the building, bay windows and avant-corps, which are crowned by pitched roofs, all contribute to the aesthetic effect created by the simple geometrical forms of the building. One of the portals in the facade facing Kronvald Boulevard is visually dominant thanks to the limestone blocks supported by two heavy columns. The stone masonry creates a strong contrast with the texture of plastered surfaces. Sculptural elements, such as bas-relief, are used sparingly in the décor of the building, mostly in parts of the gables as well as in the form of small insets in the surfaces of the flat bay windows. However, these elements are surprisingly rich. The ornament on the side of the building facing Elizabetes Street is a variation on the theme of the early medieval Viking ornament, which, in the context of the row of oval, vertically arranged bay

windows, creates associations between the building and a ship. Pēkšēns repeated the row of oval windows again on the facade of the lodging house at Ģertrudes Street 46 (1908). The exquisite richness of the ornament of this building, imitating traditional patterns on linen fabric, is also indebted to the Latvian ethnographic heritage.

Folk motifs are also used on the facades of several other buildings designed by Pēkšēns, as well as on several buildings designed by his former workshop collaborators, raising the question of the genesis of these motifs as the nature of specifically Latvian ornament was still being debated at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. However, it was already clear then that the accumulated ethnographic material (especially belts, garters, sashes, etc.) showed a large range of geometric patterns.

Nordic National romanticism in architecture was subjected to critical scrutiny quite early in its development and at the beginning of the 20th century Latvian architects started turning towards classical art and architecture in search of a new paradigm for Latvian national art. The most striking example in this respect is the building of the Latvian Society of Riga at Merķeļa street 13 (architects Ernests Pole (1872-1914), Eižens Laube; 1909–1910), which was originally inspired by northern national romanticism but in the process of its construction re-designed in accordance with classical values. By 1908, there was increased criticism of buildings that were designed in the style of Nordic National Romanticism, and, most notably, in the Latvian press. Thus, the issue of the search for ethnic specificity and national identity in the architecture of the early 20th century in Riga is a complicated one, and although there were such searches it cannot be claimed with any certainty that it was the architecture of National Romanticism in which they found more active voice than was the case in other directions of architecture during the stated period in time. The fact is that Latvian architects were also thinking about the classical heritage as a possible paradigm for national art, and that was particularly true after 1911. Those who sought out a Latvian style tended to base their thinking on the classical heritage of architecture and art, and this was certainly seen in practice – the building of the Riga Latvian Society (1910, architects Ernests Pole and Eižens Laube, with an allegorical and decorative frieze by Janis

Rozentāls) is a particularly important example of this. The building offers a synthesis of Nordic National Romanticism, the classical arts and Art Nouveau, and even as it was being built, it attracted a great deal of attention in Riga, particularly among Latvians. It is a symptomatic fact that the architectonic shape of the main centre for Latvian national ideology was designed first in the style of National Romanticism by Laube, but then, in the same year, was redesigned by Pole in the Neo-Classical style.¹¹ The final result was a building that is of a Neo-Classical appearance “represent Latvia’s assimilation into the universalist hegemony of European culture.”¹²

Several buildings of commercial companies founded by Latvians reveal a similar stylistic trend. A number of lodging houses were decorated with images borrowed from classical mythology as those were attuned both to the then prevalent patriarchal ethics and to national romanticism. In the late Art Nouveau period, architects and decorators often combined forms, ornaments and images of Greco-Roman architecture with idiosyncratic Art Nouveau motifs. They also used images that were popularized by the art of national romanticism in the second half of the 19th century. As the folk mythology researcher Toms Ķencis writes, "Following the widespread historical and textual practices of the time, national romanticists tended to construct Latvian mythology after Prussian or even Ancient Greek examples. The pseudo-mythological pantheons they invented were published in the local media".¹³ The illustrations and cover designs of the first Latvian literary magazines played a visually stimulating role in promoting such constructed mythologies. A typical example is the composition of the cover of the popular magazine "Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts" ("House Guest Monthly"), from the first edition in 1895

¹¹ Grosa S. Dekors Rīgas jūgendstila perioda ahitektūrā [Décor in the Architecture of Riga of the Art Nouveau Period (2019) Neputns (Rīga) p. 480.

¹² Howard J. "Style and patronage in Latvian architecture and design of the *debut-de-sieckle* period" Art Nouveau. Time and Space. The Baltic Sea countries at the turn of the 20th century (1999) Jumava (Rīga) p. 209-214: 214.

¹³ Ķencis T. "A disciplinary history of Latvian mythology" PhD thesis. University of Tartu. Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, Faculty of Philosophy 2012. p. 74.

until the end of 1898. This is how the magazine explains the images on its cover: "The larger woman is Pallas Athena [...] Behind the armed Athena, laurel trees and a magnificent palace can be seen in the distance, as a symbol of wealth and prosperity. At the feet of Pallas Athena [...] there is an owl as a symbol of wisdom and light, then symbols of art and science, such as a palette [...], a lyre (music), a globe and books. Pallas Athena stands on the edge of a riverbank, and holding a light-emitting nectar vessel in her hand, she seems to be a mother who invites the Latvian damsel (personified Latvia, the Latvian people) dressed in a folk costume and with a laurel wreath (freedom) on her head, to leave the rocks of the dark past and come closer to the light and prosperity, science and art. And here, adorned with a wreath of freedom, the Latvian damsel (Latvian people, Latvia) listens to the goddess of light and steps from the dark rocks onto the marble steps – and, at first tentatively, approaches Pallas Athena - from darkness to light and prosperity".¹⁴

In this context, it does not seem surprising that the idea of national statehood, as well as Latvians' achievements in various fields of economic life and culture, also influenced the choice of building decor, which incorporated both universal signs and symbols and allegories of various fields of the national economy and arts. An interesting and very typical set of examples can be seen in the facades of three houses designed by their sole owner, Miķelis Teteris. Two of them are the work of the architect Rudolf Dohnberg (1864–1918). The Eclectic House at 60 Gertrudes Street (1908) has three neoclassical themed reliefs in the centre of the facade, the central one of which is modelled after Guido Reni's (1575-1642) painting "Aurora", and one can only guess whether the owner of the building got the idea by looking at the reproduction of the painting in the 1901 issue of the "Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts" and reading its poetic description: "Pulled by swift horses, the sun god Phoebus Apollo rides through the clouds. The geniuses of the hour gather around his chariot like blooming maidens; meanwhile, the morning star and Dawn fly ahead, smoothing the night and waking up the mother Earth with flowers". On its left and right, this central frieze is complemented by two reliefs with Apollo and dancing nymphs. The facade

¹⁴ "Mēnešraksta vāka bilde"[Monthly cover photo]. Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts. Nr. 3 (1895). p. 214.

of the house (1909) built a year later at 61 Lāčplēša Street is more harmonious: the impression was achieved by abandoning both rustication and prominent sculptural elements in the decoration of the bay windows, and instead decorating it with figures in niches. In the centre of the facade, at the mezzanine level, there is a bas-relief, the left side of which is based on the motifs of Raphael fresco "The Assembly of the Gods" in the Loggia of the Farnesina in Rome. New characters have been added to the right side of the composition, so that the main characters are in the centre. The relief must have had innumerable antecedents in the academic art of the 19th century because the traditional attribute of Fortune - the wheel - had wings added to it and thus it had become a popular symbol of technical progress. Perhaps Apuleius' famous story from "Metamorphoses" about Cupid and Psyche, who obtains immortality and the favour of the Olympian gods, is one of the codes used here as well. It allows us to interpret the décor in some parts of the building as a symbolic message about a nation that has become rich by honouring its ancestral virtues (reliefs honouring idols), safely took its rightful place among other cultured nations of classical Europe ("The Assembly of the Gods") and creates lasting values in all areas of cultural and economic life (allegorical figures in the reliefs on both sides of Athena's shields and figures in niches).

The decor of Miķeļis Teters' house was apparently designed according to his wishes because Teters' third lodging house, which also rented space to some shops, at Brīvības street 61 (1911–1912, architect Aleksandrs Vanags (1873-1919)) is also a clear example of modernized neoclassicism.¹⁵ The rounded corner of the six-story building at the street intersection is crowned by a dome, the grand balconies on the facades are embellished by decorative elements of classical architecture. The semi-circular pediments above the windows of the attic floor have ornamental reliefs, as well as an allegorical composition, which conveys a nationally romantic message about Latvia as a modern European country with developed shipbuilding, industry and trade. At the centre of the pedimental composition, Mercury, the ancient patron of commerce,

¹⁵ In the 1920s, the building was sold and later became state property. Nowadays, it is known as the Corner house — the former headquarters of the Soviet Security police in Riga. The main repressive institution of the Soviet regime operated there from 1940 to 1941 and from 1945 to 1991.

depicted in high relief in a sailboat, represents art, architecture, crafts and industry. The arrangement of the four nearby allegorical figures follows the typical pedimental composition of the Greek classical period. The sailboat reminds us of the construction of ocean-going sailing ships on the coast of Vidzeme and Kurzeme in the past, while in the background behind the allegorical figures, a modern factory and an airplane (!) shown next to an ancient temple, tell us about the passage of time.

In conclusion, it can be stated that such characteristics of the style of Art Nouveau as its emphasis on asymmetry, the "biological romanticism" of its decor and its aesthetics of linear rhythm made it less than an ideal new architectural style for the creation of the kinds of traditionally respectable-looking buildings that appealed to a majority of landlords in Riga. However, a compromise was found very soon and the facades of the new buildings combined motifs characteristic of Art Nouveau iconography with Nordic ornamental symbols or with Latvian folk patterns. Moreover, they included visual re-interpretations of ancient myths and allegorical representations, and eventually became a reflection of the ethical and national ideals characteristic of the era. The mutual interaction of various stylistic phenomena was facilitated by the common "neo-romanticism platform" characteristic of the arts at the turn of the century, an essential part of which was also the search for a national style.

Curriculum Vitae

PhD Silviņa Grosa is an art historian, Professor at the Department of Art History of the Art Academy of Latvia, Head of the Art History and Theory Department of the same institution. Her main research and teaching interests include earliest periods of Western art and Art Nouveau architecture and decorative arts in Latvia. She has authored more than 50 publications. Major books: *Dekors Rīgas jūgendstila perioda arhitektūrā* (Décor in the Architecture of Riga of the Art Nouveau Period, 2019), part on industrial design of 1840–1890 in Volume 3 of *Art History of Latvia* (2019), *Freemasonry. Signs and the Architecture of Riga* (2016), parts on the architecture, applied arts and design of 1890–1915 in Volume 4 of *Art History of Latvia* (2014). She has edited collections of articles and participated in organizing international conferences.