CHAPTER 9

The ‘Latvianization’ of the Visual Arts

While Latvia’s sculptors received commissions, and funding was made available, the same did not apply to the other visual arts. Support was provided by the Culture Fund, but for the most part during the period up to 1934, artists in these fields created works on an individual basis. Influenced by the major European movements, the artists formed associations (a tendency that was broadly approved of, even initiated, by the authorities concerned), exhibitions resumed in Latvia and elsewhere, and the image of Latvia as a producer of art was fostered, as had been the intention of the new State’s authorities.

Throughout this chapter we shall see firstly how Latvian artists did not embrace radical artistic movements, and secondly how openness to foreign influences gave way to new inputs intended to eliminate the previously-dominant Russian and German influences.

A Painting

Any account of this period should first of all stress that the activities of the established associations, and above of all the artistic creators themselves, displayed a very real continuity – in terms of pictorial style – with existing tendencies. Despite this continuity, the mood of militant individual patriotism that reigned before independence had evolved into collective official encouragement, losing its fierce determination in the process.

The Multiplication of Associations and Magazines

The explosion in the number of artists’ associations, and of exhibitions in the field of visual arts, reflected the intensity of artistic activities at that time. This account uses a significant amount of information originally obtained from the archives by the Latvian art historian Ilze Konstante for her article Mākslinieku biedrības Latvijā 1934–1940 (Artistis’ Associations in Latvia 1934–1940), published in the collective work Māksla un politiskie konteksti (Art and Political Context).¹

The Continuation of Existing Associations

While on the one hand there was a steady reduction in the activities and influence of the Society for the Encouragement of Latvian Arts (Latviešu mākslas veicināšanas biedrība), the Union of Independent Artists (Neatkarīgo Mākslienieku Vienība, NMV), created in December 1919, gathered more and more members. Presided over by the writer and illustrator Jānis Jaunsudrabinski, the NMV had as its remit "the promotion of art and crafts and the provision of financial and moral support to its members." As well as artists, its membership included others with an interest in art, such as the art historians Visvaldis Peņgerots and Alberts Prande, and it was officially classified as an association in 1924. As well as actively organizing two annual exhibitions, the NMV published a number of artists monographs: Jānis Rozentāls by R. Šterns came out in 1924, while Alfrēds Plīte-Pleita by V. Peņgerots, Latvju Rakstu kompozīcija (The Composition of Latvian Ornamentation) by E. Brastiņš, and Renesances māksla (The Art of the Renaissance) by F. Šveinfurts were published in 1925, and Rūdolfs Pērle by Silins in 1928.

As the owner of premises that were also available for hire, the Union served as a kind of professional association that organized events, and in particular exhibitions and conferences. In spite of this, funds were short and the task of organizing the operations was onerous. Finally the large number and diversity of members diluted the image of this association, leading the Ilustrēts Žurnāls to comment in 1920:

Apart from a few more experienced members, most have the shared characteristics of a lack of knowledge of their field, a shallow way of behaving and even a lack of discernment as to the very essence of painting.

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2 Officially dissolved in 1924.
3 His book Baltā grāmata, the equivalent of the Tour de France par deux enfants, Belin, 1877 by Augustine Fouillée, a pseudonym of G. Bruno, was published in Riga in 1914. A classic of Latvian literature, it remains to this day required reading for Latvian school children.
5 15 Rainis Boulevard. These premises also included a library.
7 Including amateurs.