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THE LATVIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART: DIALOGUES ON THE BASIS OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of European diplomacy, art as a link in international relations has been a unifying element from the perspective of ancient history. In his paper, "The Diplomacy of Art," the French scholar Jean-François de Raymond reminds us that "the first evidence of the historical role of art and objects of art in the field of diplomacy and as an attribute of power, a depiction of ideas, and the attraction of the spirit leads one to think about circumstances related to the mutual relationship between art and diplomacy – representation and conversations, words in training related to freedom, and links and exchanges therein. Diplomacy maintains an ancient link to art, expressed in exhibitions, deposition of artworks and gifts or, on the contrary, theft which each century marks as its own searches of benefits from victories."¹

The Republic of Latvia is currently on its way toward introducing the euro at the beginning of next year, toward its first presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2015, and toward the 100th anniversary of the country's establishment in 2018. This has directly and indirectly led to discussions in various sectors – politics, economics, science and culture. An essential issue which has not been evaluated or sufficiently formulated is art as an instrument for cultural diplomacy. Still of importance is the analysis of issues related to the past specifically from this perspective.

The historical development of the territory that has been populated by Latvians has been dominated by repeated changes in foreign rule. The establishment of the independent country was a significant turning point in political, economic, social and cultural terms. This also fostered the formation and development of the world of art at a new level. The Latvian National Council proclaimed the new Republic of Latvia during a solemn ceremony on November 18, 1918.

The struggle to establish an independent state began during World War I. This involved not just the governance of the future Republic of Latvia, but also an international announcement of a new country on the world's political map.

When it comes to the history of cultural diplomacy and art in Latvia, it is important to talk about a true event – the first instance in which Latvian art represented the country. In August 1918, Latvia's first foreign minister, Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics, visited London via Stockholm as a plenipotentiary envoy. His aim was to convince British Foreign Minister James Balfour of the need for an independent Latvia. Art was the first key for success in the initial dialogue and these crucial talks. When meeting with ministers and diplomats in London and Paris, Meierovics customarily made gifts of linen-bound albums featuring the best Latvian artworks, including paintings from exhibitions in Petrograd and Moscow. The idea of representing the future state with the help of this unique album was of clear value as a convincing example of the uniqueness of Latvian culture. The process of publishing the album was described by the author known as Jēkabs of Līgotne: "Thus Meierovics could take six finely bound albums of Latvian art with him as gifts. This apparently minor detail nevertheless demonstrates the patriotic mood which was also prevalent in the broader circles of artists. Everyone wished to do his or her bit for the future of Latvia."² Various people who saw the presentation of these albums described the process in various interpretations, but no documentary evidence of it has been found. The story, however, is a symbol of the first negotiations in which culture and art were of added value in terms of talking about the establishment of a new state.

The establishment of Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in July and August 1919 involved the important issue of building up the administrative structure of its foreign policy and the capacities of its functions. Public workers, writers, scientists, artists, politicians, economists, journalists and diplomats all involved themselves in the popularisation of the country by disseminating information and essential reviews via information offices, media centres and foreign embassies.

We can certainly claim that art and culture in the broadest sense of these terms offered added value during the emergence of the new state, becoming a guarantee of quality then and thereafter, as well.

During the inter-war period, museums facilitated international recognisability, revealing Latvian art and culture to the rest of Europe.

Sadly, World War II and the subsequent decades of the Soviet occupation destroyed international recognition of Latvian art. With the restoration of independence in the 1990s, Latvia had to prove the quality of its art in Europe all over again.

Culture and art are still of added value in terms of how the country represents itself today. Art as an example of cultural diplomacy is a component in the country's foreign cultural policy, but this issue has not been sufficiently emphasised and defined. One example is the upcoming year of cultural dialogue in the Latvian capital city of Rīga.

RĪGA: THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL, 2014

Rīga will become the European Cultural Capital for the first time in 2014, and events during the year will offer a unique opportunity to reveal at a new level of quality the fact that Rīga and Latvia belong to the common cultural values of Europe.

For the title of its 2014 programme, Rīga has chosen a common legal term, *force majeure*, which speaks to a mighty force, whether unexpected or foreseeable – one that is accumulated via global and individual obstructions and problems. The “Force Majeure” programme consists of six chapters, all of them illustrating various aspects of the concept:

- 1. Freedom Street** will focus on power and freedom, rooted in the fact that 2014 will mark the centennial of the start of World War I;
- 2. Survival Kit** will offer a synergy between ancient skills and modern knowledge in various areas of culture;
- 3. Road Map** will invite everyone to discover unknown aspects of Rīga and to think about urban development issues, as well;
- 4. Amber Vein** will seek to reanimate the ancient Amber Route, which linked the Baltic, Mediterranean and Black seas so as to create a new network of cultural co-operation in Europe;
- 5. Thirst for the Ocean** will focus on human attempts to ensure intellectual and spiritual values and wisdom;
- 6. Rīga Carnival** will help everyone to forget about everyday cares and, at least for the moment, become someone else who mingles with the crowd and rejoices about life.³

All of these programmatic chapters are rooted in Rīga's European identity and the ability of its residents to participate in and be creative in everything that they do in terms of working together to create the future of Rīga.

The “Freedom Street” thematic line of the “Force Majeure” programme will focus on debates about European identity and history. The fact is that between 2014 and 2018, there will be many events in Europe such as exhibitions and scholarly conferences to commemorate World War I. Latvia will use this as a way of discussing national identity. Another essential paradox in Latvia's complex and contradictory history is that without the war and the conflict, there would have been no establishment of the new Republic of Latvia.

Accordingly, the paper that is offered to participants in the conference is focused not on conclusions as the end to a research project, but instead on an open process and a platform ideas that began in 2010 and will end next year.

The Latvian National History Museum has years of experience with international projects. One was an exhibition of art by the Latvian-born artist Mark Rothko, as loaned from the National Gallery in Washington. Another was the *Etonnante Lettonie* festival in France in 2005, along with the *Printemps français* event in 2007 and the *O, Germany!* event, as well. Currently the LNMM is taking part in the programme of the European Cultural Capital with five projects.

1914

The Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, Latvian National Museum of Art January 17 to April 20

One of the projects that are being organised by the Latvian National Museum of Art is the “1914” exhibition, which will focus on World War I and the countries which achieved independence at that time.

Why should there be a focus on the war? It is because one of the most important elements in the establishment and governance of Europe has been understanding and neutralisation of painful historical

elements. Ancient conflicts among European peoples and nations are elements in the search for contemporary identities. The way in which European countries are trying to overcome these historical traumas is another part of their identity. By transferring this experience to others, analysing the way in which all of this was done, and focusing on obstacles which have hindered the process, we can ensure a contribution toward the development of the expanded European continent.

The fact is that World War I was both tragic and beneficial, because the collapse of empires, revolutions in Russia and Germany, and a reassessment of their strengths led to the “complicated peace” that concluded with the symbolic peace treaty that was signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919. The war was also beneficial to European states such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which for the first time dared to proclaim new territories with common signs of national identity and the category of new states.

The purpose of this project is to create a network of art museums and national galleries in terms of resources which relate to visual and artistic expression. This means that museums are becoming mediators for the intellectual and creative environment.

The exhibition will be presented at the Arsenāls Exhibition Hall of the Latvian National Museum of Art, which is housed in a building that was erected in 1836 as a weapons warehouse. After many changes in its functions, the building was renovated in 1988 to become an exhibition hall. Arsenāls stood witness to World War I and is a typical example of 19th century architecture in the Russian Empire.

Although the exhibition offers visual evidence, it certainly speaks to historical issues, too. The concept includes three stories which are both separate and unifying in their message – *On the Ruins of Empires*, *Riflemen*, and *Eyewitnesses*. Each tells a story in its own way about the causes, consequences and resonance of the immeasurable conflict in time, space and individual lives.

ON THE RUINS OF EMPIRES

When we consider the complicated elements and interpretations of 20th century history, it is of key importance to look at the situation which existed during the early part of the century in advance of the war. This makes it possible to identify achievements in Europe prior to 1914, evaluate the losses that were caused by the war, and reconstruct events and consequences without trying to claim absolute truth about them.

Four empires collapsed as a result of World War I – the German Empire, the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. The war destroyed cultural heritage to an unprecedented degree, devastating castles, estates, churches, architectural ensembles, historical monuments, interiors, and unique objects of art. Old Europe lost its culture during the war, and it would never be recovered.

The war also led to a collapse in spiritual values, which were replaced by different attitudes and philosophers. The French author Marcel Proust described this era as one which led to the “death of churches.”

The centennial of World War I (1914-1918) will be commemorated with a series of events, initiating new debates about the balance between losses and benefits from the war. Along with human, civilian and military losses, the fact is that the long-lasting war, with the Eastern front line running along the Daugava River, led to massive devastation in Latvia and in terms of its art and culture (the Eleja Castle is one example). Latvia suffered more, on average, than the rest of Europe did do.

The past is symbolised in this case with an installation featuring objects of culture which really suffered damage – details of architecture and sculpture, picture frames, etc. The LNMM is working with the Rundāle Castle Museum and its director, Imants Lancmanis, for this purpose.

RIFLEMEN

The unique story of the Latvian Riflemen manifests and confirms Latvian national identity. The beginning of World War I involved universal mobilisation in the territory of Latvia, creating military units which suffered complete defeat in Germany and Poland in early 1915. Tens of thousands of Latvian soldiers were killed or captured.

Latvian rifle brigades that were part of the tsarist armies of the Russian Empire served as a resource for national self-confidence and for the establishment and development of independent statehood. The history of the riflemen is important in that this is a psychological story about conflicts in the human soul – saying farewell to one’s younger years, being able to sacrifice oneself on the altar of the Fatherland, and standing ready to give up love and perhaps even one’s own life.

It has to be said that historical research about the riflemen is successfully being pursued by the Latvian War Museum, which means that the LNMM is co-operation with another type of museum in an interdisciplinary way so as to present unique photographs of the riflemen and their lives.

EYEWITNESSES

“When eyewitnesses die, legends arise.”

Ilya Ehrenburg

The main idea here is to present Eastern and Central European artists from the era of World War I who were eyewitnesses to the war and presented it in their artworks. For the first time, an exhibition of artworks from the national art museums of Central and Eastern European countries which acquired independence will be brought together – museums from Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Finland, etc. These will reflect the following topics: *The Front Line*, *Man and the Everyday Life of the War*, and *Modernism*.

The Front Line (1914-1918). This will be an illustration of art which depicts the development of the war.

Man and the Everyday Life of the War (1914-1918) will focus on the emotional and psychological mood of the war, as well as the attitude of artists as eyewitnesses, these elements merging together with the search for innovative forms of artistic expression.

Modernism (1914-1925). World War I saw the emergence of classical Modernism – an innovative means of expression to integrate the emotional drama of war and to talk about the manifestation of Modernism and artistic choices between traditional and new means of expression. The exhibition will display Modernist artworks in Eastern and Central Europe, as created between 1914 and 1925.

In 2012, the *1914* working group had a unique opportunity to travel through the Baltic States, Nordic countries and other parts of Eastern and Central Europe so as to examine collections of art and to select artworks for the “Eyewitness” section. The art that will be seen next year in Rīga will come from the following museums:

- 1) The Finnish National Gallery
- 2) The Art Museum of Estonia
- 3) The Tartu Art Museum
- 4) The Art Museum of Lithuania
- 5) The Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb
- 6) The Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava
- 8) The National Museum in Warsaw
- 9) The Muzem Sztuki w Łodzi
- 10) The Božidar Jakac Art Museum, Slovenia
- 11) The National Gallery of Slovenia
- 12) The National Museum of Contemporary History, Slovenia
- 13) A private collection from Slovenia
- 14) The Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade
- 15) The Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest
- 16) The Gallery of West Bohemia, Pilsen
- 17) The National Gallery in Prague
- 18) The Latvian National Museum of Art

Latvian embassies helped us to establish contacts, organise meetings and handle legal issues. We are continuing to work with embassies from the aforementioned countries in Rīga to receive artworks, their couriers and museum delegations when the exhibition in Rīga will be opened.

Conferences as part of the “1914” project

The project will also involve a scholarly platform. Two of three international conferences have already occurred:

- 1) On October 10, 2012, the Latvian National Museum of Art hosted the international scholarly conference “1914 on Freedom Street,” the purpose being to generate public discussions about aspects of European identity and history in the context of the centennial of World War I. Organisers of the “1914” project and of the Rīga 2014 project joined together with historians who have focused on researching the war by analysing it as an historical phenomenon that has increasingly influenced Western perceptions and

cultural traditions. Specialists from the World War I Historical Association in Peron, France, the University of Latvia, the Rīga Academy of Pedagogy and Education, the Latvian Academy of Culture, and the Latvian National Museum of Art also took part.

2) On June 6, 2013, the Latvian National Museum of Art and the Rundāle Castle Museum organised a conference, “The Last Day of Pompeii” at the castle. The centennial of World War I has involved numerous events and discussions about losses that were incurred during the war. Alongside humanitarian, civilian and military losses, it is also important to emphasise the loss of Europe’s cultural heritage. The conference gathered professionals who exchanged experiences in relation to cultural heritage, also looking at the role of concrete institutions, foundations and patrons in the creation of collective memory. Lecturers from the Latvian National Committee of UNESCO, the History Museum of Berlin, the World War I Historical Association of Peron, the Hungarian Open-Air Museum, and the Institute of Art History of Vilnius took part in the event. The director of the Rundāle Castle, Imants Lancmanis, delivered a lecture at the conference, as well.

3) The closing conference of the project, “1914: The War and Modernism”, will take place on March 19 and 20, 2014, focusing on the emergence of a new era and Modernism during World War I.

Lectures from these conferences are to be published in the “Articles From the Museum” collection at the Latvian National Museum of Art. This will be a textual extension of the “1914” project for scholars and others who are interested in the development of the project. The proceedings of the 2014 conference will be presented on the media and at www.1914.lv, both in Latvian and in English. The aim will be to promote and publicise the conference in the long term, both in the local and the international context.

COMMENTARY ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART

The leitmotif for this section is the individual and subjective view of the generalised objective. Only personal experience and emotions can make it possible to reflect upon the relevant era and to express messages about it. This section is expected to organise the context and to involve artists who have reflected upon war, power, aggression, and the cause for conflicts. The exhibition will feature artworks that are currently being produced by three Latvian artists – Ēriks Božis, Krišs Salmanis, and Andris Breže. In partnership with the French Institute, the artwork *Heartbeats* by the distinguished European contemporary artist Christian Boltanski from France will also be displayed.

The Arsenal's Exhibition Hall, Latvian National Museum of Art *Creative Workshop* **January 19 to April 20**

A special guest in Rīga during the year when it will be the European Cultural Capital will be the distinguished French artist **Christian Boltanski**, who will visit Rīga to introduce audiences to the *Heartbeats* installation, which he has presented in various cities of the world so as to embody memories about humans in an unusual manner.

Each person has a different heartbeat. Boltanski breaks down boundaries between life and death and the past and the present. *Heartbeats* reminds us that life is fragile and the borders of death are crossed again and again. After his personal exhibition, *Grand Palais*, in Paris in 2010, the artist presented the *Heartbeats* installation in many countries in the world, including Great Britain, Israel, the United States, etc.

Visitors at the exhibition will have a unique opportunity register the rhythm of their hearts in the “Heartbeat Archive” that is preserved in the southern part of the Ejima Island in Japan. We are all invited to register our heartbeats, thus crossing the intangible border of death in that the heartbeats of people who have died are also preserved in the archive.

The concept of the exhibition poses this question to the audience: Is the world war only a formula of the past, or is the yearning to engage in various kinds of wars still important today? Also, are the benefits of the war worthy of the sacrifices that have been borne?

CONCLUSION

1. As part of a cultural event, art helps to shape a professional network of European art museums and to open up processes of information.
2. The exhibition policies of the LNMM will be expanded to an unprecedented degree, also helping to shape Latvia's image, not least in terms of the Eastern European context.
3. A unique contribution of added value for society and foreign guests.
4. An explanation of Latvian history in the broader context.
5. Joint experience in studying art on the basis of the Eastern European platform.
6. Inclusion of the study of history and art from each country as part of the project and the research process, also helping to establish contacts in future.
7. The project is a unique example of various dialogues with EU embassies and institutions on the basis of the common platform of creative ideas.

¹Jean-François De Raymond. "La diplomatie de l'art" in *Art. Philosophie. Diplomatie*, ed. Jean-François De Raymond, Maryvonne Saison. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris, 2007), 14.

² Līgotnu Jēkabs. *Zigfrīds Meierovics. Mūžs, darbs, liktenis* [*Zigfrīds Meierovics. Life, work, fate. (Rīga: Valters un Rapa (1990s))*], 59.

³ <http://riga2014.org>