

BALTIC SYMBOLISM – THE ADDED VALUE OF EUROPEAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

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From 10 April to 15 July 2018, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris held the exhibition "Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States" (*Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes*). This was an ambitious joint project of all three Baltic states and one of the largest events in the international programme of Latvia's centenary.

This exhibition invited the French public and many thousands of tourists from around the world to discover symbolism in Baltic art of the 1890s to the 1930s. It was also an opportunity to discuss the Baltic, emphasising the specific characteristics of the

art, the historical legacy, and the traditions of each country (Fig. 1).

The project was a major effort by leading cultural and diplomatic institutions, its significance underscored by the fact that the exhibition patron was Emmanuel Macron, President of France, and that it was unveiled at the Musée d'Orsay on 9 April by President Macron and the three presidents of the Baltic states (Fig. 2). We, who conceived this event and saw it through from the initial idea to its realisation, were most privileged to be involved, because the exhibition was not only an international



Fig. 1.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Advertisement for the exhibition "Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States". 2018. Photo: Ansis Starks



Fig. 2.
Opening of the exhibition “Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States” at the Musée d’Orsay on 9 April 2018.
From the left: President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid, President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė, President of France Emmanuel Macron,
President of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis. Photo: Ansis Starks

manifestation of culture attracting 236 079 visitors during its 82 days (almost 3000 per day) but also developed as a continuation of historical events, emphasising France’s role in the incorporation of the Baltic states into the general ecosystem of European art (Fig. 3).

Cultural diplomacy had a place in the foreign policy of the Latvian state right from the very beginning: for example, at the time of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, in parallel with meetings between politicians, there were lectures, speeches, publications and cultural events that provided a significant instrument of influence, conveying an impression of the high professional standard of culture in the newly-established Baltic states.

The Francophile orientation in Latvian art was an abiding source of influence, starting with the expe-

rience of Paris, metropolis of European art, at the beginning of the 20th century, and continuing with the orientation towards France among Latvian artists of the 1920s and 1930s, which reinforced a sense of belonging to Western European culture, allowed the artists to perceive their work in a wider context and acquainted them with contemporary world trends.

In the 1930s, France followed a policy of actively enlarging its cultural space to become an intellectual moderator among many different nations. The Baltics were represented at the national level in Paris at the 1935 Applied Art and Ethnography Exhibition held in the Trocadéro Palace. The next joint cultural presentation of the Baltic states was in 1937, with a shared pavilion at the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life.



Fig. 3. General view of the exhibition “Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States” at the Musée d’Orsay, 2018. Photo: Ansis Starks

This proved to be the 20th century’s last showing of Baltic art in France: with the outbreak of the Second World War and Soviet occupation, the names of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania disappeared for half a century from the European map. In the 1990s, after winning back independence, the Baltic States had to demonstrate their artistic credentials in Europe anew, regardless of their earlier achievements. Looking back now at the history of this Baltic project, the success story of Latvian symbolism has been a significant factor. After visiting Kaunas to see the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art in 1999, the French curator Rodolphe Rapetti made a trip to Riga to acquaint himself with the unknown art of this period in Latvia. Rodolphe Rapetti is France’s *Conservateur général du patrimoine*, author of many publications relating to the

theme of symbolism and curator of exhibitions at the Musée d’Orsay and the Grand Palais in Paris. Rapetti’s first exhibition as curator was “Edvard Munch and France” (Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 1991), followed by “Gustave Caillebotte” (Grand Palais, Paris, 1994). With the creation of the exhibition “Unknown Horizons. Art in Finland, 1870–1920” (Galerie de L’Ancienne Douane, Strasbourg, 1999; Palais Des Beaux-Arts, Lille, 1999–2000), Rapetti’s interests extended in the direction of Northern Europe, exploring the distinctive characteristics of Finnish art from this period, and thus also drew him nearer to the Baltic states [1].

Each of the national art museums in the Baltic states already had its own studies and past activities on this theme. Moreover, Latvian symbolist art had already been successfully presented within the



Fig 4.
Opening of the exhibition “Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Baltic States” at the Musée d’Orsay on 9 April 2018. From the left: Director of the Latvian National Museum of Art Māra Lāce, Latvian Minister of Culture Dace Melbārde, project leader Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece.
Photo: Ansis Starks

framework of an ambitious international project – the exhibition “Spreading One’s Wings”, which in 2004 and 2005 was shown at the National Museum in Szczecin, the Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture of the National Museum in Warsaw in the Królikarnia palace and the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Art Museum in Kaunas. In 2010 and 2011, works by well-known Latvian classics were shown at BrusselsTown Hall and the National Museum of History and Art in Luxembourg (Musée national d’histoire et d’art Luxembourg, MNHA). Another internationally significant episode was the participation of the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA) in the exhibition “Symbolism and Decadence: the northern perspective” held in 2015–2016 in Sweden, at Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, one of Stockholm’s most respected art museums. In 2015, the LNMA contacted Rodolphe Rapetti, inviting him to become curator of an exhibition of Baltic Symbolism. By this time, the proposal from the LNMA had already received a positive response from colleagues at the national museums in Tallinn, Vilnius, and Kaunas, who authorised us to talk to the French side. Rodolphe Rapetti received our invita-

tion with genuine interest, and thus, as representatives of the Baltic, we had the unique opportunity to work with this outstanding individual and professional in the field. The exhibition project was implemented jointly by four national art museums in the three Baltic states: the Latvian National Museum of Art (Riga); the Kumu Art Museum (Tallinn), with additional works loaned by Tartu Art Museum; the Lithuanian National Museum of Art (Vilnius) and the Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Museum of Art (Kaunas). Starting from 2016, the national art museums of the Baltic states worked together with France. Preparatory work for the exhibition involved Latvia’s Ministry of Culture as well as the corresponding ministries in the partner countries, the Latvia 100 Office, the French Embassy and the French Institute in Latvia, as well as the Latvian Foreign Ministry and the embassies of the Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in France.

In the spring of 2016, at a special meeting in Brussels, Latvia’s Minister of Culture Dace Melbārde discussed the idea of the exhibition with Audray Azoulay, the French Minister of Culture, and even before the specific venue and timing of the exhibition had been agreed, they endorsed the initiative of the cooperation partners from France and the Baltic for the holding of an exhibition in Paris (Fig. 4).

The Baltic Symbolism exhibition was discussed at several meetings on different levels at the Museums Directorate of the French Ministry of Culture, the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, etc. In the framework of the discussion, the works of art from the age of symbolism were visually presented and their merits assessed. One of a series of fortunate coincidences was a meeting in Rīga in 2005. Among the art scholars and museum specialists arriving in Rīga from abroad was Laurence des Cars from Paris, who gave a paper entitled “The Musée du Luxembourg – the first museum of contemporary in France”. Having become acquainted with the LNMA collections, the then curator and researcher at the Musée d’Orsay noted that, with the further development of European exhibition activity, the Latvian art she had seen in Rīga would have great potential. The Baltic museums’ team had to decide on the question of holding the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay in just a few days. Our colleagues from

Tallinn, Vilnius, and Kaunas were quick to let us know they would not pass up this opportunity and would do their utmost to make this initiative succeed. In order to ensure successful cooperation with the four Baltic museums, H el ene Flon, St ephanie de Brabander, and Beatrice Avanzi from the Mus e d'Orsay, as well as the museum's director, Laurence des Cars herself, visited the Baltic and became personally acquainted with all the project partners.

On 1 June 2017, a press conference was held in the Symbolist room of the LNMA, at which Latvia's Ministry of Culture, the French delegation, representatives of the Baltic museums and the project organising group announced the planned exhibition at the Mus e d'Orsay in Paris. This upcoming cultural event attracted great interest, which would not subside during the whole year. Thanks to cooperation with the Latvian Institute, foreign journalists also arrived in R iga and the upcoming event was reported in the French press.

Rodolphe Rapetti undertook to select the works and made visits from R iga to museums in Tallinn, Tartu, Vilnius and Kaunas. Each work was chosen only after viewing the original and serious evaluation (Figs. 5, 6, 7). The success of the project also is due to the professional team of museum staff from the three countries, intercommunicating in what may be characterised as a fantastic example of cooperation. This was undoubtedly helped by the creative process and the professional dialogue with the Mus e d'Orsay specialists during which our French colleagues' interest in the project grew into a genuine interest in Baltic culture, languages and traditions. The idea advanced by the Mus e d'Orsay was to involve specialists from various fields in a scientific exchange of views on the age of symbolism. On 3 May 2018, a symposium on symbolism was held at the Mus e d'Orsay entitled "National Romanticism and Baltic Symbolism", with the participation of three researchers from each country. At the closure of the project in Paris, articles in the press and in specialist publications were collected, so that they would be available for professional evaluation in the Baltic.

In addition to the fact that the Mus e d'Orsay offered the most prestigious exhibition space, it was also a major financial partner in producing the



Fig 5
Vilhelms Purvītis. Spring Waters (Maestoso). ca 1910. Oil on canvas. 102.5 × 144 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art. VMM GL-1570. Photo: Normunds Brasliņš



Fig 6.
Ferdynand Ruszczyk. Nec mergitur. 1904–1905. Oil on canvas. 204 × 221 cm. Lithuanian National Museum of Art. LMD T-2691. Photo: Antanas Lukšėnas



Fig 7.
Konrad Mägi. Composition (Meditation. Landscape with a Lady). ca 1915–1916. Oil on canvas. 81.6 × 106 cm. Art Museum of Estonia EKM M 2060. Photo: Steņislas Stepaško

exhibition and the catalogue. In the course of preparing the exhibition, the team of museum specialists from the Baltic came to the conclusion that the project also had to be shown back home, and we agreed to continue it in the three capitals. After the Musée d'Orsay, the exhibition began with great success at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia (11.10.2018–03.02.2019), travelling to the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, National Art Gallery in Vilnius (24.07–11.10.2020), and ending at the LNMA in Rīga (20.11.2020–04.05.2021). The Latvian phase of the symbolist project imposed certain historical obligations on us because the building of the Rīga City Art Museum once held regular exhibitions by Baltic artists. In 1909, it was the venue for the first exhibition by Parisian artists, in addition to which there were regular showings of art from Lithuania and Estonia. In the context of cultural exchange between France and Latvia, more than eighty years ago, in March 1939, an exhibition of French modern art opened here, just a few days af-

ter a hugely successful Latvian art exhibition at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris that had been acclaimed as a triumph of Latvian art. This fact was noted repeatedly at various organisational meetings of the Baltic symbolist exhibition.

Ending the four-exhibition project where it began, in Rīga, we may conclude that in this aspect we have been privileged in a way; the staff of Latvia's art museums as a united team were able to draw attention to the Baltic states not only in the cultural sense but also at the political and diplomatic level, delighting exhibition visitors in Paris, Tallinn, Vilnius, and Rīga. Laurence des Cars repeatedly emphasised that Europe is united not only politically but also in the creation of common cultural values. This conviction, one of the cornerstones of the Musée d'Orsay's exhibition policy, made it possible to demonstrate that, alongside the work of well-known masters, the contribution of artists from the little-known Baltic belongs to Europe's common cultural heritage.

REFERENCES

1. General curator, Rodolphe Rapetti, currently Director of the National Domains and Museums of Compiègne and Blérancourt. In parallel with his research activity, Rodolphe Rapetti has also been Curator at the Musée d'Orsay, Director of the Musées de Strasbourg, Director of the Muséum National Jean-Jacques Henner and Deputy Director of the Museums of France; he has taught at the School of the Louvre and Paris Nanterre University. Rapetti's achievement in the field of symbolist research includes the exhibitions "Odilon Redon" (Grand Palais, Paris, 2011), "Van Gogh to Kandinsky: the Symbolist Landscape of Europe 1880–1910" (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, 2012); "52 Souls. Symbolist Landscape: 1880–1910" (Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, 2012) and "Émile Bernard" (Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris; Kunsthalle Bremen, 2014). His most important studies include the monograph *Symbolism (Le Symbolisme)*, Paris: Flammarion, 2007, also published in English that same year, with a condensed version in 2014.