

Latvian culture

Shaped by man and nature

The Latvian national identity has developed over a 3,000 year period. Latvian culture has always been closely tied to the Northern European land and nature that Latvia's inhabitants have depended on for survival. The forests, rivers and meadows on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, like the sea itself, have shaped Latvia's history, politics and economy, and as a result, have formed the lifeblood of its living culture.

European influences

While the roots of modern Latvian language and culture date back thousands of years, the 13th century marked the beginning of a series of foreign invasions and influences. German, Swedish and Polish warriors and traders brought European culture to Latvia, at times threatening the existence of the Latvian culture, at times strengthening it through adversity, and eventually co-existing along side it.

Dainas – a uniquely Latvian phenomenon

Centuries of foreign rule prevented Latvians from recording their history and traditions in written form. Latvian culture was instead preserved and manifested in folklore that displayed the collective wisdom and beliefs of the Latvians' ancient tribal ancestors. A uniquely Latvian cultural phenomenon, folk songs, or *dainas*, date back well over a thousand years. Rich with tradition, literature and symbolism, the *dainas* serve as an oral record of Latvian culture. By the 19th century, more than 1.2 million texts and 30,000 melodies were identified. In the 21st century, these songs continue live as an essential part of Latvian contemporary holiday celebrations and social life.

The 'Singing Revolution'

This powerful tradition of song played a central role in Latvia's National Awakening in the second half of the 19th century and led to the first Latvian Song Festival in 1873. The Song Festival, involving massed choirs of tens of thousands of participants was a central focus of national identity during Latvia's

first period of independence from 1918 until 1940. It survived as a distinctly national event and a bastion of Latvian culture despite 50 years of forced Sovietization during the Soviet occupation, and spearheaded Latvia's 'singing revolution' in the late 1980's. The political and economic forces that lead to the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 were driven by powerful, centuries-old cultural forces.

Contemporary culture

Latvian traditions still play a central role in the Latvian identity today. This uniquely 'Latvian' culture is woven through its literature, music, theatre and the visual arts. Yet, the legacy of foreign rule has also given Latvia a second, European culture. As a distinctive Latvian identity emerged during the National Awakening in the 19th century, so did an appreciation for the achievements of other cultures. Latvians enthusiastically embraced all the classical arts – literature, painting, theatre, symphonic music, architecture, opera, ballet and film. At the turn of the century the Latvian poet Rainis, and painters Janis Rozentāls and Vilhelms Purvītis had established international reputations. In the 1920's and 1930's Latvia's 'Rīga group' of painters became known internationally.

During Soviet rule, Latvia's passion for the arts routinely broke through the rigid ideological constrictions that Moscow tried to impose on its Communist empire. Latvia's filmmakers established Rīga as the 'Hollywood' of the Soviet Union, while its provocative fashion designers made it the avant-garde design centre of the otherwise staid and conservative Soviet Union. The late Juris Podnieks gained world recognition in the 1980's for his incisive and uncompromising documentary films that exposed the dark and deteriorating underbelly of the collapsing Soviet empire.

Artists of international renown

With independence, came a revival of Latvia's traditional and cosmopolitan cultures. Latvia's National Opera – the

'White House' of Rīga – was one of the first buildings to be renovated after the restoration of independence in 1991 and is the centrepiece of a flourishing cultural life. Latvia's world class opera singers such as Inese Galante, Sonora Vaice, Egils Siliņš and Elīna Garanča, today perform in opera houses throughout Europe.

Pēteris Vasks is considered one of the finest contemporary composers in the world, while Rīga-born violinist Gidon Kremer and his *Kremerata Baltica* chamber orchestra won a Grammy in 2002. Violinist Baiba Skride took First Prize in the Queen Elizabeth International Music Competition in Brussels in 2001 and has been hailed as one of the most outstanding young violinists in all of Europe. The creative energy of Latvia's innovative post-modern folklore band, *Iļģi*, has established them as stars in the growing genre of world music. Not to be left behind by classical and traditional artists, Latvia's youthful pop-rock band *Brainstorm* has gained legions of fans across Europe through its successes at Eurovision and on MTV. In 2002, Latvia surprised Europe when Marie N. (Marija Naumova) won the Eurovision Song Contest with her song, 'I Wanna.'

Rīga – the hottest city in the north

The rapid renovation of Rīga's historic centre has revealed hundreds of examples of distinctive Jugendstil architecture, leading some to assert that Rīga may be the Jugendstil capital of Europe. The historical centre of Rīga was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997.

A hundred years ago Rīga was known as the 'Paris of the North'. Now Rīga has blossomed as a creative centre for the arts once again. Local and visiting art exhibits and the opera, theatre and ballet, compete with night clubs and discos that rock with jazz, blues and the latest electronic fusions of hip hop and dance music. After 14 years of independence, Rīga is now called 'The Second City that Never Sleeps', and 'The Hottest City in the North'.

A multi-faceted, dynamic culture

The vibrancy of cultural life in Latvia is a product of talented artists, performers and writers that honed and developed their skills in cities and regions throughout Latvia. Many continue to live and work in their home towns or rural settings, blending the influences of traditional roots with the modern, cosmopolitan influences of the nation's capital. This spiritual desire to live and flourish as Latvians, as Europeans, and as the shapers of the 21st century, is a phenomenon that continues to shape Latvia's multi-faceted, dynamic culture.