

Culture: the Key to Latvia



Cover photo:
Artists Krišs
Salmanis and
Kaspars Podnieks
before the
opening of the 55th
International
Venice Biennale,
featuring their
works at the
Latvian pavilion
entitled "North by
Northeast"

If you want to understand Latvians, or are ready to fall in love with Latvia, you should get to know its cultural life. Once you embark on this journey, you will never want to finish it. The cultural landscape of Latvia has its peaks and valleys, panoramic views and fast turns. It is too diverse to generalize, though you may come across some common threads.

It is surprising to what extent the traditional culture and folklore serves as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Latvian arts, design and architecture. And so does the complex history of Latvia – it provides never-ending food for thought, the content for plays, poems, novels, even musical compositions and visual art. One should note that the Latvian art scene, especially visual arts, and to a lesser extent literature, went through a period of disorientation during the socialist years, with its attempts to instrumentalise arts by preferring one kind of esthetics and prohibiting another. Thus, resistance became a driving force for art and artists for a significant amount of time.

Having a language that has ancient roots but is nowadays spoken by only two million people is another key factor for developments in Latvian culture. On the one hand, it could have made our poets and writers less heard for wider audiences, on the other hand – cherishing the language and seeing it as an endangered cultural value has been a powerful impulse for creative work. With no scientific proof we can assume that language is also the ground for musicality that Latvians apparently have in their blood – there are disproportionately many talented Latvian musicians that are appreciated far beyond its borders.

The real success of culture are not awards and prizes (although Latvians have got them too), the real value of culture lies in the extent to which culture is necessary for its creators and audiences, how much in use it is. And here, culture is part of the air we breathe; it stretches towards the horizon.

Literature

INTRODUCTION

A still from the
New Riga Theatre
production
“Ziedonis and the
Universe”,
2010



If there was no Latvian literature, there would probably be no Latvians. It is as simple as that. Literature and litterateurs helped crystallize the idea of the Latvian state and bring forth the courage to lay its foundations. During the age of banned and recommended subject matter, literature (and poetry in particular) cleverly manoeuvred between the lines to convey its message. It is only now, at the start of the 21st century, that Latvian writers – perhaps for the first time – can stay true to their art without making any concessions to external pressures.

Latvian literature is flourishing; and its voices, timbres, intonations are diversified. There are writers whose texts are densely woven with layers of metaphors and symbols, employing a mythological way of expression.¹ There are others who create deeply intimate, emotional worlds.² There are intellectual innovators of form,³ and those inclined towards more ironic intonations.⁴ The generation of grand poets⁵ who wrote at a time when poetry could influence not just perceptions but also socio-political realities, of polyglots whose knowledge of other cultures became a colourful ingredient in their own creations,⁶ is now followed by a surprisingly plentiful generation of young poets.⁷ Standing a little apart, though close by, the Russophone literary landscape of Latvia has been developing and adding to the polyphony of Latvian contemporary culture.⁸

We have our own master of crime novels,⁹ our first talents in the fantasy genre,¹⁰ and even our poetry slammers who believe that the future lies in the spoken word. The current landscape of Latvian literature is like a swarming beehive, a babbling river or a busy airport.

- 1 Gundega Repše (1960), Nora Ikstena (1969), Inga Ābele (1972), Inga Gaile (1976)
- 2 Leons Briedis (1949), Amanda Aizpuriete (1956), Pēteris Draguns (1976), Agnese Krivade (1981)
- 3 Guntis Berelis (1961), Edvīns Raups (1962)
- 4 Jānis Rokpelis (1945), Klāvs Elsbergs (1959-1987), Kārlis Vērdiņš (1979)
- 5 Vizma Belševica (1931-2005), Imants Ziedonis (1933-2013), Ojārs Vācietis (1933-1983), Māra Zālite (1952), Jānis Peters (1939)
- 6 Knuts Skujenieks (1936), Uldis Bērziņš (1944), Pēters Brūveris (1957-2011)
- 7 Ingmāra Balode (1981), Henriks Eliass Zēgners (1995), Anna Foma (1988), Arvis Viguls (1987), Andris Ogrīņš (1975), Artis Ostups (1988)
- 8 Sergejs Moreino (1964), Oļegs Zolotovs (1963-2006), text group “Orbita”
- 9 Andris Kolbergs (1938), Gunārs Cīrulis (1923-2002)
- 10 Tom Crosshill (1985)

A still from TV series
“Lupatiņi” (Shammies)
for children, based
on stories by Inese
Zandere



Inese Zandere & liels un mazs

CONTEMPORARY
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We would venture to assert that over the past decade or so no child in Latvia will have grown up untouched by the phenomenon of Inese Zandere (1958). Literary critic Anda Baklāne says: “Inese Zandere is not just a children’s poet; Inese Zandere is an entire paradigm, an industry and a concept.” Zandere’s poems for children – or, rather, families – have turned reading poetry into a lively, playful and serious conversation, rich with imagination yet devoid of pretence. Inese Zandere also encourages others to write for children; “liels un mazs”, the publishing house she founded, is remarkably prolific and, in close collaboration with poets, writers and illustrators, is helping ever more readers to cross the boundary from reading ability into reading enjoyment.

Documentary Prose

Unable to earn a living in Latvia, Īva Baranovska embarked on the experiences and tribulations of a guest worker in modern-day Ireland (Laima Muktupāvela “The Mushroom Covenant”). Five decades earlier, a girl was born in Siberia, to a couple banished from Soviet Latvia as part of the mass deportations; not until much later will the girl, afterwards to become Latvia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, truly grasp how much endurance, courage and human perseverance was needed to survive starvation and humiliation (Sandra Kalniete “With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows”).

Documentary literature (fiction and non-fiction) has been gaining popularity with both writers and readers since the 1990s. Alongside its literary qualities its appeal also lies in the chance to hear another telling of the stories of European history.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE



Pauls Bankovskis,
the most prolific
Latvian documentary
prose writer



Radio wall installation
by Orbita group for
Cēsis Art Festival,
2012

Orbita. Blurring the Lines

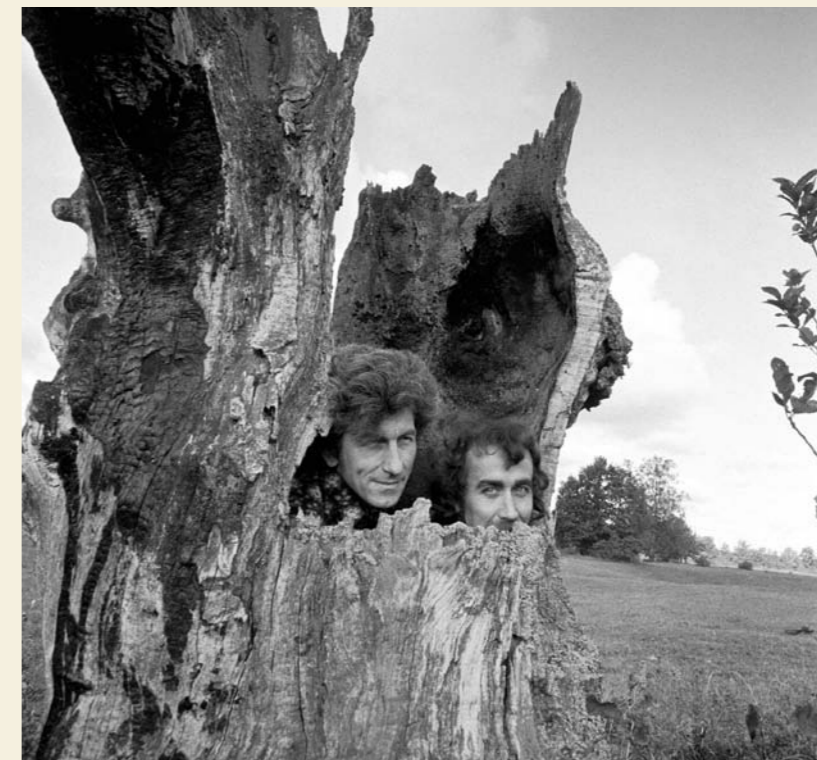
CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Poetry that shares its audience with DJs of electronic music? Yes – that is the case with Orbita, a union of five Latvian-born Russophone poets of roughly the same generation – Semyon Khanin (1970), Vladimir Svetlov (1973), Zhorzh Uallik, Artur Punte (1977) and Sergei Timofeyev (1970). No less interested in new media than in poetry, they experiment with ways in which poetry can be performed and perceived, creating almanacs (also in CD format), video experiments, collaborations with media artists. Orbita has succeeded in bringing together both Latvian and Russian-Latvian audiences, which otherwise tend to stay on their respective near-lying but parallel cultural streets. An interdisciplinary approach is now advanced even further by an artist-run art centre Totaldobže, where collaborations among poets, musicians, contemporary dancers, poetry slammers and artists have become part of the daily routine.

Imants Ziedonis and the Power of Poetry

When Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013) passed away, thousands of people lined up to pay their last respects. Ziedonis, being one of the greatest Latvian poets, wrote in a way that allowed people from the most varied walks of life – be it a skateboarding teenager, a forty-something entrepreneur or an elderly teacher – to feel a personal connection with his work. He was a rational thinker preoccupied with the irrational; a master of paradoxes; a poet so in command of the Latvian language as to be able to show it off in all its playfulness. Like Ojārs Vācietis (1933–1983) and Vizma Belševica (1931–2005), Imants Ziedonis was an author whose writings and point of view influenced not only the following generations of poets but also the socio-political developments of his time.

ORIGINS



Imants Ziedonis
(1933-2013) together
with composer
Imants Kalniņš (1941)

Poet Klāvs Elsbergs
(1959-1987) who
influenced many
contemporaries



Censorship and Readership

ORIGINS

Latvians are often asked how tough life was during Soviet times. When it came to literature, a literary career could put your life in danger. Writers and poets could be banned – prohibited from being published, read, even mentioned. Worse yet, some writers were imprisoned or deported. There were others, though, who were supported by the regime and commissioned to write. However, alongside this sad and cruel absurdity, there was a phenomenal keenness for reading – the print runs of each published title were 20 and even 40 times the size that they have been ever since.

Rainis

Where Germans have Goethe, where the Spanish have Cervantes, Latvians have Rainis – or, as it would only be fair to say, Rainis and Aspazija (the pseudonyms of Jānis and Elza Pliekšāns). Literary Latvian language was at the time in its infancy, and Rainis and Aspazija were without a doubt among those who helped nurture it. In their poetry, plays, translations and political activities they both created a sense of Latvian identity. You would be hard-pressed to find a Latvian town that does not have a street named after Rainis or Aspazija; you will probably see their names in most theatre repertoires – and so it is hardly surprising that there is even a crater on the planet Mercury that bears Rainis' name.

ORIGINS



Rainis at the beach
in Majori, 1929



A still from the Latvian National Opera production of Donizetti's "L'elisir D'amore" in 2009

Performing Arts

INTRODUCTION

Latvians love theatre. They go to the theatre, they discuss it, actors are admired and theatre directors become opinion makers. With Alvis Hermanis alone, one of the leading theatre directors in Europe right now, Latvia's name would have gone down in the history of theatre, but there is certainly much more on offer.

In recent years directors, actors and playwrights more often tend to work as researchers, historians, anthropologists; they collaborate in creating performances instead of staging dramatic texts. Latvian audiences have experienced theatre performances about Latvian love,¹ rural life,² the national development plan,³ recent presidents,⁴ as well as equivocal historical conflicts.⁵ Alongside post-dramatic performances, there are also excellent interpretations of literary and drama texts⁶ and, although without its own Broadway, Latvian theatres can be proud of their musicals,⁷ often with original librettos, written by contemporary authors and composers.

Traditionally the biggest Latvian theatres are state-funded repertoire theatres, but independent theatres,⁸ known for their successful and often brave experiments, have gained an established place on the Latvian theatre scene. The Latvian National Opera house, the tradition of which goes back over 90 years, has also been the stage for daring productions, featuring not only excellent performers, but also imaginative directors and stage designers. LNO's Carmen has been set in Cuba,⁹ The Magic Flute has been turned into a dizzyingly stunning forest of visual metaphors. The Latvian performing arts scene is a vibrant field – with historically rich soil, lush vegetation and vibrant sprouts.

1 "Latvian Love" (Latviešu mīlestība) by Alvis Hermanis and the New Riga Theatre
2 "Black Milk" (Melnais piens) by Alvis Hermanis and the New Riga Theatre
3 "National Development Plan" (Nacionālais attīstības plāns) by Jānis Balodis, Valters Silis
4 "All My Presidents" (Visi mani prezidenti) by Valters Silis
5 "Grandfather" (Vectēvs) by Alvis Hermanis, "Legionnaires" (Leģionāri) by Valters Silis
6 Theatre directors Vladislavs Nastavševs, Mihails Gruzdovs, Māra Ķīmele
7 Musicals, directed by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Edmunds Freibergs,
8 Independent theatre houses: Dirty Deal Teatro, Ģertrūdes Theatre
9 Directed by Andrejs Žagars.



Alvis Hermanis

You must have heard of him. This forty-something director has more than 55 performances to his name, staged in Rīga, Salzburg, Berlin, Vienna, Cologne, Munich, Modena, Moscow, Zurich, Tallinn. The production “Long Life”, a performance where five actors exhibit life in a flat shared by a group of elderly people, has become a benchmark of Hermanis’ documentary approach to theatre – all the dramatic material is created together with the actors, based on attentive observations of life situations and human behaviour. But it would be wrong to limit Hermanis’ style down to just that, he is also the author of proficiently done interpretations of classical literature and drama texts. Hermanis has been accurately described as a contemporary thinker who, instead of writing philosophical dissertations, stages performances; and following his thought process continues to excite audiences throughout Europe.

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Māra Zālīte

Māra Zālīte (1952) is the most productive and certainly the most staged Latvian playwright of recent decades. Musicals that she has created together with composer Jānis Lūsēns (1959) have been warmly received by the Latvian audience. Māra Zālīte chooses to tell complex stories often based on historical events, questioning national myths and proposing alternative sources of national identity. All that is masterly expressed in poetic and metaphoric language, often carrying references to folklore and national romanticism. Māra Zālīte is also well known for her poetry and is perceived as a public intellectual.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE



A poster for theatre
performance
“Lācis” by Māra Zālīte,
2009



Monika Pormale's scenography for the theatre performance "Garā Dzīve" (The Long Life) at the New Riga Theatre, 2003

Wizards of the Stage

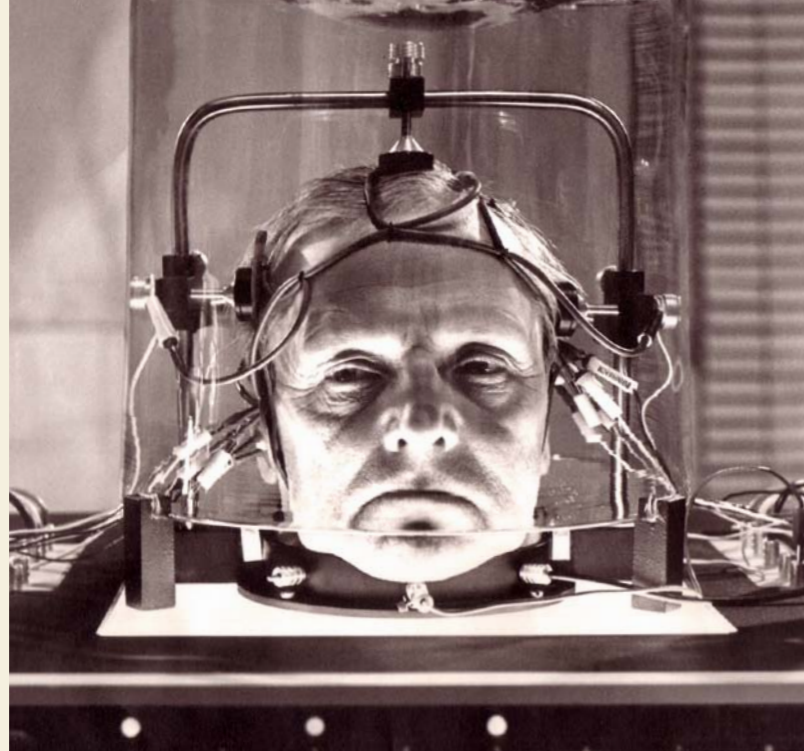
When it comes to Latvian theatre, scenography has always played an important role. The stage of the Latvian theatre could be the mythological world of Ilmārs Blumbergs (1945); the world of clean lines, ascetic forms and finely nuanced colours of Andris Freibergs (1938); or – listen up – it could also be the world of Reinis Suhanovs (1985), Freibergs' student, recently awarded "The Most Promising Talent" title at the International Prague Quadrennial. You might also find yourself wondering around in a set full of details, reconstructing an atmosphere of a particular place or time, with or without a playful stylisation, most probably done by Monika Pormale (1974) who is now working for Berliner Festspiele, Schauspielhaus Zürich and other European theatres.

CONTEMPORARY SCENE



Andris Freibergs' scenography for the Latvian National Opera production of Wagner's "Das Rheingold", 2012

Production of
T. Williams' "Orpheus
Descending" directed
by O. Kroders at the
Valmiera Theatre,
2011



Grand Dukes of Latvian Theatre

ORIGINS

Eduards Smiļģis (1886-1966) founded one of the first Latvian theatres, and together with set designer and theoretician Jānis Muncis (1886-1955) developed a new kind of theatre with stylization, dynamic visual form and radical changes in stage design. Psychological realism mixed with unusual dramaturgy of scenes, circus aesthetics and even vaudeville elements were brought into theatre by Adolf Šapiro (1939). Playwright and director Pēteris Pētersons (1923-1998) invented "poetry-theatre", using poetry as dynamite in his performances. Another grand duke of Latvian theatre, Oļģerts Kroders (1921-2012), is known for his psychologically sophisticated character studies, and a form of physical existence that was consciously approximated to everyday life. Meanwhile Latvian contemporary scenography is still under influence of talented artist and scenographer Kurts Fridrihsons (1911-1991). All of them were not only outstanding personalities of their time, but they also left a traceable influence on contemporary Latvian culture.

Rūdolfs Blaumanis

Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908) was the founder of the realistic psychological narrative and drama in Latvia. Blaumanis' plays pushed Latvian stage art to a new level, and one of his plays – "Skroderdienas Silmačos" (Tailor Days in Silmači) – has become a tradition, it is staged and performed every year around midsummer. After Blaumanis, the question whether great literature can be created in a remote European and Russian province was no longer relevant.

ORIGINS



Production of
Blaumanis' play
"Skroderdienas
Silmačos"
(Tailor Days in Silmači)
at the National
Theatre



Atelier of shoe designer "ZOFA"

Architecture and Design

INTRODUCTION

Latvian architecture has been developing slowly and carefully with respect towards the diverse architectural heritage of cities and towns – whether it was medieval grandeur, Art Nouveau intricacy or soviet functionalism, when it comes to rural territories, customary building traditions and landscape are taken into account. Contemporary Latvian architecture has often been one of reconstruction and preservation, adaptation of buildings that represent times gone by or used to serve entirely different functions. Banks, car distributors, offices have been commissioners to some of the most talented Latvian architects,¹ resulting in new features in the architectural landscape of Latvia. Lately also a number of public building projects have been on the rise – for the Treasury of the Bank of Latvia² and the Latvian National Library³ have both gained new homes, so has a concert hall in Rēzekne,⁴ a music school in Saldus,⁵ a Pārventa Library in Ventspils.⁶ Wooden architecture in Riga, on the other hand, has a patroness,⁷ who has not only led a highly regarded restoration process, but also raised awareness of and initiated a movement around wooden architecture as one of Riga's treasures.

With the young generation of architects entering the scene recently, architecture seems to have become more daring and emotionally expressive. Indeed, this is not limited to buildings. Latvians have their own shoe architect now – an architect turned shoe designer who has created her own brand of footwear,⁸ combining craftsmanship of previous generations with her own feel of form. When it comes to Latvian design, be it fashion, furniture, commodities – it often stands out with clean lines, and use of natural materials.

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- 1 Architectural offices Sīlis, Zābers, Kļava; NRJA, Arhis, INDIA, Sarma & Norde
 - 2 Andris Kronbergs (Arhis)
 - 3 Gunārs Birkerts
 - 4 Daiga Bikše, Uldis Balodis
 - 5 Linda Krūmiņa, Miķelis Putrāms (MADE)
 - 6 Pēteris Bajārs, Ivars Kalvāns a.o. (INDIA)
 - 7 Zaiga Gaile
 - 8 Elīna Dobeļe (ZOFA)



Birkerts and the Castle of Light

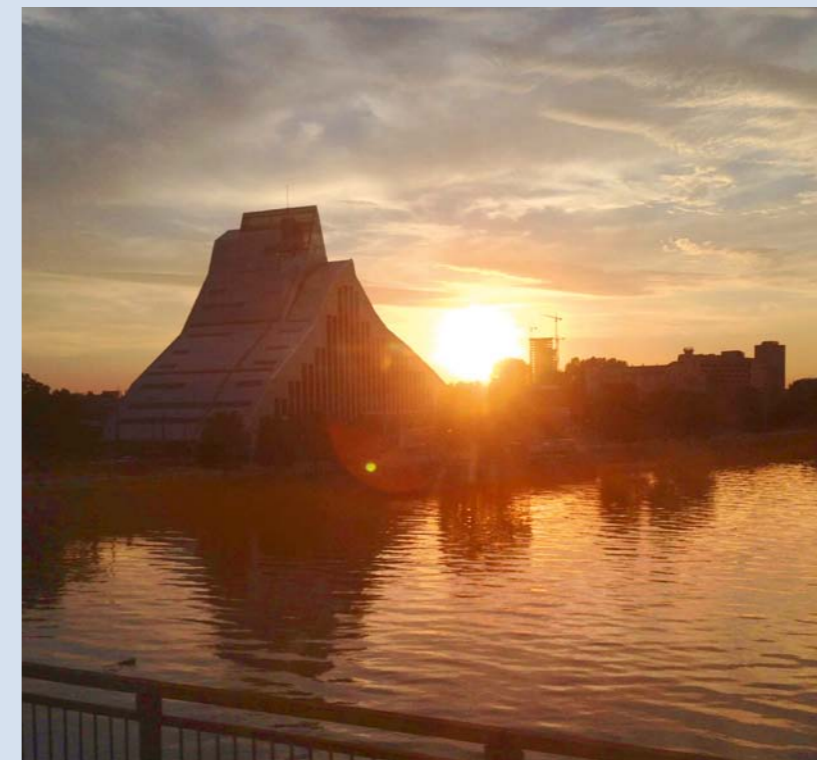
Gunārs Birkerts (1925) is the most famous architect of Latvian origin in the world. He has worked mainly in the United States and is internationally known for projects such as the Law Library building at the University of Michigan, the Corning Museum of Glass, and lately – the Castle of Light, the new building for the Latvian National Library in Riga. The architectural form of the Castle of the Light draws inspiration from the metaphors and images of Latvian folk legends – the hill of glass, the symbolic Castle of Light which, according to legend, sank into the depths during the blood period of oppression in Latvia. The legend tells that when brave men and women summon it, the castle will rise from the darkness, and the people will once again be free. Not only expressive in form, the library building is designed with the needs of readers, books and librarians in mind. The first sketch of the library building was created in 1989 and it opens to the public in 2014.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Zeimuļs

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Zeimuļs – a building complex for creative activities of young people is one of the most surprising architectural projects of the last decade in Latvia, created by Rasa Kalniņa and Māris Krūmiņš (both under 30). Inspired by the dynamic landscape of the town of Rēzekne with its ruins of a medieval castle on the backdrop of hilly scenery, architects have created form using imagination and a sense of humor. They even created a legend of a wizard who came and lifted a piece of earth and stuck some pencils in the ground to hold it up, so that children have space to play and learn after work is done. Zeimuļs (pencil in the Latgalian dialect) is an example of contemporary design emerging from physical and emotional surroundings, from a local spirit and traditional archetypes, providing a warm and friendly new environment for children.





From
MAREUNROL'S
collection
"by mareunrol's",
2007

Andris Kronbergs

Andris Kronbergs (1951) is one of the most notable contemporary architects in Latvia. Since the restoration of independence his work has not only been prolific but also creative conceptually, offering innovative solutions with regard to scale, form, and materials appropriate to the regional environment. Kronbergs's accomplishments often reflect a talent for working with Latvian landscapes, but he has also been drawn to the scope of projects involving city planning and infrastructure as well as the latest in construction technologies. One of his best known projects is the renovation and expansion of the Rīga International Airport, and the elegant new treasury of the Bank of Latvia. Both the airport and the treasury are among the first structures visitors to Latvia see, acting as gates to the capital.

CONTEMPORARY
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MAREUNROL'S

MAREUNROL'S is a designer duo of Māriete Mastiņa-Pēterkopa and Rolands Pēterkops, working on concept based collections. Their clothes are specially designed sets, scenography, video projections and installations, photography, most often their works tell a story. They mix avant-garde forms with wearable qualities. They have repeatedly gained international acclaim, among other things – the winning awards in fashion and photography at the Hyeres festival. Their clothes can be considered avant-garde, but in reality it is wearable fashion, made for the public and made to generate emotions.

Building complex
by architecture firm
NRJA, inspired by the
Latvian Farmstead,
2011



Latvian Farmstead

ORIGINS

The archetype of the ancient Latvian farmstead can still be found in most contemporary architects' works. Despite the trend toward uniformity, the Latvian country landscape is still characterized by the historical model of the Latvian household - the individual farmstead. Usually it is a group of buildings with the characteristic double pitch roofs and laconic form encircling a tree in the middle of a field. A valuable collection with samples from all four ethnographic areas of Latvia can be found at the Open Air Museum. The individual farmstead and its elements serve as the archetype for simple and clear architecture, which is quoted and interpreted by contemporary architects.

Art Nouveau in Rīga

The time of Art Nouveau, late 19th, early 20th century, coincided with an unprecedented period of prosperity in Rīga. Over several years more than 100 multi-story buildings were erected and many of them are still here to see. The world famous architect Mikhail Eisenstein resided and worked in Rīga, numerous local architects – K. Pēkšēns, E. Laube, J. Alksnis and others – were also actively working in Rīga, developing their own style, later called 'national romantism' – a rougher form of Art Nouveau with use of natural, indigenous building materials.

ORIGINS



An element from an
Art Nouveau building
in Rīga, designed by
Mikhail Eisenstein
in 1901



A still from
"Kolka Cool",
a film by
Juris Poškus,
2011

Cinema

It was less than a year after the unofficial première of the Lumière Brothers' first films in a Parisian apartment that the first short films ever made were also shown in Riga. Three years later Sergei Eisenstein, later to be called 'the father of Montage', was born in Riga. Although it must have been a coincidence (Eisenstein left Riga at an early age), creative use of montage along with other artistic aspects of film, is undoubtedly the strength of Latvian cinema. The Latvian film industry cannot impress with its size or budgets, but it will charm you with unusual stories and talented storytellers.

When considering Latvian cinematography, the most noteworthy is the documentary genre. The 1960s and 1970s were significant with the informal group, afterwards titled Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema, most widely known with the iconographic film "Ten Minutes Older";¹ the 1980s were marked with Latvian film "Crossroad Street",² which won a European Film Academy Award, and "Is It Easy to Be Young?",³ which reached 28 million viewers. Latvians have had good documentary film-makers ever since.

When it comes to feature films, most represent the so-called auteur cinema, where the film director's vision and style, the work of the cameraman, the composition of the frame, and the rhythm, play the main role.⁴ The number of co-productions has increased during the last three years both in feature⁵ and animation films⁶ thus bringing new influences to the Latvian film industry. Additionally, besides artistic and experimental films, Latvians aren't lacking in their national action movies either,⁷ based largely on historical plots and warmly welcomed in the cinemas.

INTRODUCTION

1 Herz Frank, Juris Podnieks (camera) "Ten Minutes Older" (Vecāks par desmit minūtēm), 1978

2 Ivars Seleckis "Crossroad Street" (Šķērsiela), 1988

3 Juris Podnieks "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (Vai viegli būt jaunam?), 1987

4 Film directors Laila Pakalniņa, Jevgēnijs Paškēvičs, Ināra Kolmane, Gatis Šmits, Viesturs Kairiņš

5 "Mona", dir. Ināra Kolmane, "In the Fog" (Miglā) dir. Sergei Loznitsa

6 "Lotte from Gadgetville", dir. H. Ernits, J. Poldma, "Kirikou and the Sorceress", dir. Michel Ocelot, "The Triplets of Belleville", dir. Sylvain Chomet.

7 "Dangerous Summer" (Baiga vasara), dir. Aigars Grauba, "Dream team" 1935 (Sapņu komanda 1935), dir. Aigars Grauba



A still from
Pakalniņa's film
"Pizzas", 2012

Laila Pakalniņa

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Laila Pakalniņa (1962) is one of the most prolific contemporary Latvian filmmakers. She has made dozens of documentaries, which were well received at international festivals, and four feature films. Absurdity, an unusual sense of humour, particular attention to the sound and composition – Laila Pakalniņa has her individual style. The stories that she tells are inspired by everyday life, though her detailed observations are often mixed with the imaginary or at times even the surreal. Her films have been screened at the Venice Film Festival, Berlinale, film festivals in Cannes, Locarno, Rome and elsewhere. Pakalniņa's newest feature film "Pizzas" (2012) tells the story of two pizza bakers who rob the cash register and flee to avoid the consequences of their actions. A seemingly ordinary story in Pakalniņa's hands is turned into a film experience for cinefiles.

Boy Band – New Latvian Cinema

Latvian filmmaker Jānis Nords (1983) was only 29 when he received the Berlinale K Generation Plus Jury Award for his newest film "Mother, I love you" (2013). Nords' film is a touching story of a boy who, while trying to improve his relationship with his mother, delves into a world of troubles. Aiks Karapetjans (1983), being only 28 years old, surprised everybody with "People Out There" (2012) – a harsh urban drama set in the suburbs. Being so convincing at such an early age they give hope and raise expectations for the future of Latvian cinema. A generation older is Juris Poškus (1959), one of the most distinctive Latvian filmmakers. Poškus recently attracted attention with a stylish black-and white film "Kolka Cool", portraying a small Latvian town doing nothing; this, as well as his earlier films, shows that Poškus is gifted in grasping the Zeitgeist and capturing it in artistically compelling language.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE



A still from Jānis
Nords's "Mother,
I love you", 2013



A still from
"The Kiosk"
by Anete Melece,
2013

Documentary

Instant soup, an obsession with downhill skiing in a country without mountains, the first gay pride and the anti-gay movement in Rīga, a dump, a Christian sect, 400 terns (*sterna hirundo*) nesting on the rooftop of a printing house – to name just a few themes that have attracted the curious eye of Latvian documentary film makers. Latvian documentaries are not so much about uncovering, unmasking or exposing; they are rather about refined details like the rhythm of the story, a visually captivating style, a sense of humour, expressive montage. Latvian documentaries are frequent guests at festivals, and their awards are piling up. The latest hit is "The Documentalist" (2012), by Ivars Zviedris and Inese Kļava, a controversial film about the relationship between a filmmaker and a protagonist, whether the film maker manipulates the subject, or, en contraire, the other way around? And, at the end of the day, does a true documentary ever really exist?

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Animation

Latvian animation is artistic, inspired by local culture and powered by the excellent technical skills of illustrators and animators. Recent successes for Latvian animation films include the special Jury Prize for "The Kiosk" created by Anete Melece in application technique. It is a story of Olga, whose home has been a kiosk, simply because her sweet tooth and monotonous life has made her bigger than the exit. A story of two hedgehogs, adapting to the city life, titled "Hedgehogs and the City" by Ēvalds Lācis got awarded in Berlinale 2013. It was created in the studio "Avārijas Brigāde", which is the most experienced Latvian plasticine and puppet animation studio. The Hiroshima International Animation Festival Jury appreciated "Ursus" by Reinis Pētersons. It is a charcoal drawing animation, telling the story of a bear who works as an acrobat-motorcyclist in a travelling circus but yearns for wildlife and forests. It is typical for the Latvian scene that artists with education in painting or graphic art turn to animation, bringing in unconventional fantasy and technical precision.

Director Juris Podnieks together with protagonists of documentary "Is it easy to be young", Juris Podnieks, 1986



Herz Frank and the Rīga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema

ORIGINS

The film "Ten Minutes Older" (1978) by Herz Frank (1926-2013) and cameraman Juris Podnieks (1950-1992) is a laconic yet emotionally precise study of a little boy's face, and has become an icon in European film history. In 2002, Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Jim Jarmush, Spike Lee, Chen Kaige, and Aki Kaurismäki, completed a short film project dedicated to the legendary film by Frank and Podnieks. H. Franks, along with Uldis Brauns (1932) and a few other of their contemporaries were later marked as the Rīga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema. There was no formal school though, rather a group of filmmakers who rehabilitated cinema as a visual art, paying particular attention to the visual language of the film. The documentary tradition was further on developed by Juris Podnieks, most widely known for his documentary "Is It Easy to Be Young?".

Children's Films

A benefit of having a small film industry is that good films have literally been seen by almost everybody, and they become shared culture, they get quoted and become part of folklore. Children's films such as "Naughty Emil", "The Child of Man", "Boy", "Christmas Hullabaloo", "Waterbomb for the Fat Tomcat" were all made at a time when film directors, who are at the beginning of their careers right now, were growing up. There is much we expect from them! Latvian animation also has strong roots, with famous studio Dauka, created by Arnolds Burovs (1915-2006) who started the Latvian puppet animation tradition, as well as Roze Stiebra (1942) and Ansis Bērziņš (1940) who were the first ones to employ the application technique and started a tradition of drawn animation in Latvia. It is thanks to them that Latvian animation has been praised as exceptionally painterly, and Latvian animators – as technically skilled.

ORIGINS



A still from "Naughty Emil" by Varis Brasla, 1985



Evelīna Deičmane.
From the series
"Black Fairy Tales",
2012

Art

The Latvian contemporary art scene is Nordic and poetic, often executed in refined techniques, paying a lot of attention to the formal and esthetic aspects of an artwork. Contemporary Latvian artists, as artists elsewhere, are interested in capturing the Zeitgeist and exploring boundaries of the artistic medium – be it painting, sculpture, video, photography or other mediums. What makes the explorations of Latvian artists distinct is the cultural layers that form their background – post-soviet, pro-Western, a-political or en contraire – very political. Re-visiting history and reflecting on the here and now has certainly been one of the themes, ranging from works with almost reportage-like quality¹ to ones where you can only indirectly sense it² if you are skilled in listening to the semitones of meaning. An inner emotional world is the inspiration for others,³ taking shape in painting, sculpture, graphic or other mediums. There are also artists who turn their attention to the artistic medium itself⁴ or those who experiment on the border between science and art.⁵

Latvia can also be proud of a rich illustration scene created by Māris Bišofs whose editorial work for The New York Review of Books is well known to American audiences and many talented illustrators of younger generations.⁶ The only element still lacking in the landscape of Latvian contemporary art is a contemporary art museum, already designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and awaiting its turn to be built.

INTRODUCTION

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- 1 Arnis Balčus, Ivars Drulle, Katrīna Neiburga
 - 2 Jānis Avotiņš, Krišs Salmanis, Katrīna Kursiņa, Miks Mitrēvics, Ieva Iltnerē, Alnis Stakle
 - 3 Daiga Krūze, Anda Lāce, Inga Meldere, Evelīna Deičmane
 - 4 Ivars Grāveļs, Andris Eglītis
 - 5 Gints Gabrāns, Voldemārs Johansons
 - 6 Anete Melece, Reinis Pētersons, Mārtiņš Zūtis



A fragment from
Daiga Krūze's painting
"Winding/Galop with a
Moving Car", 2012

Latvian Painting

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

'A strong school of painting' – that can often be heard about the Latvian art scene. Largely due to the rather conservative education system, which is still based on painting 'from nature' and developing a wide range of techniques, it is not only painting that is strong, but also Latvian photography, cinema, scenography is often outstanding with its painterly qualities. Internationally the most acclaimed Latvian artist is painter Jānis Avotiņš, who is represented in galleries in London, Hamburg and Munich. His works can also be found in significant collections like Hamburger Bahnhof, White Cube's Jay Jopling and others. Ēriks Apaļais, another promising painter of Avotiņš' generation, shares with Avotiņš an interest in memories, but Apaļais is distinguished with his analytical approach – his paintings are often based on written or unwritten philosophical treatises and references. The landscape of Latvian painting would be incomplete without mentioning the emotional and expressive paintings of Daiga Krūze and Inga Meldere, labeled by critics as belonging to the 'new simplicity' trend, and acclaimed artist Andris Eglītis known for his continuous experiments with the painting medium.

In Dialogue with the Socio-Political

Although less dominant than in the 1990s, art used as a critical response to the socio-political realities is still an important part of the Latvian contemporary art scene, ranging from artistic political activism to storytelling with less direct or more ambiguous messages. Katrīna Neiburga, one of the most successful contemporary Latvian artists, who mostly works with film and video installations, has been compared to an anthropologist – her interests range from amusing scenes of everyday life (tea-mushroom culture, a taxi-driver's routine) to nostalgia (history of the Press House) or existential and personal experiences (solitude, security, privacy). A tradition of criticism in art is maintained by the annual contemporary art festival "SURVIVAL KIT" which invites artists to reflect on crisis, to come up with future scenarios, to imagine utopias or inspirations for change.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE



A performance
by Margo Zālīte and
Kristīne Alksne at the
contemporary art
festival "SURVIVAL
KIT", 2012

Inta Ruka. Portrait of Gita Gaigale and Māris Gaigals from the collection "The other side of the river"



Inta Ruka, Andrejs Grants

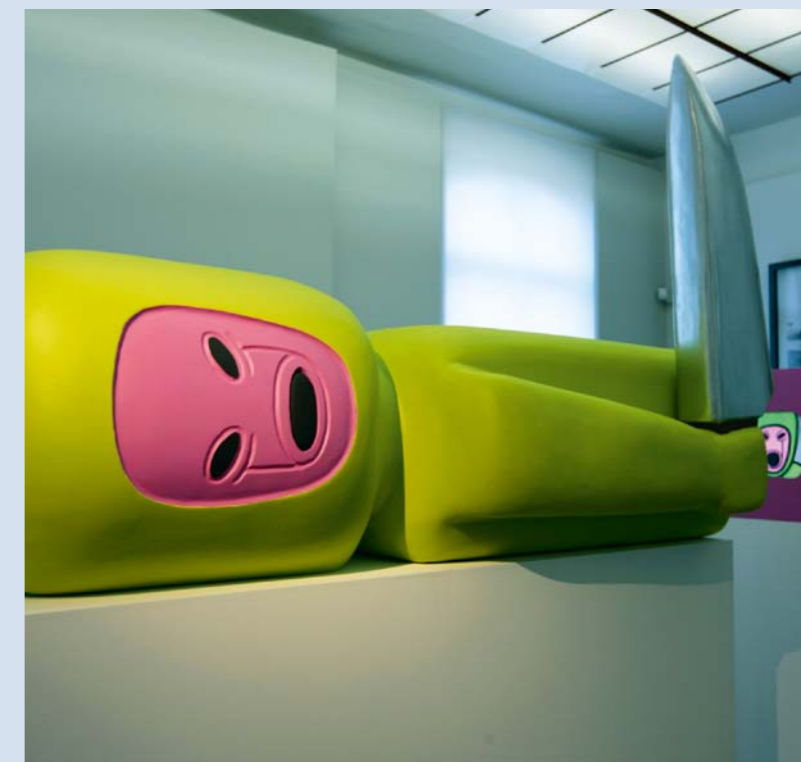
CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Inta Ruka (1958) is one of the most famous Latvian photographers, known for her black and white portraits of people in their own environment. Her photography has been included in numerous museum collections in Europe and the United States. Andrejs Grants (1955) is another influential photographer, also interested in people of Latvia, but unlike Ruka, Grants works in a reportage style, capturing moments of life in small towns in Latvia or the urban landscape. Both Ruka and Grants continue the photographic thinking of Egons Spuris (1931-1990), the most significant Latvian master of photography. Andrejs Grants is also known for being the tutor to the majority of Latvian photographers, filmmakers and even painters. Grant's School, we call it.

VKN

The abbreviation VKN does not stand for a contemporary art museum, or even for an artist group, it stands for the Department of Visual Communication at the Art Academy of Latvia, led by Ojārs Pētersons. Although it is only one of the Academy's departments among many, in the last decade it has succeeded in creating a distinct style, gathering like-minded artists and yielding an important voice in the Latvian contemporary art scene. It could be labeled as neo-conceptualism where concepts and ideas still take precedence over traditional aesthetic concerns, although in VKN's case artists also aim for perfectionism in form. Miks Mitrēvics, Kristīne Kursiša, Armands Zelčs, Kaspars Podnieks, Krišs Salmanis - to name just a few - are all former students of VKN that have gained local and international acclaim.

CONTEMPORARY SCENE



Maija Kurševa. "Valley of Sorrow", 2004



Ģirts Muižnieks
"In the Garden",
oil on canvas,
1989

"Formalists" and Trespassers

The natural development of Latvian arts initially went hand in hand with other European countries, but was interrupted by demands of socialism to provide a naturalistic representation of reality, to avoid any abstractions and absence of a clear story behind the artwork. Originality was reprehended. Nevertheless the strongest personalities – Leo Svemps, Ģederts Eliass, Jāns Pauļuks, Džemma Skulme, Leo Kokle, Boriss Bērziņš, Biruta Baumanē, Maija Tabaka and others, succeeded in maneuvering between expectations and their own individual style. They were followed by a generation active in the 1980s, later on described by their contemporaries as "trespassers" or the "Latvian avant-garde" - Andris Breže, Sarmīte Māliņa, Sergejs Daidovs, Kristaps Ģelzis, Hārdijs Lediņš, Vilnis Zābers, Aija Zariņa, Ģirts Muižnieks, Oļegs Tillbergs and others. The generation was characterized by intervention, and conflict. "Trespassers" broadened the formal language of Latvian art, introduced the use of installations and performance art. Their period coincided with the final decade of the USSR and the renewal of Latvia's statehood; their works resonate with the processes of the time.

ORIGINS

Vilhelms Purvītis

Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945) is widely considered to be one of the most important late 19th and early 20th century artists in Latvia; he is also the founder of numerous Latvian art institutions. His most outstanding contribution was the creation of the image of the national landscape – neo-Romantic, strictly structured, multiform in terms of the color. At the turn of the century Purvītis created his typical landscape: usually he painted birch groves or pine stands, snow drifts and ice floes in early spring, blooming trees in May or the colorful foliage of autumn. His landscapes have been so influential that it wouldn't be surprising if you find a Latvian looking at the landscape in early spring and saying – "it is pure Purvītis".



Internationally most famous Latvian pop/rock band PRĀTA VĒTRA (Brainstorm), 2013

Music

How such a small country can produce so many world-class musicians remains a mystery. Although, if you are born in Latvia you are likely to be raised with lullabies, you grow up singing at celebrations and gatherings, you are likely to be a member of a choir and take part in the Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration – a movement based on the choral and folk dance tradition which brings together thousands of people from all over the country – such an environment must be a breeding ground for excellency in music. Even the Latvian struggle for independence during the last years of the Soviet Union is known as ‘the Singing Revolution’. Music, often combined with the most powerful poetry of the time, contributed to the resistance movement by carrying messages that had to be hidden between the lines through to the people.

Since the restoration of independence it is this field of contemporary classical music that has flourished most notably. Latvian choirs¹ have built an international reputation by obtaining almost all the awards that a choir can get – ranging from the European Grand Prix to the main prize of the Choir Olympics.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, as well as the Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchestra are all currently led by Latvians.² You can find a surprising variety on the Latvian music scene – chamber music, medieval music, baroque ensembles. Having such talented musicians has forged an inspiring field for composers.³ There is also a lively pop music scene,⁴ folk and post-folk,⁵ jazz and blues musicians,⁶ but one of the most popular Latvian bands abroad might be Skyforger that combines folk and heavy metal traditions.

INTRODUCTION

1 “Kamēr...”, Latvian Radio Choir, State Choir “Latvia”, “Sola”
2 Andris Nelsons, Mariss Jansons
3 Pēteris Vasks, Maija Einfelde, Uģis Prauliņš, Andris Dzenītis, Ēriks Ešenvalds, Santa Ratniece
4 Brainstorm, Instrumenti, Sound Poets, Goran Gora a.o.
5 Ilģi, Auļi
6 Māris Briežklans, Deniss Paškevičs, Gints Pabērzs, Viktors Ritovs, Artis Orups a.o.

A production of Bizet's "Carmen" at the Latvian National Opera, featuring Eļina Garanča in the leading role, 2007



Sopranos

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Probably the first Latvian-born opera singer that opera lovers around the world got to know was Inese Galante (1954), but before long the best opera houses of the world, be it Metropolitan Opera in New York, La Scala in Milan, Vienna State Opera or others, would feature some of the great Latvian opera stars – mezzo-soprano Eļina Garanča (1976), soprano Kristīne Opolais (1979), soprano Maija Kovaļevska (1979) and many more. All of them began their careers at the Latvian National Opera, which under the leadership of Andrejs Žagars (1958), an opera director himself, has become an important opera venue, staging works by Chaikovsky, Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Wagner, as well as contemporary Latvian composers.

Krēmers & Kremerata Baltica

Gidons Krēmers (1947) is a Latvian violinist, internationally renowned for his exceptional interpretative skills. He has appeared on virtually every major concert stage with the most celebrated orchestras of Europe and America. In 1997 he gathered the most talented musicians of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, creating the chamber orchestra Kremerata Baltica, which later became one of the most prominent international ensembles in Europe and beyond. The orchestra has played in more than 60 countries and 400 cities, and in the best concert halls around the world over the last 16 years, together with soloists and conductors such as Mischa Maisky, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Sir Simon Rattle, Heinz Holliger and others.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE





Final concert
of the Latvian
Nationwide Song
and Dance
Celebration,
2013

Pēteris Vasks

Since the 1990's, Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks (1946) has been recognized as one of the major European contemporary composers. He has certainly influenced the younger generations of Latvian composers with his work. In his compositions – symphonic works, choral music, chamber music, piano concertos - Pēteris Vasks always contains a moral imperative. Cragged and disjointed clusters of sound and aleatory elements may represent the destruction and inevitability of pain, though a reference to the possibility of a better, more ideal world is never absent. Music critics have described Vasks' musical style as spiritual, powerfully evocative and richly expressive. In his music Vasks tells of Latvian history and landscape, and even poses questions about humankind.

CONTEMPORARY
SCENE

Conductors

Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov once said that conducting is a 'shady business' – it is not easy to explain what role in the whole wonder of music is played by a conductor. However, it is certain that Latvians are gifted at this shady business. Grammy-award winning Mariss Jansons (1943) is currently chief conductor of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, Andris Nelsons (1978) has been appointed Music Director of the Boston Symphony orchestra. Conductors specialized in choir music have also achieved success together with their choirs – Māris Sirmāis created the world class amateur choir "Kamēr...", and also leads the internationally acclaimed professional choir "Latvija". Sigvards Klāva and Kaspars Putniņš together with the 24 singer chamber choir "Latvian Radio Choir" are considered one of the leading professional chamber choirs in Europe. They all eagerly perform contemporary works by Latvian composers, and have the ability to perform the most complicated scores written in our times. If you are Latvian, you most likely know the main conductors, have your favourite and least favourite ones.

Song and Dance Celebration

ORIGINS

The Latvian Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration is an incredible phenomenon, recognized as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. With the tradition dating back to 1873, it is a grass-roots movement that literally pervades all of Latvian society, engaging huge numbers of people from all walks of life. Imagine 12 000 singers come on one stage to sing a capella with such nuance, technical skill, tonal colour and style that you would expect from a professional ensemble. Or imagine corps de ballet of 15 000 dancers that dance, forming patterns which can only be appreciated from above, based upon ancient Latvian designs. Behind the scenes there are four years of a thorough preparation process, a general tradition of singing and dancing, a respect and interest in the roots of Latvian culture.

Dainas

The Dainas (Latvian Folk Songs) are little quatrains of ancient Latvian wisdom captured in song. Created well over a thousand years ago, Dainas were part of celebrations, daily work, reflections on life preserved in oral form. There are more than 1.2 million Dainas, with references to them in all forms and layers of culture, from theatre plays to everyday conversations. The collection of Dainas under the name "The Cabinet of Dainas" is inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme.

The Latvian Institute deals with promoting awareness and providing a wide range of information about Latvia. It works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its branding and its people.

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