

A virtual visit to Latvia



1. Ludwigs Kalnins (1912-1996), ceramic panel 'Woman before a mirror' with glass mirror, 1940.

As we continue in lockdown of some kind, it may be a perfect time to embark on a journey of exploration to a destination not allowed us just now, and perhaps outside of our familiar aesthetic. Therefore, let us make a pictorial visit to the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Riga, Latvia back in 2017, when a stimulating display of ceramics of that fine city were displayed alongside their furniture, textiles and glass of their independent as well as their Soviet years.

Latvia gained its somewhat brief independence after declaring itself so from the Russian Empire at the end of WW1, but became enveloped as a Soviet state in 1940, only to become independent again in 1991 after the collapse of the ruling power.¹ Thus, the ceramics selected here were produced under both political statuses. The first object shown here is a ceramic panel of major proportions made at that historic moment of annexation into the Soviet Union, but the design of this piece fits well into the category the art nouveau of the 'free World' decades earlier. (1)

Although the Kuznetsov Porcelain Factory dates back to the early 19th century, the Riga Company became M S Kuznetsov in 1887.² A second major porcelain factory established in Riga, J C Jessen, along with M S Kuznetsov, had a collaboration with professional artists initiated by the 'Baltars' Workshop (from the Latin, *ars Baltica*), a group of ceramic painters founded by leading Riga artists including the painters Romans Suta (1896-1944) and his wife, Aleksandra Beļcova (1892-1981), and the graphic artist Sigismunds Vidbergs (1890-1970).³ In the 1930s the closest cooperation with renowned

Latvian artists was maintained by the Kuznetsov factory. Several of the examples selected for this paper are the fruit of that cooperation.⁴ (2, 3, 4, 5)



2. Baltars, dishes, all faience, except top-right (porcelain), 1927-8.



3. Baltars, dish 'Demonstration', porcelain onglaze painted and silvered, c.1925-8.

4. Baltars, plate 'Dance', porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, 1927.

The style adopted in the design of these Baltars pieces appear to be influenced by an eclectic mix of historical styles including *kraak* porcelain of Ming Dynasty China (4) and the angularity of early 20th century European art movements including that of the Russians, cubism and constructivism. (2) The effect though is of spontaneity and deep-rooted Latvian

nationalism and thought-through design. This nationalism and folk element is also seen in the recurring 'Wedding' motifs as well as in other more naïvely painted Kuznetsov pieces. (6, 7, 8)



5. Baltars, plate 'Wedding', porcelain onglaze painted and silvered, 1928.



6. MS Kuznetsov, plate 'Wedding', porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, 1935.



7a. M S Kuznetsov, coffee set 'Piebalga', porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, c.1934-5.



7b. Romans Suta, design sketch for 'Piebalga' set. ©Museum of Romans Suta & Aleksandra Belcova, Riga.

The design sketch for the 'Piebalga' coffee set, seen with the final porcelain wares, reveal that the sketch seems to have been merely a guide towards the final decoration, showing quite substantial differences between the two, whilst maintaining the essence of the style and the folklore element. (7a, 7b) This was no high volume production line, but a fluent and aesthetically considered artistry well developed for its medium. It should come as no surprise that Baltars porcelain ware received two gold medals and a bronze at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1925. During the World Expo in Brussels in 1935, Suta won a silver

medal for a ceramic tea service he designed for the Kuznetsov factory, and, in 1937, he took the top prize for dishes he designed for the Iļģuciems Glass Factory at the World Expo in Paris. At this time, the Kuznetsov factory produced a porcelain tea service painted with motifs entitled 'Work and Repose' that fitted the themes of the everyday lives of the common people of Latvia that also come from designs by Suta. (8)



8. M S Kuznetsov, tea service 'Work and Repose', porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, 1938.

An example of the quality wares produced by the rival Riga Ceramics Factory is a vase and lid of 1945 with decoration that appears to be influenced by ancient Grecian vases, but using the artistic flavour of the 1930s in art deco. (9)

The set of vases designed by Sigismunds Vidbergs in c.1928-29 for the Burtņieks factory in Riga are very much in the art nouveau manner, suggesting that the Baltars continued to keep up with the artistic styles in Europe, and even mastering them in making them their own, but also in the art deco manner. (10)

Vidbergs was also known for the design of posters, book covers, rather erotic artwork, and other graphic design work.

Moving the clock forward to the last years of the Soviet era for Latvian artists, three ceramic works are included here to demonstrate how far ceramic design had travelled from the influences of the 1920s and 1930s in Latvia, in spite of the relative social isolation of the Iron Curtain since their annexation in 1940. The glazed pottery birds by Margita Melnalksne (1909-89) demonstrate how plastic clay forms were imaginatively used by this artist to convey both the form and movement of her 'Birds' of 1976 in a most arresting way. The

texture of the fired clay suggests the plumage of the birds, whilst maintain an almost abstract quality. (11)



9. Riga Ceramics Factory, vase with lid, porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, 1945.

Her glazed pottery pair of 'Owls' of 1978 are moulded in an even more basic form, whilst they remarkably convey the bird so familiar and loved. (12)

Margita Melnalksne graduated from the Riga School of Crafts in 1938. She was a teacher at the Academy of Arts from 1945 to 1965 and participated in exhibitions since 1938. The works have been awarded at exhibitions in Berlin and Prague. In 1972 he was admitted to the International Academy of Ceramics.

The vase by Antonina Paskevica in porcelain of 1988 brings a delightfully fresh approach to the decoration of the sheer white of fine porcelain. The vase has a conical form whilst being decorated by the Benu bird, such that the bird is too large for the vessel, and needs to be crouched to fit, giving the piece both a satisfying aesthetic at the same time as a dramatic tension.



10. Sigismunds Vidbergs, vases, porcelain onglaze painted and gilded, c.1929-39.



11. Margita Melnalksne, 'Birds', glazed pottery, 1976.



12. Margita Melnalksne (1909-89), 'Owls', glazed pottery, 1978.



13. Antonina Paskevica (1951-), vase with the Benu bird, porcelain onglaze painted, 1988.⁵

Much of the detail included in this paper has been obtained from the labelling and information wall posters in the Museum of Decorative arts and Design, Riga during the writer's visit there in June 2017.



14. Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, Riga.

Patrick Hagglund, November 2020

References

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia>.

² <https://www.antonina.lv/en/porcelain/kuznetsov-porcelain/>.

³ <https://www.neputns.lv/en/products/darbnica-baltars>.

⁴ Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, Riga explanatory wall posters.

⁵ <https://www.artland.com/artists/antonina-paskevica>.