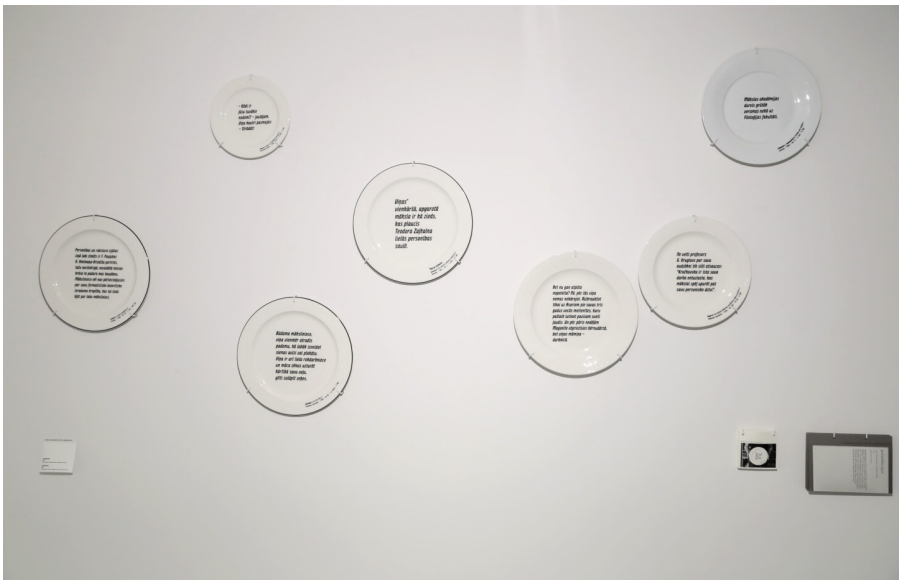

Tytuł

Ways of Forgetting. The Faded Image of Women Artists in Periodicals of the Latvian SSR

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Abstrakt

This research was initially conducted for the exhibition ‘I Remember, Therefore I Am. Unwritten Stories: Women Artists’ Archives’ (2020–2021) at the Latvian National Museum of Art, and served as a launching point for artwork by Rasa Jansone, periodicals.lssr (periodika.lpsr), which engages the issues women artists have faced. We explore the ways in which women artists were represented in the print media of the Latvian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic), delineating possible reasons why women artists of the time tend to be forgotten today. We reviewed more than five thousand articles about women artists to investigate how their work and private lives in the Latvian SSR were framed differently from those of their male contemporaries. Applying qualitative discursive analysis, we identify common biases and linguistic modes of describing women’s artistic practice, and uncover several tentative answers to how and why women artists have partially been obscured in the historical memory of Soviet Latvian art. We argue that despite the nominal feminist ideas embedded in socialist ideology, women artists’ advancement in fine arts was systematically discouraged in popular discourse, by framing positions in art education, crafts, design, and fashion as most suitable for their gender. Their achievements in these roles have been obscured through the present discourse. Women painters and sculptors often worked in the traditionally ‘feminine’ genres of still life and landscape, often focusing on the domestic sphere and children. These

genres also allowed them to partly escape or passively resist the ideological discourse; however, this work has been downplayed, not only in the past, but also in the present. Finally, despite the ideological claims of gender equality, the traditional gender roles, both in economic and domestic spheres, were present, inhibiting promising women artists' development and reducing their opportunities for work and growth.

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

Ways of Forgetting The Faded Image of Women Artists in Periodicals of the Latvian SSR

During the winter of 2020–2021, an exhibition dedicated to the not yet written stories of women artists in the Latvian SSR, [1] 'I Remember,Therefore I Am. Unwritten Stories: Women Artists' Archives', curated by Andra Silapētere, took place. Among the historical and contemporary artworks exhibited, one of the most notable was a series of porcelain plates by Rasa Jansone, a series entitled *periodicals.lssr* (periodika.lpsr) (Fig. 1). While the exhibition was focused on remembering and celebrating those women artists working in the Latvian SSR who have faded into obscurity today, the work by Rasa Jansone contextualised their work within the ideological, discursive, and political constraints of the time. The series consisted of high-quality porcelain plates with transfers of short quotations. [2] The quotations from the printed media of the Latvian SSR were presented unedited, and properly referenced. Some of them were extremely critical, others offered a kind of back-handed praise, and all concerned women artists in Soviet Latvia. They told a story of marginalisation, dismissal, softly but inexorably enforced gender roles, and overwhelming duties usually not applicable to male artists. These works provoked discussion about the issues surrounding women artists not only in Soviet times, but also today. Rasa Jansone worked on the p*eriodika.lpsr* series alongside the research presented here: a qualitative look at the way female artists were presented and represented in Soviet periodicals.

Rasa Jansone and Ieva Melgalve, periodika.lpsr, 2020, English porcelain plates, overglaze decal. View in exhibition 'I Remember, Therefore I Am. Unwritten Stories: Women Artists' Archives', Latvian National Museum of Art, 14.11.20 - 24.01.21 Photographer: Margarita Ogoļceva. Courtesy of the artists.

Rasa Jansone and Ieva Melgalve, periodika.lpsr, 2020, English porcelain plates, overglaze decal. Photographer: Margarita Ogoļceva. Courtesy of the artists. ‘Riga Porcelain factory’s talented artists have developed multiple beautiful samples of small vases, and painted them in multitudes of bright colors and patterns, but these samples are kept in their workshop, to be dusted only when they are need to be shown to brag: see what beautiful things our women artists can create!’ From: Z. Jaunzeme ‘Mēs rakstām atkal…’, Zvaigzne 05 April 1962, p. 6

Rasa Jansone and Ieva Melgalve, periodika.lpsr, 2020, English porcelain plates, overglaze decal. Photographer: Margarita Ogoļceva. Courtesy of the artists. ‘Maija Baņķiere has finished the ceramics section with only excellent grades. The representative of the Ministry of Culture announced that if the graduate wishes, she can start working as a teacher.’ From: n.a. ‘Jauna lappuse skolu dzīvē’, Dzimtenes balss 04 July 1959, p.2

The basis of our research was a database of around five thousand articles from Soviet Latvian newspapers and magazines [3] containing the word ‘woman artist’ (mākslinieces), with articles clearly outside the visual arts (i.e. theatre and music) excluded. This specific word is gendered (its male counterpart would be mākslinieks) and carries associations with creativity, elevated status in society and personal excellence. The selection process did not produce a list of how all women artists were perceived, but rather highlighted the cases where women artists were explicitly named that way, excluding cases where they were never named ‘women artists’, even if such a mention would be warranted. The articles rarely mentioned the women artists that are currently recognised as the most prominent at the time, while the women artists that were mentioned are relatively

unknown today. Thorough quantitative research would require the use of digital humanities tools, so we chose to take a qualitative look at the articles, which enabled us to detect several trends that led to the paradoxical situation where many of the women who were named 'women artists' during Soviet times have become obscure in the post-Soviet situation, resulting in a locally and temporally specific set of reasons for having few 'great women artists'. [4]

When researching Soviet printed media, it must be recognised that all press was subordinated to government control and censorship.
It would be false to assume that the press was regarded as a herald of truth: as anthropologist Alexei Yurchak asserts, the official, highly formulaic language constituted a performative act, a ritual that needed to be done to be able to get on with the important issues. [5]
An important part of Soviet propaganda was the purported gender equality [6] which required women artists to be represented in the press. Jana Kukaine, among other researchers, stresses that since gender equality was presented as a goal already achieved, the conversation about women's representation and equality was foreclosed. The inability to address important issues and discuss the government's mandates led to a situation where the traditional gender roles of women were retained or even emphasised, maintaining many patriarchal structures and assumptions, and simultaneously creating the impression that gender equality is *de facto* in place. Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, 'gender equality' became associated with Soviet ideology, thus hindering the discussion of these issues. [7] As we demonstrate in this paper, the combination of traditional and ideologically maintained gender roles, specific ways of representing women artists in Soviet periodicals and major discursive changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to 'forgetting' women artists, dismissing their successes in Soviet times as well as their portrayal in the Soviet press. Additionally, we will discuss systemic issues revealed by the articles that led to underdevelopment, downplaying, and hindering of talented women artists.

The forgotten design artists

During the first decade of Soviet Latvia, the Soviet authorities championed the idea of freeing women who had been oppressed and suffocated by bourgeois society. In practice, it meant determined education and employment of women in the so-called masculine professions to ensure the recuperation and growth of the economy after World War II. In pursuing this goal, in the post-war period girls were discouraged from becoming artists: this vocation was seen as the influence of the 'old bourgeois education system'. [8]

While private entrepreneurship, for example having a workshop or atelier, was strongly discouraged, artistic collaboration in so called
'artels' – a form of a creative union – was maintained [9] : for example, the Māksla Industrial

Complex of Visual and Decorative Arts (‘Tēlotājas un lietišķās mākslas kombināts “Māksla”’). The productivity of artels was evaluated according to the principles of production – by completing and exceeding the planned quota as quickly as possible. Articles make it clear that the artels’ collectives were mostly comprised of women, the works created by whom were anonymised and standardised. For example, Māksla is described as producing ‘vases, tablecloths, (traditional) garters, fibulas, patterned mittens’ and other souvenirs, as well as a set of stage curtains and a wooden chandelier made on order for public buildings. [10] Here, the arts overlapped with crafts and while the term ‘woman artist’ was used, it often was coupled with the notion of ‘craftsperson’.

It is argued that the competition in product design was among the most important frontiers of the Cold War, [11] 11 and around the 1960s,
the importance of artists involved in the design of manufactured goods –mostly women – became prominent in the printed media of the Latvian SSR. Even before this, women had worked in ceramic art and textile production, since these professions overlapped with the traditional role of women in society, [12] at the same time lacking recognition of the author’s name, which would be the male prerogative. In Latvia, women comprised the overwhelming majority of workers and artists in porcelain factories, [13] and the textile and fashion design industry, as evidenced in articles, was composed mostly of women. Judging from the articles, women artists – both mural painters and textile designers – were often commissioned to design the interiors of factories, diners, and other communal spaces. All these fields offered opportunities to avoid working on ideological subjects – as was demanded in easel painting – and to create stylised or abstract forms that often developed on a par with Western art. For a long time, women artists in these spheres had more opportunities for free
artistic expression, and it was women – fabric and fashion designers – who had the chance to shape society’s taste and style, not only in their workplace, but also through giving advice and interviews in the press.

However, currently those artists are either marginalised or totally forgotten, for several reasons. Firstly, currently these artists would be
called ‘designers’, which tends to be seen as a lower position than that of artists, as designers’ names are known mostly to collectors and enthusiasts. Secondly, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet design was seen as obsolete (as opposed to Western designs of the same time and of similar style). Thirdly, the collective nature of the design artists’ work often erases their names in lieu of the brand name of the factory, and their gender is often hidden uat least one male, or the author of the article is not certain about their gender, the female gender will ‘disappear’ under the umbrella term of (male) artist. Finally, after the sharp decline of industrial production
in Latvia, the design artists were put out of work and their design samples and moulds often lost,

thus further erasing their legacy and the
chance to pass on their knowledge, skills and creative approaches.nder the ‘neutral’ name mākslinieks, which also stands for ‘male artist’. Thus, when the collective has at least one male, or the author of the article is not certain about their gender, the female gender will ‘disappear’ under the umbrella term of (male) artist. Finally, after the sharp decline of industrial production in Latvia, the design artists were put out of work and their design samples and moulds often lost, thus further erasing their legacy and the chance to pass on their knowledge, skills and creative approaches.

Genre divisions by gender

Before the USSR, Latvian art circles retained traditional gender roles while embracing the Modernist style. Even one of the most accomplished women painters in Latvia, Aleksandra Beļcova, was routinely dismissed as being a follower and imitator of her husband, Romāns Suta, [14] while the majority of Modernist painters were men. The situation aligns with what Linda Nochlin asserted: the art world was divided into ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ art forms, with easel painting and certain genres being considered both more prestigious and artistic, as well as undoubtedly ‘masculine’. [15]

In the Latvian SSR, the women were encouraged to pursue more ‘masculine’ professions, especially in the industries, science, and agriculture, and gained more prominence in artistic circles. However, the assumption about feminine and masculine forms and genres persisted. For example, articles about the achievements of women artists in sculpture usually express surprise that a woman had dared to try and been successful in the ‘masculine’ field of sculpture, and their femininity was contrasted with the assumptions about this field. On the other hand, male artists were not particularly encouraged to take up the fields and professions generally considered ‘feminine’, hence the gender disparity in the ceramics and textile industry.

Considering art in the Soviet Union, it is necessary to keep in mind that the ideology dictated not only the ideological imagery in the artwork, but also the discourse around it, namely, what was mentioned, what was remembered, and what was omitted. The aim of art was to guide people in a definite direction, which continuously shifted according to the Communist Party’s direction at any given time. Considering the existing and potential ideological guidelines, art that was considered controversial or ‘neērta’ (uncomfortable) was omitted from public discourse to avoid possible repercussions. In articles about art, not only critics had a say, but also the representatives of the nation, who needed to be simultaneously educated and listened to, via a semi-staged public discussion where the authoritative discourse was reiterated. [16]16 In a striking example, the painter Biruta Baumane was harshly critiqued by a factory assembler: ‘Grim colours. Who are these women, coming to us as if without faces? To show a human without a face? Without a soul? What

can be understood here? Butif it cannot be understood, is it art? Who is it meant for.' [17] Such a 'worker's opinion', as the article is titled, could carry an inordinate weight, considering the expectations for art to be both understandable and educational.

The spotlight of art criticism was usually reserved for easel painting and, to a lesser degree, sculpture. Several genres were deemed especially important, as they carried the most ideological and educational weight: namely, works depicting political leaders and key moments of Soviet history. These genres came under the closest ideological scrutiny. The artists who strived to avoid ideological paintings turned to landscapes and still life paintings. [18] However, women artists were in a double bind here: when working on politically neutral themes, for example still lives, they were criticised not only for lacking appropriate themes but also for being 'feminine' in that they, as women, lacked the necessary political conscience, or, as it was put more poetically, 'lacked eyes and ears' [19] towards politically important themes.

One additional theme was most often dealt with by women artists – the world of children and family, likely due to their social roles and surrounding environment. [20] Since these subjects were thus considered 'feminine', an overall trend of male artists to shy away from these subjects can be detected already in the Modernist period in Latvian art, which was interrupted by the Soviet Union's dictate. During the Soviet times, the portrayal of family and children remained predominantly the sphere of women artists. The depiction of children, if they were happy, playful, inquisitive, or industrious, was not criticised for ideological reasons. The portrayal of a mother could more be politicised: for example, Aleksandra Briede, who was to become one of the leading sculptors of the time, was criticised for her portrayal of a mother with a child: 'Here, she can be criticised for her attachment to the image of the Medieval Madonna. A novel image of a mother should express not only feminine gentleness, but also the spirit of heroism and struggle, which are characteristic of a Soviet mother.' [21] However, while these themes were scrutinised for ideological correctness, they could be perceived as less politicised by the artists themselves, as well as the spectators. The art history of Soviet times in Latvia, similarly to the art in the Eastern bloc, was retrospectively written with special attention to works that could be seen as nonconformist politically, artistically, or both. [22] The works and themes of women artists, if they did not attempt to break with the canon politically or artistically, have mostly disappeared from memory, precisely due to their seemingly conformist nature. The strategies of passive resistance to the ideology through specific genre selection have been underexplored in the art history of Latvia. [23]

The influence of gender roles and notion of femininity

In the propaganda narrative, Soviet women were freed from the oppressive bourgeoisie and thus were portrayed as heroic, independent, skilled, and knowledgeable. However, in practice, the stereotype of femininity as connected with grace, emotionality and poetic understanding of life was strongly present. This inherent paradox often remained unnoticed. For example, in an article about the sculptor Leja Novožeņeca, right after she has explained the heavy lifting involved in the process of creation, the journalist follows up with: 'The artist shows a sketch of her upcoming work. War-time girl, how many times already your nobility and power ha offered inspiration for an artwork! […] People, protect the peace! Girls should not have to hold rifles, but, instead, should sing happy songs!' [24] The shift from woman-creator to woman-inspiration was not uncommon. Notably, in the annual 8 March contest Our (Women) Artists (Mūsu mākslinieces), in which the best photographic portrait of a female artist was selected, the winners were almost always male. In art exhibition reviews, interviews and other materials, the Soviet woman, regardless of the propaganda's image of a powerful working woman, still maintained the features of a weak, fragile, shy, humble, airy and childish creature in need of protection – one that was common in the preceding bourgeois society. The stereotypes of the 'feminine' traits to be praised in women remained unquestioned. For example, Aleksandra Briede was praised as '[q]uiet and shy, kind and helpful' to the point where her subjects 'seem not to notice the artist's presence'. [25] This characterisation is not uncommon: women artists are described as shy, unassuming, humble, often at a loss for words.

Perhaps the most telling examples are double interviews with married artist couples working together, a quite common arrangement –
for example, Gunārs Krollis and Izabella Krolle, Edgars Iltners and Ērika Iltnere, Teodors Zaļkalns and Marija Zaļkalne. Usually, the interview focuses on the male artist and the wife appears in the second part of the interview, as an afterthought, and is presented as hospitable and shy. The binary perception of gender can be very pronounced. In a typical example, the sculptor Evi Upeniece's works are described as 'lyrical', while her spouse, Vladimir Rapik, creates 'masculine, strong images'. [26] Often, the wife is described as a pupil or follower of her husband, or on some occasions the journalist remarks that she is valued as an advisor and aide in her husband's work. For example, Edgars Iltners is described as being 'well and nicely married – his wife, too, is an artist!', and then the interviewer belatedly remembers that he has seen watercolour paintings by Ērika Iltnere in an exhibition. [27] It is not certain that the interviews describe the actual marriage dynamics; sometimes it betrays the journalist's presumption of the gender roles in a family. However, sometimes it seems that the roles of teacher and pupil were inherent to the marriage. Thus, the talented sculptor Marija Zaļkalne, was discouraged by her husband Teodors Zaļkalns from studying at the Art Academy, where he was a professor, and was taught only individually. This

enabled the description, ‘Her simple, soulful art is like a flower that has bloomed in the sun of the great personality of Teodors Zaļkalns’. [28] Although the author clearly admires Marija Zaļkalne’s work, the gender roles are not questioned but instead reinforced.

More often, women artists are described as mired in their everyday work, dedicated to caring for children. In a telling example, in one article the ceramist Tatjana Aļejeva Kračkova (1920) and sculptor Aivars Gulbis (1933) have been interviewed after finishing their studies with distinction. The daily life of Kračkova is described thus: ‘But now, has a break been earned? No, she does not even desire one. She will just go to Asari to her three year old daughter who is currently being nurtured by people outside her family. And after a few weeks, the little Magone will return to kindergarten, but her mummy – to the workshop.’ Simultaneously, the post-studies life of Aivars Gulbis seems to be much more inspiring: He ‘will visit his parents in Turaida and try out his hand at painting. […] He will also enjoy a planned excursion to Czechoslovakia, where he will go together with his erstwhile coursemates, the sculptor Imants Murovskis and painter Jāzeps Pīgoznis.’ [29]

Aļejeva-Kračkova’s life is described as firmly tied to her responsibility for her daughter and further plans to fulfill art assignments for the government, to gain the necessary income. Meanwhile, her course mate is planning a vacation with his parents, new creative developments, and a summer excursion with friends. Even though nominally Soviet women were free and emancipated, in practice – on the level of opinions and expectations of society – they were expected to work two or even three shifts, first at their workplace, then at home as a wife and mother. [30] To become a wife, a mother, a nurturer and homemaker was the government’s given duty to each Soviet woman, which meant not only less time for a career, but also less time for relaxation, fewer chances to share experiences with colleagues. Accordingly, it can be said that each artwork created by a Soviet woman was not created due to, but despite the ‘gender equality’ enforced by the ruling power. Moreover, following the masculinity crisis that became apparent at the end of the 1960s, one of the strategies for overcoming it was resuming and strengthening the caregiving role of women in the family. [31] As the Soviet Union’s governments started to falter, gender equality politics gradually crumbled, too, [32] revealing the underlying gender role structures.

Another path to development for women artists in Soviet Latvia was to become schoolteachers, children’s extracurricular activity leaders
and art teachers. In the numerous articles about women artists working with the younger generation, the rhetoric of a woman’s professional work led by her love for children, which is natural and self-evident, dominates. Usually, this opinion is not expressed by the artist herself, speaking about her professional choices and creative work, but instead is assumed by the author of the article – the art critic or interviewer. In a situation where many parents were busy at work

and many children spent their time in boarding schools or at extracurricular activity groups, art teachers were also solving social problems related to their students, which often took up much of the artist's life. In a striking example, Marga Lielkraste-Leitlande, who, despite her disability – due to a childhood illness, she could only paint with her left hand – had been one of very few female students of Vilhelms Purvītis, a prominent painting professor at the Academy of Art, spent most of her life as a painting teacher, working also with disabled students at the Krimulda sanatorium. In an article, her typical lesson is described as starting with taking care of her pupils' emotional needs – providing a hug and a caress for a bedridden child – 'and only then there was time for perspective, light, shadows, et cetera'. [33] Even though Lielkraste-Leitlande remained an active artist, clearly, she could dedicate less time to painting due to her social and professional work. Women artists who were also teachers were often praised for the success of their students, however, this praise diminished as the student gained recognition. Accordingly, the names of many women artists are scarcely remembered, even if they have left their mark on Latvian art history by spotting new talents, guiding them, developing their skills, and offering them support, even outside the field of art.

Conclusion

Overall, the forgetting of the women artists of the Latvian SSR was and is a complex process that brings to light historical, ideological
and feminist issues. The simplest assumption, namely, that women artists in the Soviet Union were underappreciated, needs to be
rethought. In many areas, women artists did gain prominence and were known, respected and heard. However, due to historical changes and the discursive re-formulation of the concept of 'artist', they have faded into obscurity. A similar erasure has been facilitated by
the language itself, erasing the gender of the artist on the level of discourse, where the masculine gender is assumed as the default.

Another shift is more ideological: the women artists who accepted the more traditionally 'feminine' genres, focusing on still lives, landscape paintings, and the life of children and family, could thus evade the pressure of ideology. Their passive avoidance of clashes with ideology was not retrospectively recognised as a strategy of resistance: just like the way they slid under the radar of the Soviet ideology, they now slide under the radar of national art history, looking for rebels and outsiders.

The third is the well-known issue of traditional gender roles that were not only retained, but in some ways even strengthened
in the Soviet Union; women artists were often underrepresented, underappreciated and simply too

busy with work and family life to dedicate their lives to art the way their male counterparts could.

While the exhibition 'I Remember, Therefore I Am. Unwritten Stories: Women Artists' Archives' focused on the past issues of women artists, the work by Rasa Jansone, periodika.lpsr, created a powerful resonance not only due to its portrayal of the past, but also due to its relevance to society today: while some of the quotations were obviously possible only under the Soviet ideology, others, especially the ones related to the conception of gender roles, obligations and capacities, can be seen as relevant today. Thus, researching the past's forgotten women artists is also a way of highlighting the ways women artists are being forgotten in the present.

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20. Griselda Pollock, 'Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity' (1988), in Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 70–127. ↩
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22. For example, in the previously cited book D*esmit epizodes 20. gadsimta otrās puses mākslā Latvijā / Ten Episodees in Art of the Second Half of the 20th Century in Latvia*, only one deals with works that conformed with the canon, and the rest attempts to break away from it. ↩
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30. Jana Kukaine, 'Dzimumu vienlīdzības izpratne un dzimtes kārtība Padomju Savienībā', p. 106. ↩
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Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

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