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Motifs of Art Nouveau Décor in Riga and Their Sources

One of the least explored issues in regard to the motifs of Art Nouveau architectural décor in Riga concerns its sources; analysing them one has to take up the strategy of studying Art Nouveau and the formal conditions of using established Art Nouveau motifs as well as the reasons of why this décor includes a wide spectrum of elements whose iconographical and stylistic character reaches beyond the scope of Art Nouveau.

Before taking up the question of sources, one has to remind that Art Nouveau appeared in the architecture of Riga shortly before 1899¹. Important information in the appropriation of style was provided by:

Firstly, private contacts and perfection of knowledge abroad², including cases when foreign architects and masters of decorative arts came to Riga and had a chance to share their experience.

Secondly, commercial institutions, especially the store *Jaksch & Co* that provided the latest international news of design³. One can suppose that the role of *Jaksch & Co* in Riga was similar to that of the Liberty Store in London⁴, especially after the opening of the new, splendid store building in January 1901. (Arch. *Carl Felsko, Th. Eyrch*, 1900. The façade of the building was finished with a mosaic produced at the German company *Villeroy & Bosh*⁵. Building destroyed in 1945.)

Thirdly, comparatively wide-spread foreign exhibitions as well as periodicals and picture editions played a major role. Many from the very wide spectrum of publications dealing with Art Nouveau ornament, known throughout Europe, were accessible in Riga as well. Not just the plastic décor of buildings but reprinted materials also testify to this. The publications of Alexander Grosset's studio of lithography provide an interesting material in this respect. One should also note that Grosset's building was one of the first Art Nouveau buildings in Riga⁶.



Arch. Alfred Aschenkampf, Alexander Grosset's building, 1899.

Even without a detailed analysis of sources, it is obvious that there were no significant informational obstacles in the assimilation of the new style. Still the architectural décor in Riga retained an influential element of historicist tendencies fostered by the conservative society and popular ideas of social prestige, largely

conditioned by the specific social and political situation in Riga⁷. During the early period of Art Nouveau rich plastic décor had become a sign of self-representation of the rapidly developing class of local bourgeoisie, often also a symbol of self-invented nobility.



Arch. Alexander Schmaeling. Carpenter Mārtiņš Pagast's building. Detail of the façade, 1903.

Art Nouveau with its principles of functionality, new ideas of architectural design, asymmetry, a décor based on “biological romanticism”⁸, self-sufficient aesthetics of linear rhythms, was rather inappropriate to the creation of a traditionally representative image of a building. Still soon the general interest in Symbolist tendencies and popularity of neo-romanticist, pantheist ideas created preconditions for a peculiar synthesis of Art Nouveau and historicism. To typify the architectural décor of Riga in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, Eric Hobsbawm's interdisciplinary term “invention of traditions”, used by the Finnish historian of architecture Pekka Korvenmaa in the context of Finnish Art Nouveau⁹, seems particularly appropriate.

To describe shortly the main groups of decorative motifs in Riga Art Nouveau facades and interiors, firstly one should mention the motifs of nature, including typical representatives of Art Nouveau flora and fauna and traditional motifs as well.



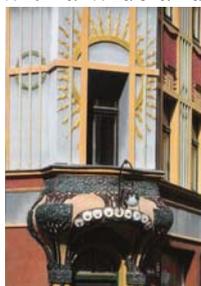
1.



2.

1. Arch. Heinrich Scheel, Friedrich Scheffel. 1902. Šķūņu Str. 12/14. Detail of the façade 2. Arch. Wilhelm Neumann, 1902. Mafisa Str. 16. Detail of the façade.

Stylised solar motifs became very popular, turning into one of the most used symbols with a wide and diverse iconographic message.



1.



2.

1. Arch. Paul Mandelstamm, 1903. Kalēju 23. Detail of the façade 2. Eng. Mikhail Eisenstein, 1903. Elizabetes 10a. Detail of the façade.

The anthropomorphic décor acquired a series of new features, reflecting the general developmental process of art and, according to Latvian art historian Eduards Kļaviņš, “oppositions of different biological ages, manifestations of joy, sorrow, emotional expression of erotic longings”¹⁰. Like décor in general, anthropomorphic décor oscillates between naturalistic solutions and strong stylisation during the early Art Nouveau period; during the late period the degree of stylisation increases.



Merchant Bobrov's house. Detail of the façade. Arch. H.Scheel, F. Shefeel, 1902. Decorative works – *Otto&Wassill*.

Motifs that dealt with musical themes were popular as well as purely geometrical motifs whose usage increased with the consolidation of National Romanticism.



Arch. Eižens Laube. Miera Str. 27. 1908. Detail of the façade.

Depictions of hybrid creatures were widely current, especially the motif of dragon that was conveniently ambivalent, being an archetypal symbol as well as a traditional element of heraldry¹¹.



Arch. Konstantins Pēkšēns, Antonijas Str. 8. 1903. Detail of the façade.

Alongside these motifs there were others – the so-called “neo-pagan” tendencies that could be manifested as the glorification of ancient cultures, like Ancient Egyptian, Assyrian or Maya art examples (one of drawings by Mikhail Eisenstein's son, the famous film director, testify to this¹²) as well as the art of Far and Near East.



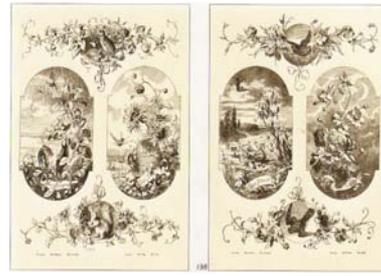
1. Merchant Bergs' s house. Arch. Konstantins Pēkšēns. 1901. 2. Detail of façade.

Theatrically pathetic, allegoric composition of plastic décor, consisting of two winged geniuses supported by a lion and an Egyptian pharaoh's head with a cartouche between them, crowns the merchant Bergs' house (Krišjaņa Barona Str. 11, arch. Konstantins Pēkšēns, 1901.) But the façade of Mikhail Eisenstein's (1903.) building at Alberta Street 4, designed for a high-ranking official of the tsarist government A. Lebedinsky, balances between traditionalism and innovation, taking up similar motifs.



1. A. Lebedinsky house. Eng. Mikhail Eisenstein, 1903. 2. Detail of façade. 3. Plate of the F.S. Meyer's lexicon.

A series of references to ancient cultures appear here as well; firstly, the entrance portal reminds of a stylised Ancient Egyptian pylon decorated with dragon figures but the upper floor is topped by a heraldic composition with two lions. Although the décor of these buildings is stylistically rather different, the motifs have been taken from the same source – F.S. Meyer's lexicon (edition of 1888) that belonged to the most popular handbooks of ornament throughout Europe and was the leading source of samples in Riga as well. The traditional material found in this publication served as an important supply of decorative motifs in Riga during all the period under discussion. Vienna publisher Martin Gerlach's compiled edition *Alegorien und Embleme* whose first series appeared already in 1882¹³ and had a great success throughout Europe, was equally reputable in the early 20th century architecture of Riga. Gerlach's publication was devised as a source of inspiration for art students and artists¹⁴, aiming to create a contemporary vision of allegories and emblems, although this edition was academic and conventional. According to contemporary Viennese art historians, *Alegorien und Embleme* "probably the last great undertaking of the optimistic Historicist era in Vienna"¹⁵.



1. Architect Rudolf Zirkwitz' house at Vīlandes 1. 2. Vestibule at Vīlandes 1. 3. Plates of the *Allegorien & Embleme*.

Decorative finish of the architect Rudolf Zirkwitz' private house vestibule at Vīlandes Street 1 (1898, arch. Rudolf Zirkwitz) is one of the earliest and artistically most interesting solutions in Riga, based on Gerlach's publication¹⁶ and resulting in a praise of nature and organic life endowed with the "biological romanticism" of Art Nouveau¹⁷. Regardless of technical differences (the vestibule finish is created as a polychrome stucco relief), the sentimentally romantic and narrative element is not just retained but even heightened. Almost childishly naïve representation of natural motifs is in fact an illusion. This detail becomes important if one remembers that the building was its architect's property and the rest of its interiors were finished according to very splendid neo-styles. Zirkwitz plays a refined game with elements and themes of historical styles, finding perfect connections leading to Art Nouveau. This example demonstrates a kind of universal scheme that was very popular in Riga during all the period of early Art Nouveau.

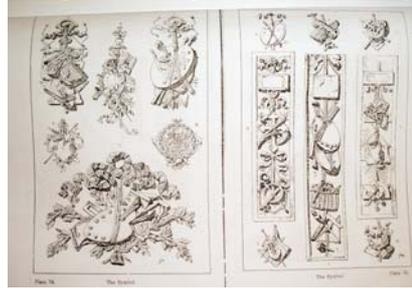
The plastic décor of this period shows also interest in hermeneutics, theosophy as well as in the ideas of Freemasonry, either more or less directly implemented or freely interpreted in the architectural decor of Riga. Too little is known to clear up the so-called aspect of instrumental symbols; even if the meaning of a symbol seems clear, one can not be sure that it testifies to the owner's direct involvement with Freemasonry. The factor of play popular in this period is not to be dismissed because Freemasonry was officially prohibited in the Russian Empire (from 1822) and the prohibition held true into the 20th century (till 1905)¹⁸.



1. Šķūņu Street 10/12. Arch. H. Scheel, F. Shefeel, 1902. Detail of façade 2. Smilšu Street 2. Arch. Konstantins Pēkšēns, 1902. Detail of façade.

Not only some motifs were inherited from the 19th century architecture, often endowed with a new meaning (for instance, the so-called radiant mascaroon found in the décor of historicist buildings, like Paris City Council house, could be treated as the personification of Sun). Emblematic and heraldic motifs were equally related to the tradition of historicism. For example, contractor P. Radzing's rent house façade

(Blaumaņa Str. 11/13, arch. Alexander Schmaeling, 1901) features central consoles decorated with female mascarons as well as emblematic motifs with symbolic representation of art, architecture and engineering, referring to the owner's profession.



1. Contractor P. Radzing's house. Detail of the façade. Arch. Alexander Schmaeling, 1901. 2. Plates of the F. S. Meyer's lexicon

One should note that this emblematic décor is a precise copy of the 19th century Dresdner sculptor Hauptmann's work reproduced in Meyer's lexicon as well¹⁹. Emblematic motifs were an important part of the decorative finish of public buildings (including interiors), retaining their significance in the late Art Nouveau period, too.



Brunņinieku Street 27. Arch. Bernhard Bielenstein. 1911. Detail of the façade.

Decorative painting was widely practised in Riga interiors in the late 19th century – early 20th century. Especially popular were ornamental stencilled finishes in the style of William Morris. Still figural or landscape motifs, related to Rococo or 18th century neo-classicist interpretations, or contemporary academic art, were no less popular. One of examples is the finish of the staircase room in the architect Alfred Aschenkampff's building designed in 1900 and pulled down in the early 1970s. The staircase premise was conceived as a variant of the Pompeii 4th Style: classical architectural ornaments in stucco framed large-scale realistic, figural panels with the copies of John William Godward's works; he was the late 19th century – early 20th century celebrity of academic neoclassicism²⁰. Conventional solutions typical of



1. J. W. Godward "Yes or No?"²¹; 2. Figural panel with the copy of John William Godward's work; 3. Postcard from 1905, Riga; 4. „Rendezvous”- decorative relief made at Kusinsk factory.

academic art were often combined with Art Nouveau means in the practice of decorative art, creating a basis for “invention of traditions” or a peculiar dichotomy on the ground of dissociation of particular historical traditions.

J.W. Godward's works are a convenient example in this respect; their popularity in the Russian Empire of the late 19th - early 20th century is an acknowledged fact. For instance, his work “Yes or No?” (1893, c.o., Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany), described as his best two-figure composition, was widely known in the early 20th century, copied for the needs of decorative painting as well as reproduced on innumerable postcards²². This work is used also for decorative relief in Russia, made at Kusinsk factory of cast iron²³ and turned into a generalised image typical of decorative relief. This example of transformation of Godward's work points towards three factors: firstly, works of academic paintings became a sort of folklore, reproduced on postcards and transformed into anonymous elements of industrially produced applied items or plastic décor. Secondly, 19th century academic art was an important source of iconographic motifs of the period; because of the small number of concrete examples it has not been emphasised enough.

Thirdly, the above-mentioned example stresses the issue of authorities – the influences of phenomena so far not considered important in the context of decorative art, including Symbolist painting and sculpture (such as Franz von Stuck, 1863–1928, or Arnold Böcklin, 1827–1901). One should know that, besides significant and innovative sources acknowledged during the rehabilitation of Art Nouveau in the 20th century, there could be peripheral ones almost totally forgotten in our days. This idea makes to reassess the role of authorities respected in the early 20th century Riga whose works could possibly serve as a source of inspiration. Names which are almost completely unknown today – for example, Berliner architect, sculptor and painter Otto Rieth (1858–1911). He was described in the publications of that period as a talented artist and representative of a strong individual style who, not being ashamed



1. Otto Rieth. Drawing of capital²⁴.



2. Smilšu Street 8. Detail of façade.

of traditions, was able to discover new artistic horizons, “uniting Renaissance harmony with the medieval ornament in monumental buildings.”²⁵ Particular motifs, such as the widely used “screaming mascaroon”, is related to Rieth name²⁶.



1. Otto Rieth. Drawing of capital²⁷.



2. Smilšu Street 8. Detail of façade.

Franz Metzner (1870–1919²⁸) became a similar authority in the decorative sculpture of Riga during the late Art Nouveau period, although his popularity was not of the same scale. Metzner's symbolic, generalised, pathetically expressive and strongly stylised images²⁹ significantly influenced a rather wide group of façade decorations of late Art Nouveau.

Dresdner sculptor Ernst Hottenroth's (1872–1908³⁰) name also should be included in the list of forgotten authorities of late Art Nouveau. Reproductions of his works were published in a special edition³¹ and reproduced in the journals of architecture many times – his peculiar sense of form, strong Symbolist element and formal language of the early periods of classical art influenced Art Nouveau plastic décor in Riga.

Concluding this short insight into the decorative sources of Art Nouveau buildings in Riga, one should note that the “inner circle” of migration of decorative motifs was no less important, repeating and reinterpreting a particular motif from one building to another; the motif possibly seemed luckily found or simply eye-catching to the client, leaving open the question of imitation whose interpretation on the threshold of the 20th century was radically different from that of our days.



1. Alberta Street 13. Detail of façade 1905.



2. Vīlandes Street 1. Detail of façade 1898.

This conclusion, referring to the discussed material in the context of that time, also points towards contemporary problems of interpretation as well. Source analysis reminds that assessment of Art Nouveau plastic décor in Riga should retain a balanced standpoint, avoiding the excesses of over-interpretation.

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¹ See : *Grosa S. Art Nouveau in Riga.*– Riga, 2003.

- ² *Grosa S.* Dekoratīvās tēlniecības darbnīca *Otto&Wassil* Rīgā 19. un 20. gs mijā (The *Otto&Wassil* Decorative Sculpture Workshop in Riga at the Turn of the 20th Century) //Arhitektūra un māksla Rīgā. Idejas un objekti. Sast. Jānis Zilgalvis. – Rīga, 2004.–95. lpp.
- ³ Catalogue – s.a. Cover text: J.Jakšs & Ko. Dibināts 1841.g. Rīgā, Rātnama laukumā. A.Groseta grafisku mākslu iestāde Rīgā, Mārstaļu ielā Nr. 3.
- ⁴ *Greenhalk P.* *Le Style Anglais: English Roots of the New Art//Art Nouveau 1890–1914.* Ed. by *Paul Greenhalk.* – London, 2000. – P. 142.
- ⁵ Riga und Seine Bauten. – Riga, 1903 – S. 392.
- ⁶ *Grosa S.* Die Fassadenausstattung und Interieure der Rigaer Häuser um 1900//Architektur und bildende Kunst im Baltikum um 1900/ *Elita Grosmane...* (Hrsg.). – Frankfurt am Main; Berlin; Bruxelles; New York; Wien: Lang, 1999. – S. 26.
- ⁷ See: *Grosa S.* Sociālā prestiža ideju atspoguļojums Rīgas agrā jūgendstila arhitektūras dekorā (Reflection of the Ideas of Social Prestige in the Early Art Nouveau Architecture of Riga). // Pilsēta. Laikmets. Vide. 13. B.Vīpera piemiņas lasījumi. Konferenču tēzes. – Rīga, 2005. gada 24. novembrī. 8.–9. lpp.
- ⁸ *Shmutzler R.* Art Nouveau. – New York, 1962. – P. 260.
- ⁹ *Korvenmaa P.* Regionalism: Import, Innovation, Export. The Role of Finnish Turn-of-the-Century Architecture in the Baltic Sphere //Art Nouveau. Time and Space. The Baltic Sea Countries at the Turn of the 20th Century. Ed. by *Silvija Grosa.* – Riga, 1999. – P. 206.
- ¹⁰ *Kļaviņš E.* Art Nouveau Iconography and Latvian Visual Arts at the Turn of the 20th Century//Art Nouveau. Time and Space. Ibid. – P. 247
- ¹¹ See: *Grosa S.* The Dragon Motif and Decorative Art Nouveau Sculpture of Riga. – Riga, 2000.
- ¹² Rakstniecības, teātra un mūzikas muzejs (Museum of Literature, Theatre and Music). EizF2/9, inv.Nr. 180040.
- ¹³ *Whitford F.* Klimt. – London, 1990. – P. 41.
- ¹⁴ *Natter Tobias G.* The Naked Body: Disguise and Tradition. –www.schirn-kunsthalle.de/data/news/1106908734_nackte_wahrheit_apke_kap1_engl(1).rtf (Site visited: 15.07.2005).
- ¹⁵ *Dobai J.* Das Frühwerk Gustav Klimts. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Vienna 1958), cited in: *Christian M. Nebehay,* ed., *Gustav Klimt: Dokumentation* (Vienna 1969), p. 83, cited in: *Natter Tobias G.* The Naked Body: Disguise and Tradition. –www.schirn-kunsthalle.de/data/news/1106908734_nackte_wahrheit_apke_kap1_engl(1).rtf (Site visited: 15.07.2005).
- ¹⁶ *Gerlach M.* Allegorien&Embleme. – Wien. – Bd. 6. – S. 28.–29.
- ¹⁷ *Grosa S.* Art Nouveau and Interior Design in Latvia at the Turn of the 20th century // Art Nouveau. Time and Space. Ibid. – P. 242
- ¹⁸ Grand Lodge of Latvia – <http://www.masonicum.lv/index.php?p=229&lang=77> (Site visited: 2006.17.11).
- ¹⁹ *Meyer F.S.* Handbook of Ornament.– Leipzig, 1888. – P. 116.
- ²⁰ See: *Swanson, V. Grosvenor.* J. W. Godward: the Eclipse of Classicism. <http://artmam.net/www1/main/www.artrenewal.org> (Site visited: 2005.09.08).
- ²¹ From : <http://artmam.net/www1/main/www.artrenewal.org> (Site visited: 2005.09.08).
- ²² E.g. – postcards from 1905 and 1907 in author's collection.
- ²³ Кусинский чугунолитейный и железоделательный завод Каталог. (Kusinsk Factory of Cast Iron. Catalogue). – Text: Relief „Rendezvous”. Late 19th – Early 20th century. No. 88. Cat. No. 166.
- ²⁴ From: *Барановский Г.* Архитектурная энциклопедия. – СПб., 1902–1908. – Т. VI.
- ²⁵ *Шморь В.* В борьбе за искусство. – Зодчий. – 1901. №. 4. – С. 47.
- ²⁶ [E.C.] Новое в искусстве. – Зодчий. – 1902. №. 18. – С. 214.
- ²⁷ From: *Барановский Г.* Архитектурная энциклопедия. – СПб., 1902–1908. – Т. VI.
- ²⁸ Österreich-Lexikon – AEIOU// <http://www.aeiou.at/aeiou.encyclp.m/m592356.htm> (Site visited: 2006.09.09).
- ²⁹ *Greiner D.* Monumentale Kunst. Eine Studie über Franz Metzner// Deutsche Kunst und Decoration. B. XV, Oktober 1904.– März 1905. – S. 93–105.
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- ³¹ See: Ausgeführte Dekorative Bildhauer-Arbeiten Ernst Hottenroth. – Dresden, 1902.