

THE ORIGIN OF LANDSCAPE IN LATVIAN TEXTILE ART. RŪDOLFS HEIMRĀTS'S SCHOOL

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Abstract

The article provides insight into development processes related to professional education in Latvian textile art. Special attention was made to the textile artist Rūdolfs Heimrāts and his crucial role in the history of Latvian textile art. He was permanently leading the Textile art department at the State Academy of Arts of Latvian SSR for more than thirty years. Heimrāts established his original educational model based on a deep understanding of Latvian textile culture heritage. The new generation of artists educated by Heimrāts completely changed visual content and technical capabilities of textile artwork. It raised the Latvian textile art to an unprecedented level of artistic expression. Heimrāts's unique personality, creative interests, and set goals influenced Latvian textile art development for several decades. Textile artists who had acquired education under the leadership of Rūdolfs Heimrāts created their special contribution to Latvian textile art known as Heimrāts's School. One of the unifying features of Heimrāts's School became the predominance of landscape theme in artists' oeuvre.

The article aims to analyse the phenomenon of Heimrāts's personality, his educational method, and his contribution to the development of Latvian textile art. Special attention was paid to determine the circumstances that affected the topic selection of weavings. Research methods include the study of archival material and publications, formal analysis of the artwork, biographical analysis, interviews, historical research, and field notes.

Keywords: *Latvian textile art, fibre art, Heimrāts's School, landscape, art education.*

Rūdolfs Heimrāts. Nature of personality

As stated by human geographer David Lowenthal, personal as well as geographical knowledge is a form of sequent occupancy. Like a landscape or a living being, each private world has had a career in time, a history of its own. Since personality is formed mainly in the earliest years, we are simultaneously determined by what we were as children and by what we are experiencing now [Lowenthal 1961: 258].

Rūdolfs Heimrāts (1926–1992) spent his childhood in Zemgale. The artist was born in 1926 in Bēne. His parents worked a variety of ancillary works at Bēne Manor but later held a shop on Stacijas Street, next to the first home of Heimrāts [Heimrāts 1987]. Father died early when the boy was only seven years old. At about eight years, Heimrāts had to start the shepherd's work, which lasted every summer up to fourteen years of age. The artist remembered this period to get to know job responsibilities and natural hardiness because he was always employed, even on Sundays. On the one hand, shepherd's experience means a strict attachment to the child's day-to-day duties without holiday and idling about; on the other hand, it is a long-standing stay-alone with nature [Heimrāts, Kalniete 1986].

Referring to Nancy M. Wells and Kristi S. Lekies' research, participation with "wild nature" in childhood has a significant, positive association with adult environmental attitudes and behaviours. In general, the result linking childhood nature experiences with later life outcomes is consistent with research findings connecting childhood participation with nature and various adulthood outcomes [Wells, Lekies 2006:13]. For instance, Heimrāts's contemporary, the most notable Lithuanian textile artist of the time, Jousas Balcikonis's (1924–2010) artwork indicates clear links with childhood experience in rural environment materialized in numerous works dedicated to peasant lifestyle and serenity of local nature [Пинкус 1974]. Similarly, Heimrāts's long shepherd's days, in close connection with the natural environment, formed exceptional poetic, realistic images filled with nature's sound, characteristic of Heimrāts's art, which once appeared, passed through the whole creative work of the artist.

Along with the shepherd's passages, Heimrāts in his childhood memories also highlights Bēne Watermill [Oša 1986]. The mill was located next to the house where the family lived after moving from Stacijas Street. The Bēne Manor complex was nearby, with extensive barns and farm buildings. The watermill was built on the dam of the Auce River, creating a vast mill pond. It was an impressive three-storey structure made of red bricks, distinguished in the rural matter of the surroundings. At the time, the mill was run by weaving workshops, yarn spinning, and dyeing. Every precious spare moment, the boy raced there to engage in this world of colours, patterns, smell, and visual impressions. Considering the diversity between the everyday rural environment and the mechanized atmosphere of the plant, which was also filled with



Figure 1. Bēne Watermill today. Author: Rita Ļegčīlina-Broka (2020).

various fabrics and colourful yarns, it becomes clear why this experience has had such a profound effect on Heimrāts's memories. The multiple patterns of dyed yarns stock have been particularly encouraging. In later years dyeing had been one of the most exciting textile handling processes for the artist [Oša 1986]. When the time came to choose the direction of further education, the captivating image of the mill weaver was the determinant factor in Heimrāts's subsequent choice of profession.

Education in Textile Art in Latvia before 1961

By 1961, several secondary education-level institutions provided education in textile art in Latvia. Rīga and Liepāja Secondary Schools of Applied Arts were the main opportunities for applicants. Both schools were established at the time of the Latvian Free State. Liepāja Secondary School of Applied Art was initially established in 1926 as a private arts school, while Rīga Secondary School of Applied Arts (Riga State School of Art Crafts) was founded in 1931 on the basis of earlier arts workshops and traditional crafts courses [Rinka 2016: 583]. Special attention was paid to preserving national traditions by following the once established appropriate samples in the educational process.

Rūdolf Heimrāts began his artistic education at Rīga Secondary School of Applied Arts, joining the Textiles department in 1941. According to the periodization

of school history researcher Brigita Sturme (1940), the training of Heimrāts from 1941 to 1948 took place during a period which the researcher refers to as the yoke of Stalinist ideology [Sturme 2009: 27]. The content and training methods applied to the new uniformity scale had to be learned to work for both permanent school teachers and students. Remembering the education process, Heimrāts highlighted the role of the teachers' personalities and their educational methods. In some cases, they created doubts and resistance, but in general, they have laid the grounds for the basic principles of creative work that Heimrāts has kept for all his creative life. Among the educators, Heimrāts highlights Kārlis Sūniņš (1907–1979) and Herta Stepe, as those who have given the most not only during school but also afterwards [Heimrāts, Kalniete 1986].

For the first few years, Heimrāts learned composition with the founder and principal of the school, Arvīds Dzērvītis (1897–1942), whom he describes as a very strict educator who always made firm remarks about the work of learners. After his death, the composition was taught by Jēkabs Bīne (1895–1955). He was clinging to his colour-breaking and compositing system and left to his mind with his spot tasks, where a tone, like *LAU*, was asked to create a colour composition, then, through complicated formulas, had to find the right shade and blend it with pencil colours [Heimrāts, Kalniete 1986]. In the last two years, Heimrāts learned to create textiles within special requirements, including the school's preferred selection of colours, which were described by the artist as beige-brown-green, inevitably led to uniformity and grey perception of works. The textiles had to be very accurate and neatly executed, and Heimrāts himself acknowledged that the subtlety and thoroughness of his works had come along from school. After finishing school, he tried to do something that had not yet been done, but the feeling that he could not get rid of what he had learned had not particularly allowed it [Kalniete 1986].

After completing his education with the qualifications of the textile artist-performer, Heimrāts continued his studies at the Ceramic department at Latvian State Academy of Arts, as it was the only opportunity at the time to continue his education in the field of applied art. In parallel to his studies, Heimrāts began his pedagogical work in the Textile department of Rīga Secondary School of Applied Arts. At that time, Heimrāts started his independent research of Folk-Art collections in repositories at both the National History Museum and the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum in Rīga. The world of colours turned out to be surprising and captivating outside the means of the School of Applied Arts opinion he had learned before. Remembering this period, Heimrāts mentioned with gratitude the History Museum staff member, Mērija Grīnberga (1909–1975), who had urged him to look at the legacy of the masters of folk art more broadly, without attaching to any particular biases or assumed samples of so-called good practice [Kalniete 1986].



Figure 2. Rūdolfis Heimrāts and his colleagues at Rīga Secondary school of Applied Arts, 1957. Photo from Heimrāts's personnel file in Art Academy of Latvia Information Centre.

Heimrāts began his pedagogical work during Stalin's regime. In the arts, the method of Socialist Realism was the only appropriate, which determined that artwork had to be national by form but socialist by content [Ansons 2019: 45]. With the changes initiated by Khrushchev's Thaw after 1954, the new state's pace of production and construction updated the necessity for highly educated specialists in the applied arts field. Thus, in the late 1950s, attention was drawn to the education of professionals in applied-arts industries at the academic level.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Rūdolfis Heimrāts had been teaching for more than a decade. From 1955 he consequently participated in exhibitions with textile and ceramic works. The changed political situation caused by Khrushchev's Thaw allowed some freedom of information in the media, arts, and culture; therefore, it was possible to get insight into processes in art beyond the local scene [Knāviņa 2019: 63]. Meanwhile, in the late 1950s, Heimrāts had turned to the weaving technique used in the Royal tapestry workshops in France and Belgium, the most famous of which is the Gobelins tapestry manufactory. The classic tapestry technique, which allows the weaver to create an alternative painting in the fibre, became a novelty in post-war Europe. The idea that tapestry can be an independent artwork, rather

than a secondary reproduction of a painting in fibre, launched an ambitious process of reviving textile art [Ginsburg 1995: 105]. It can be assumed that, influenced by ideas accented by European tapestry revival, Heimrāts turned to tapestry weaving. In 1960 he created his first large-scale tapestry "To the Song Festival". Monumental weaving (170 × 300) represented realistic, multi-figure composition. This weaving emerged as a kind of revelation in contemporary Latvian textile art, where artistic expression was reduced to creating interior objects for practical needs like small-sized textiles, decorative wall hangings, curtains, and pile rugs made within the formal ornamental tradition. Specialists educated at the secondary level were prepared as skilful masters of their profession, ready to continue to work in manufacturing and mass consumption, but could not provide the support for the increasing demand of ambitious, monumental decorations for representative needs in various public interiors of the Soviet state. Consequently, the question arose about the necessity to reorganize the higher education in arts.

Academic Textile Art. Heimrāts's School

In the summer of 1961, a session of the USSR Academy of Arts was held in Moscow, dedicated to the theory, practice, and propaganda of Soviet Art during the construction period of communism. By the presidency of the USSR Academy of Arts, the establishment of a Decorative and Applied Arts department was particularly discussed [Rīgas Balss 1961]. The decision facilitated implementing centralized introduction of the missing departments of Applied Arts in state universities.

Heimrāts was already an educator with thirteen years of experience and the most prominent artist in textile art. He was acknowledged with his personality charm, enormous work capabilities, creativity, the desire to give textiles the depth of the artistic expression besides interior-decorating values. Consequently, in 1961, he was invited to take the lead of the established Textile art department in the Art Academy of Latvia. Heimrāts himself admits that taking on these duties did not allure him because he had already considered abandoning pedagogy and focusing more on creative work. By then, he had successfully rejected the offer to become director of the Rīga Secondary School of Applied Arts [Sturme 2009]. In addition, he was critical of his abilities and did not feel comfortable with higher education. Heimrāts himself acknowledged that the crucial circumstance for the positive decision was the proposed opportunity to stay in Belgium for a year and so agreed to take on the new commitments [Heimrāts 1986].

On 2 October 1961, the rector of the Art Academy of Latvia, Leo Svemps (1897–1975), announced opening of three new departments in a formal act. Along with the textile art department, artistic metalwork and pedagogical departments were opened [Dzimtenes Balss 1961].

In remembering the department's initials, Heimrāts notes that the first year was the toughest. There was no suitable space, no material, no equipment. All that was needed, including the curriculum, had to be done by Heimrāts himself [Heimrāts, Kalniete 1986]. It was remarkable that the loose attention of governing institutions allowed Heimrāts to proceed relatively freely [Bankovskis, Heimrāts 1989]. Meanwhile, one could gain the textile art education in Moscow and Leningrad universities; however, the curriculum there was based mainly on developing industrial work skills. Looking back at the department's 25 years of work, Heimrāts had summarized the goal of his programme: *I decided to focus on preparing artists with high professional thinking and skills. On this principle, the department has been holding to all these years. However, not once have various commissions accused us of teaching too little about special, industrial-related items, such as desinatur and jacquard technology. I'm sure if the artist has excellent taste and original ideas, he will quickly learn these special conditions when he goes to the textile factory. The main thing is for him to be a creative personality* [Heimrāts, Kalniete 1986].

According to this statement, one of the essential components of education was the colour culture, technical performance, and author's innovative thinking. Heimrāts advanced the development of artistic imagination, the ability to execute well-structured compositions in the fibre material, as well as figurative motifs and natural scenery.



Figure 3. Ethnographic blankets from collection of National History Museum of Latvia. CVVM 7816, CVVM 11176, CVVM 10918, CVVM 171113.

Author: Rita Ļegčīlina-Broka (2021).

The Information Centre of the Art Academy of Latvia has been keeping a curriculum of composition written by Heimrāts, the conformity of which, according to the attached protocol, was used in 1985/1986 academic year [Heimrāts 1985]. By examining it closer, the educational guidelines of Heimrāts can be clearly detected. First of all, extensive investigation of colours was required throughout the first year of studies, including research and practical analysis of the Latvian folk art heritage. (Figure 3)

Secondly, the textile artist had to delve into long-term nature studies. Adapting the structure of natural forms, colours, and textures to the specific conditions of textile expression yield the basic knowledge of textile education. The third-year followed with in-depth research of natural shapes and textures, studying nature's landscapes and colour scale. The fourth year of training developed the ability to compose a narrative scene expressed in tapestry practiced in various topics. A significant number of lectures were intended for studies of international textile art. Heimrāts paid particular attention to the development of textile art in Poland and other Eastern bloc countries. For these purposes, Heimrāts carefully collected materials on relatively frequent overseas trips. In general, these foreign tokens and photographs provided by Heimrāts awarded students an unusual initiative. Thus, they generated a way of thinking significantly more modern than it was at the time, for example, in the fine arts departments [Eglīte 2020: 38]. Along with narrative tasks, Heimrāts encouraged the development of specific haptic thinking in colour and abstract shapes. In the final year, students learned textile in connection with interior and finally executed diploma work.

Heimrāts himself did not deny that the development of the curriculum was influenced by other universities' practices, mainly the Prague Art Institute in the Czech Republic [Bankovičs 2010]. It was not an entirely original model of the training plan; however, taking into account Heimrāts's contribution in creating the brand-new education from the zero point and its further success in the textile art field, he can be appreciated as outstanding reformer.

Perceptions of environment. Landscape in Latvian Textile Art

In the coming years, the success of textile art reached an unprecedented level of appreciation and demand. Moving towards the synthesis of textile artwork with architecture as well as the application of the expression features related to fine arts has enabled textile artwork to revolutionize from ordinary things of narrow functional significance into unique environmental objects whose decorative value was based on the artist's individual performance, the specific materiality of the fibre, the colours, ornamentation, texture, thematic content, and variety of shapes. Despite being educated on the priority of realistic figurative compositions, only a few artists practiced this method in their further creative work. State-commissioned figurative

weavings were also more valued in terms of compensation, but despite this, such attempts decreased with every year. On close analysis and appraisal, it is possible to assume that targeted research of Latvian folk art, particularly the aesthetics of its geometric patterns and colour combination principles, the purposeful observation of nature, and manifesting the materiality and fibre values in different types of weaving techniques, the available knowledge of the trends in modern European art, directed textile artists away from the expected monumental figurativeness and industrial-oriented thinking to other forms of visual expression where local nature and landscapes increasingly strengthened as the leading theme.

The majority of Heimrāts's students have, over time, abandoned the need for figural compositions in favour of the use of motifs of nature, landscape, and abstract-captured images, experiments in new fibre materials, and spatial plastic forms. Justification for this assumption could be detected in the oeuvre of numerous representatives of Heimrāts's School. The following overview is considered some notable examples from the first generation of textile artists educated under Heimrāts's method.

Textile artist Aija Baumanē (1943–2019) must be mentioned first. The artist had been Heimrāts's student from the time of Rīga Applied Art Secondary School, and she was one of the first four students in the department of Textile Art. In the early works of Baumanē, such as *Bāleliņi*/"Brothers" (1970), *Rumulēšanās*/"Shepherd ritual" (1975), *Rūtoja saule*/"Folk motif" (1988), presence of figures is notable and plays an essential role in the narrative meaning, whereas the following range of works of the author is entirely related to the depiction of generalized landscape motives, arrangements of colours and symbols. The necessity to use the figural scene to support narrative meaning was replaced by perceived elements of the significant surroundings, reflections, and signs. The need for the literal interpretation of the image becomes minor, possibly redundant. The close connection with the environment of the ancestral home, the native nature of the native area, and its typical landscapes became the primary imagery source for all Baumanē's artworks. The conditional images of these sites were considered to contain much more personally relevant information to be transmitted to the viewer than in a depiction modelled in figures.

Ilma Austrīņa (1940), along with Baumanē, was among the first ten Heimrāts's students who acquired education at Art Academy of Latvia, and she is one of those textile artists who, despite the long and relatively successful career, never created figural images. However, this fact does not diminish the presence of interpretative content. A considerable example is a weaved triptych *Pirmās vagas, Sējējs nāk, Zelmenis*/"The First Furrows, The Sower Comes, Greenness" (1977). Aligned composition consists of three woven pictures representing a rural landscape, where the central part is dedicated to sowing how it was practiced in ancient times. Two



Figure 4. A. Baumane. Eventide. Wool, flax, mixed technique. 160 × 193 (1994). Photo from Baumane's family archive.



Figure 5. I. Austriņa. The First Furrows. The Sower Comes. Greenness. Tryptych. Wool, flax, mixed technique. 260 × 135, 260 × 112, 136 × 255 (1977). Author: Māris Kundziņš, Museum of Decorative Arts and Design collection.

others depict the fertile fields before and after the sowing. The central part represents sowing in the circular shape of the round ancient sowing tool, also interpreted as the sun from which seeds fall into processed land. The sower included in the work's title reveals as a symbolically articulated process, which in this way does not exclude the literal understanding of this activity, as the sower itself though remaining in the associative image, significantly expands the capacity of meaning. The laconic abstract composition broadens the time of the event from historical maturity to the reality of the current time much more successful than if it would be depicted in figural images. The absence of figurately expressed narrative provides an opportunity to interpret the work in a much wider meaning, linking it to the lyrics of the Latvian folk songs, literary prose, annual customs, or the viewer's personal experience. Thus, sensibly captured Latvian nature and attitude to traditional culture, revives in specific colours of organic materiality as the palpable sense of native place. This poetic textile symphony is just one of numerous artworks *Austriņa* has created; however, the lyrical content of her compositions and continuous reluctance to figurative scenes diminished the attention of critics, and today her name is nearly unknown.

In respect of successful textile artist carrier, the illustrative example is Heimrāts's student Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere (1939). The author is recognizable with her enormous working capacity, technical skills, and free treatment of figural expression in tapestries. However, there is a significant amount of textiles where pure colour and plain landscape are dominant. A considerable illustration here can be the tapestry *Raža/Harvest* (1972). On the large-sized weaving the field of cereals is depicted, upon which the summer sun shines. The blue sky reflects in mature ears of corn and some buckled-down flowers from surrounding meadows. Despite the impression of abstract decoratively arranged composition, the source of this weaving has a powerful personal story. It is a memory landscape from the artist's childhood years when the summers had been spent in Vidriži village located in Limbaži district [Vīgnere 2020]. The experienced vast precious cereal fields became the guiding theme of the textile artwork dedicated to the native land. The composition intended to show the hardiness of peasants' life is not proceeding as a figuratively treated scene. The perennial essence of engagement between nature and human, the eternity of growing power becomes visible in the mature beauty of the upcoming harvest.

Conclusions

Following his childhood dream to be a weaver, Rūdolfs Heimrāts became the best-known artist in Latvian textile art. His contribution to the development of Latvian professional textile art is exceptional. Textile artists educated within Heimrāts's established teaching system have still made the most remarkable proportion of practicing textile artists today. Putting folk art and nature's studies in the core of

education let him develop the specific vision through textile material possibilities, which, alongside with obtained technical skills, formed the new experience of the creation process, encouraging experiments and improvisation. Developed through knowledge of ancient tradition, practical methods of work concentrated the whole creative process in the hands of the artist executor. They made the basis of the new textile language in which it became possible to communicate in an imaginative way using symbols, abstract images, and metaphors. Despite the demand for narrative figural tapestry, many textile artists have chosen to think and reflect in the categories of fibre's features. They preferably obtained visual content from perceptions of the natural environment, landscapes, seasonal changes and emphasized the union of yarn and colour, tactile exposure, and intimate essence. Forms and motifs experienced in everyday life, local nature, and personal relationships with the place expressed in the weavings became the common theme in the contribution of Heimrāts's school. Heimrāts's established model of education no longer exists in its original performance. Due to followed changes of the educational system mainly proposed by the replacing of teaching staff, textile artists in Latvia are divided into generations educated by Rūdolfs Heimrāts and after.

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