

## FOUNDATION AND OPERATION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LATVIAN TEXTILE ART (1994–2014)

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### Abstract

Influenced by political and economic changes in Latvia in the mid-1990s, artists in different fields of art came together and formed independent associations. Aija Baumane (1943–2019), artist and professor, the head of the Department of Textile Art at the Art Academy of Latvia (AAL), founded the Association of Latvian Textile Art (ALTA) together with ten textile artists from different generations.

The aim of the research: to describe the significance of the Association of Latvian Textile Art activities in the first 20 years of operation and to identify changes in textile art since the 1990s. ALTA's attempt to motivate and encourage Latvian textile artists to become involved in world art processes marks a transition in various aspects. New ways for expression were searched and different understanding developed in textile art, and thus the question of the traditionally accepted function of textile work was raised. Until now the operation and significance of ALTA have not been studied, although its impact on the development of the textile art sector is undeniable.

The research is based on ALTA activity materials, mainly documented in the press – “*Literatūra un Māksla*”, “*Māksla*”, “*Diena*”, “*Kultūras Forums*”, etc., as well as little studied and not systematized so far archive of the Association of Textile Art, located at the Department of Textile Art of the Art Academy of Latvia since the foundation of the association.

**Keywords:** *artists association, Aija Baumane, Latvian textile art, textile work.*

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The Association of Latvian Textile Art (hereinafter ALTA) is the only textile artists' organization in Latvia and it unites almost 80 members – professional artists. It was founded in April 1994. In the year of its foundation, ALTA's activities included formation of its members creative biographies database, organization of exhibitions in Latvia and abroad, collection and dissemination of information on international competitions and exhibitions in order to promote ALTA's members individually and the textile art sector as a whole.

Since 1995, the legal status of ALTA has been registered in the Register of Associations and Foundations. Acquisition of legal status was mainly necessary to raise funds. It should be emphasized that both the board of the association and the members performed the work necessary for the existence of the association free of charge.

### **Preconditions for the establishment of the Association of Textile Art in the early 1990s**

Latvian artists obtained their experience of participation in professional organizations during the Soviet period. The professional status of the representatives of the visual arts sector, including textile artists, was determined by the affiliation to the largest artists' organization in Latvia, the Artists' Union of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (AU LSSR)<sup>1</sup>, since 1990 the Artists' Union of Latvia (AUL). As a state institution under the Ministry of Culture, until 1991 AU LSSR organized large-scale exhibitions, planned the procurement of artworks, provided some artists with workshops and co-financed the cost of materials. Each sector of art (painters, sculptors, textile artists, etc.) had its own section, director, board and members. Textile art section from 1976 until 1992 was led by Egils Rozenbergs (1948). The Artists' Union of LSSR and other creative unions were supported by state owned weekly cultural newspaper "*Literatūra un Māksla*"<sup>2</sup> and the cultural magazine "*Māksla*" both delivering a wide coverage of cultural life. However, at the same time as support, AU LSSR and activities of its members in accordance with the understanding of the Soviet era were under the supervision and control of the Communist Party, therefore the AU LSSR and art processes taking place at that time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are re-evaluated in more extensive research on art history<sup>3</sup>. In 1992, as the political and

<sup>1</sup> AU LSSR was founded in 1941, until 1991 was a member of the USSR Artists Union.

<sup>2</sup> "Glezniecība. Laikmeta liecinieki. 20. gadsimta 60., 70. un 80. gadi. Latvijas Mākslinieku savienības mākslas darbu kolekcija" [Painting. Witness of the era. The 60s, 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Collection of works of art of the Latvian Union of Artists] editor Inese Baranovska, 2002, "Padomjzemes mitoloģija" [Sovietland mythology] editor Elita Ansona, 2008, "UN CITI virzieni, meklējumi, mākslinieki Latvijā 1960–1984" [AND OTHER trends, searches, artists in Latvia 1960–1984] editors Vilnis Vējš, Ieva Astahovska, Irēna Bužinska, Līga Lindenbauma, Māra Traumane, 2010, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

economic situation in Latvia changed, the AU LSSR ceased to exist, the creative sections lost their unifying role [Zemzaris 1995: 6], and thus both the organization and the artists thought about what to do next.

The events of the Third Latvian National Awakening, political, social and economic changes facilitated the rapid renewal of various cultural organizations, such as the Librarians' Association, the Latvian Architects' Union, the Latvian Cinematographers' Union, etc. In 1999, according to various sources, information was gathered about more than 150 non-governmental organizations [Vinnika 1999], run by activists. Visual artists with similar interest also organized in smaller groups with aim to realize their ideas. Santa Mazika, a researcher of cultural organizations in the 1990s, notes that many young artists, not finding a place in the Artists' Union of the LSSR were forming independent creative units and considers this as a bright feature of the 1990s art processes and names this concept as "new institutionalism" [Mazika 2010: 84]. The term "new institutionalism" refers to organizations "OPEN", "E-LAB", "Pedvāle Open-Air Art Museum", "K@2", etc., the content of which is contemporary art, but the form of activity corresponds to the way the artists themselves work [Mazika 2010: 84].

Adaptation to the new conditions also took place in neighboring Estonia and Lithuania. The activities of Estonian textile artists, which began in 1993, played an important role. In Tallinn, Estonian textile artists founded the textile art association *Eesti Tekstiilikunstnike Liit*. The main goals of the organization were to develop the traditions of textile art in Estonia, to collect and disseminate information about Estonian textile art. To this day, the magazine *KOILIBLIKAS* (translated as "moth") is published twice a year; it reflects ongoing activities in the sector and interviews with artists. The experience of colleagues from neighboring countries encouraged Latvian textile artists to look for similar opportunities in Latvia.

The need for new organizations was doubted by painter and writer Uldis Zemzaris. In his 1995 publication "Independents then and independents now" does not hide his skepticism towards the formation of such groups, pointing out that artists are essentially individualists who feel competition with each other [Zemzaris 1995: 3]. Some artists from younger generations also questioned the need for organizations, believing that artists' unions were a legacy of the Soviet era, when their task was to regulate the activities of creative people in return for offering various coveted privileges – social guarantees, public procurement, workshops and even apartments [Balčus 2015].

This time coincided with changes within the textile art sector. After the death of Rūdolfs Heimrāts, the founder of the professional textile art school and the most active developer of the sector in 1992, the textile artist Aija Baumann took over and continued the management of the Department of Textile Art at the Art Academy.

Many colleagues admired Baumanē's courage, realizing that prospects were gloomy. As a result of unplanned difficulties – in the following years, the competition for applicants for entrance exams in the applied arts departments of AAL declined rapidly. These conditions were also affected by problems with the supply of materials, the cessation of public procurement and the purchase of works of art for museums [Rozenieks 2004]. It must be concluded that the entire sector was subject to change, and A. Baumanē sensed that the textile art sector was in the process of survival.

Textile artists also experienced a need to unite in an independent group. In 1994, the last international symposium took place at the Artists' House of Creativity in Dzintari. Its organizer Egils Rozenbergs (1948) emphasized that symposia were one of the ways to better integrate into the world of art life [Baranovska 1995: 16]. Inspired by the experience of foreign colleagues, a group of textile artists "+ – 48" was formed during the symposium in 1994. The group "+ – 48" united nine former students of the professor and artist Rūdolfs Heimrāts – Egils Rozenbergs, Dzintra Vilks (1948), Inese Jakobi (1949), Lija Rāge (1948), Arvids Priedīte (1946), Pēteris Sidars (1948), Baiba Osīte (1958), Zinta Beimane (1948) and Viesturs Bērziņš (1954–2019).

The first ideas and plans for an organization that would take care of the possible development of the Latvian textile art sector were recorded in a 1993 interview "A year in the length of year" in the newspaper "Diena" in which E. Rozenbergs pointed out that textile artists were thinking about setting up an information centre. "There are several international textile art associations in Europe that publish magazines, organize conferences on textile art issues and would like to cooperate with us" [Kaufmanis 1993: 9]. Apparently, ideas vibrating among textile artists had reached a time to mature and transform into reality. In turn, the participants of ALTA pointed out that the activities of the group "+ – 48" have given the strongest impetus for other textile artists to unite in the Association of Latvian Textile Art.

### **Foundation and operation of ALTA**

The founders of the Association of Latvian Textile Art were 9 textile artists of different generations: Aija Baumanē, Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere, Aina Muze (1943–2017), Skaidrīte Leimane (1941), Astrīda Bērziņa (1948), Irīsa Blumate (1948), Daiga Štālberga (1963), Iveta Vecenāne (1962), Ieva Krūmiņa (1964), Barbara Ābele (1964), Zane Krūmiņa (1952) and textile art researcher Velta Raudzēpa (1951). 72 textile artists gathered for the foundation meeting in April 1994, voted for the statutes and elected members of the Board. Aija Baumanē was unanimously elected President of the Association and was the only president of ALTA until 2019. ALTA statutes determined the main goals of the Association – to promote contemporary textile art activities, creative initiative, creativity and the integration of Latvian

textile art into world art processes. At the same time ALTA maintains its ties with the Artists' Union of Latvia and is still one of several associations of AUL creative groups.

Some members of the Board had experience of participation in the Textile Art Section of the Artists' Union, especially in organizing meetings and planning exhibitions. The individual initiative of ALTA members was of great importance. For ALTA to function fully as an organization, its members were interested in promoting the development of ALTA activities. For example, artist Ieva Krūmiņa designed the emblem of the Association.

The founders of ALTA purposefully sought communication opportunities for international contacts. In 1995 A. Baumane sent informative letters about the foundation of ALTA to textile art organizations in several countries. As a result, ALTA established cooperation with the largest textile art organizations in the world – the European Textile Network (ETN) in France (since 2015 in Spain, from 2019 in Germany), Textileart in Denmark, the American Tapestry Alliance (ATA) in the United States.

Support was provided by the researcher of textile art Velta Raudzēpa – the head of the collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design<sup>1</sup>. The most significant contribution of Raudzēpa is the initiative to organize six<sup>2</sup> Riga International Textile and Fiber Art Triennials in the period from 2001 to 2018. The assumption that international textile art biennials should be considered as an indicator for understanding textile art in order to follow changes in various trends and phenomena has become a driving force in the sector. With this experience, textile artists developed a deeper understanding of what is happening with textile art outside Latvia, as well as the ability to join the chain of large-scale international events – biennials and triennials<sup>3</sup>.

In 2001 with its first triennial, Riga also became one of the stages of international textile art events connected with the European Textile Network (ETN), founded in 1991 by several European textile artists with aim of popularizing the use of tapestry technique in diverse manifestations and ideological currents of contemporary art.

<sup>1</sup> Until 2005 the museum was called the Museum of Decorative Applied Arts.

<sup>2</sup> 2001, 2004 Tradicionālais un laikmetīgais [Tradition and innovation], 2007 Globālā intriga [Global intrigue], 2010 Globālā intriga 2 [Global intrigue 2], 2015 Daudzveidība vienotībā [Diversity and unity], 2018 Identitāte [Identity].

<sup>3</sup> *The International Lausanne Tapestry Biennials (1962–1995)*. *Fondation Toms Pauli* – Toms Pauli Foundation is a non-profit organization that aims to organize exhibitions, publish catalogs and make scientific archives available to researchers. The foundation is a member of an international research network working to document the history of tapestries and protect textile use.

Egils Rozenbergs, President of the Artists' Union of Latvia and textile artist, also participated in the foundation of ETN.

In 1991, the ETN had 32 member states<sup>1</sup>. In order for each country to be able to present in depth the local traditions and experience of textile art, an annual conference of the ETN organization, in cooperation with the cultural institutions, museums and ministries of culture of the respective country took place in one of the member states. In 2001, the ETN conference took place in Riga. In honor of this event, the DMDM Museum, the Association of Textile Art and the Ministry of Culture organized an international exhibition "Tradition & Innovation". At the same time several solo exhibitions of Latvian artists were opened and textile art symposium took place in Zvārtava. At the end of the conference, the participants signed the "Declaration on the regular organization of the textile and fiber art triennial "Tradition & Innovation" in Riga".

A. Pumpurs also created a design concept for exhibition catalogs – the catalog of works of ALTA participants "Latvian Textile Art" (1997), "Textile and Fiber Art in Latvia" (Spain, 2004), "Latvian Textile Art" (Italy, Rome, 1998), "Textile Art from Latvia" (Prague, 1999), etc.

Inga Skujiņa (1952) from the artist's point of view expressed an independent opinion in the press and wrote introductory articles for exhibition booklets. In 1992, in the newspaper "*Literatūra un Māksla*", Skujiņa created a series of articles entitled "The Cobra and Rabbit Phenomenon or Three Latvian Textile Art Ladies in the Skin of French Artists" [Skujiņa 1992: 6] to share her impressions gained during her residence in France and her inclusion in the international textile community.

The contribution of Iriša Blumate cannot be ignored. Thanks to her initiative, will and energy, since 1997 until 2000 in Riga, in the foyer of the third floor of the hotel "Latvija", ALTA created the gallery "Rūdolf". After the reconstruction of "Latvija" hotel in 2001, the cooperation agreement was not renewed.

Most likely the ALTA community did not make full use of the opportunities provided by communication between the artist and the society for mutual understanding, perhaps without understanding the meaning and necessity of communication at that time. In the following years, publications explaining and interpreting textile works in Latvia decreased in number, making it more and more difficult for the public to keep up with rapid changes in the sector. There was mainly a lack of texts on new materials, used techniques and the transformation of textile works from a functional object into non-functional objects. The research on

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<sup>1</sup> Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Vatican, Hungary, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Great Britain, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, San Marino, Romania, Switzerland, Spain, Slovakia, Turkey, Sweden.

the establishment and operation of the Association of Latvian Textile Art is part of the author's doctoral thesis "Textile Art in Latvia at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century". Thus, this is the first attempt to gather information and provide an explanation of textile art in Latvia since the 1990s. In 1997 art researcher Ruta Čaupova (1939) explained in her paper "Contemporary Art Assessments and Research Questions" that in order to provide a professional assessment of the analysis or explanation of non-traditional visual art expressions (..), issues of creation and dissemination, an art historian also needs different experience and a different orientation of professional knowledge acquisition [Čaupova 1997]. There have been no significant changes in the assessment of textile art, and the opportunities for improving the experience of contemporary textile art researchers are still developing slowly.

There was also a lack of experience and knowledge in carrying out numerous other tasks, especially in bookkeeping, raising funds (support for exhibitions and publishing from the state budget had been practically stopped in Latvia since 1990), establishing international contacts and diplomatic correspondence, and attracting exhibition curators. It is possible that due to lack of time, the collection of creative works of the members of the association was not continued. The catalog is incomplete, only participants who joined between 1994 and 1999 have been added. As far as possible, the AAL Information Center provided support for obtaining the missing information. More than half of the photos in the LTA archive of textile works do not include the name of the author or the year of creation of the respective work of art, therefore it cannot serve as a basis for more extensive research. Many documents have been lost, such as the minutes of LTA members' meetings, which included a regular (once a month) summary of board decisions and intentions. On the first Thursday of each month, the gathering of textile artists was a platform for mutual exchange of ideas and discussions. Skaidrīte Leimane, the secretary of meetings, remembers how joint visits by members to foreign textile exhibitions were planned and carried out. In order to promote the participation of artists in various events, ALTA Board regularly informed about international competitions and exhibitions. In addition to serious work, the planning of informal events was not forgotten also. No less important was the social aspect – exchange of experiences, mutual support and encouragement from colleagues [Leimane 2021].

### **ALTA exhibitions overview and textile art interpretation trends**

One of the main goals of ALTA was to ensure the regular exhibition activities in Latvia, and to involve artists of all generations in this process. The association from the moment of its founding in 1994 until 2014 implemented more than 120 exhibition projects in Latvia. In co-operation with the embassies of the Republic of

Latvia abroad, 42 exhibitions have been established in many countries during these twenty years<sup>1</sup>. Each LTA exhibition was created as a selection of works by a jury of ALTA current year's Board members or independent experts. In twenty years, 223 artists took part in the exhibitions organized by the association.

In 1995, with the first exhibition of ALTA of the same name "The First" in the Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, the annual tradition of organizing exhibitions of the members of the association began, which continues to this day. Despite the fact that it was the free choice of each artist, there was an unwritten rule among the textile artist community that participation in the annual exhibition was mandatory. The aim of these exhibitions was to show the textile works created in the previous year, allowing the artist to determine the choice of theme and appropriate technical performance, thus emphasizing the artist's creative freedom and giving the viewer an idea of the development of Latvian textile art. However, from today's point of view, probably this principle of the exhibition did not become a "formula for success". Although ALTA had chosen a thematic orientation for a few exhibitions, in 2001, the seventh exhibition "Connection", in 2003 the eighth exhibition "World in the World", in 2005 at the AUL gallery "Textile + X", in 2008 "Stone, Paper, Scissors", there were no comments and explanations to get an idea of contemporary developments in textile art. Most of the exhibition events remained unnoticed, without press reviews. For example, compared to the previous decade (1980s), when the boundaries of textiles had expanded, and the main directions of textile art were considered to be decorative expressiveness and tapestry technique [Raudzēpa 1998: 150], then the trend of the 1990s marks similar techniques and technical performances, but proportionally more works include a variety of author's techniques, feltings, non-functional textile mosaic works with conceptual orientation. From Inga Skujiņa's publication about the first exhibition of the Association in the newspaper "*Diena*" we learn about the general situation in the textile art sector in early nineties: "There are still an inexplicable number of active textile artists. Seventy artists of all generations are working in spite the loom is not generating income" [Skujiņa 1995: 5]. As we can see from the quote, working but not weaving. It cannot be overlooked that the difficult economic situation in the country reduced the opportunities for artists to create woven textiles. While artists saw change as a challenge to keep working and were not afraid to look for new techniques and materials, then, as observed by Laura Miglone in the publication "At Crossroads of Worlds" in 2003, textile art by spectators was still associated only with classical weaving techniques, and this was also expected from exhibitions [Miglone 2003: 4].

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<sup>1</sup> In Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Russia, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Norway, China, Spain and Australia.

The first three ALTA exhibitions (1995, 1997, 1998) took place in the Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, but starting from the fourth exhibition in 1999, St. Peter's Church became the annual exhibition space. The concept of the association's annual exhibition included the principle that after the works were exhibited in St. Peter's Church, the collection created was completed as a traveling exhibition to the history and art museums of Latvia's regions. Retrospective and anniversary exhibitions are considered to be the most ambitious. In 1996 "The Year of Rūdolfs Heimrāts", in 1997 "Latvian Contemporary Textiles", in 2000 "Nineties", in 2001 "Riga Ornaments", and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition of Latvian professional textile art "Golden Ratio" in 2011.

In parallel with the exhibitions in Latvia, since the foundation of the association, many exhibitions have been held abroad. It should be noted that the exhibitions were created in cooperation with the support of the embassy of the respective country. An example of this is the long-term cooperation (1997–2007) with the Latvian Embassy in Estonia and the cultural attaché Guntars Godiņš (1958) and the head of the Latvian National Cultural Association in Estonia Juris Žigurs (1939). Exhibitions took place in the hall of the Tallinn Opera House "Winter Garden" every year in March. In 2001 Batik Exhibition, 2002 Aina Muze's solo exhibition, 2005 Textile Mosaic Exhibition, 2007 Iriša Blumate's solo exhibition, etc. In turn, Estonian textile artists had the opportunity to exhibit their works once a year at Riga Latvian Society House.

In 1999, during the visit of the President of Latvia Guntis Ulmanis (1939) to the Czech Republic, a tapestry exhibition of 45 Latvian artists "Latvian Art – Wall Textiles" was opened in Prague Castle. The author of the exhibition Arnis Pumpurs also created a catalog of works. The catalog shows that less than half (20) were of woven textiles, other of works of art were batik, screen printing and textile mosaics. The course of the exhibition was also covered in several Czech publications.

Most often, a collection of works by an average of 15–25 authors was completed for foreign exhibitions. Such exhibitions were "Material Value" in Prague (2000), Tapestry Exhibition in Hamburg (2000) and Latvian Textile Art Exhibition in China (2001), however, in the Czech Republic, Austerlitz Castle, and in the Eidfjord City Hall and Hydroelectric Power Station building, Norway, 40 artists had the opportunity to exhibit their textiles.

## Conclusions

Because of the change in the state system, associations of the creative professions, including the Artists' Union, in the early 1990s lost their original role – controlling activities of their members, organizing exhibitions (promoting the ideology of the system at the time), purchasing works of art, etc. As a result, artists lost their usual

environment and came together in smaller groups to adapt to the new conditions. Aija Baumann together with colleagues and like-minded people founded the Association of Latvian Textile Art to help artists in the textile art sector. The primary goal of LTA was to inform artists and promote their involvement in international art processes, thus popularizing Latvian textile art. The great contribution to the organization of local and international exhibitions shows that the Association has become a driving force for creativity. Simultaneously with the association's goal of becoming an organization representing the sector, A. Baumann respected the personality of each artist, provided support and encouraged for individual achievements, as evidenced by textile works and solo exhibitions. Although the creators of LTA and the community itself have been involved in the development of the textile art sector on a participatory basis, not all objectives set out in the statutes have yet been achieved. For example, it was difficult for the general public to understand the phenomena of contemporary textile art. It must be concluded that this situation is related to the lack of financial, human resources and skills to perform certain necessary work in the association. From the point of view of LTA participants, membership in the association is associated with the expansion of professional experience and a sense of community, which does not exclude healthy mutual competition in an informal and friendly atmosphere.

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### ***Interviews***

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