

PERSONALITIES OF PAINTERS VILHELMS PURVĪTIS AND IMANTS LANCMANIS IN THE LATVIAN ART FIELD IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

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Abstract

The Latvian National Museum of Art's 2022 exhibitions "Purvītis" and "The Art of Imants Lancmanis", one dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Vilhelms Purvītis and the other a retrospective exhibition of works by Imants Lancmanis, are united by their ambition. It is a testimony to its time and to the personality of the artist. The main aim of this article is to use the sociology of art to portray the influence of two artists, painters and leaders of national art institutions, on the formation of national art perception in society. Two personalities, each working in their own time, but both with strong social capital and habitus – the ability to use it to shape the rules of the Latvian art field and construct national identity.

Keywords: *sociology of art, art field, national art, painter.*

National art institutions, which are key holders of cultural and symbolic capital, play an important role in building national identity. The national art institutions, which have had impact onto the formation of national art, have been analysed and the activities of those artists, whose personalities have influenced the formation of Latvian national art, have been studied. When examining the mutual interaction between the painters and national art institutions, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analytical instruments – *habitus*, field and capital – help to

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understand how painters become aware of the external structures and reproduce them, expanding the internal structures in socially and culturally constructed space in the context of national identity [Bourdieu 2000]. The article allows determining some boundaries of the artistic field, as well as the cooperation models between the artists and the national art institutions revealing how the interest of artists and their position in the artistic field define their participation in the construction of national identity and the interpretation of content. The representatives of the nation can decode the work of art that entails the elements characterising the nation [Leoussi 2004]. It can be manifested through both the means of expression and content.

The Latvian National Museum of Art is one of national art institutions. The aim of the National Museum of Art is to educate the public and stimulate their interest in the evidence of Latvian and world visual arts, decorative arts and design in their historical and artistic manifestations, emphasising the place of the national art school in the history of culture and contemporary processes [Regulations of the National Museum of Art]. Today, the Latvian National Museum of Art is the largest professional art repository in Latvia, which not only collects cultural values in accordance with the museum's collection policy, but also provides opportunities for public education through a number of educational programmes.

It is not only the fact of an exhibition or event that is important, but also how it is presented to the audience. Pierre Bourdieu points out that museums, like educational institutions, are sites of symbolic abuse – they impose a self-defined definition of cultural values [Bourdieu 1996]. People with the right education feel at ease in a familiar environment. They thus take for granted a way of perceiving that has been acquired through education. This type of perception can be general or specific, conscious or unconscious, academic or free. In contrast, a less experienced viewer, confronted with academic culture, finds themselves in a foreign place and time. The disorientation and cultural blindness of less educated viewers is a reminder of the objective truth that the perception of art is a mediated process of encoding. If the information encoded in the works exceeds the viewer's ability to decipher them, they believe that they contain no deeper meaning – or, more precisely, structure and organisation – because they cannot decode and reduce them to a comprehensible form. Any decoding requires simpler or more complex code, which the viewer is more or less familiar with [Bourdieu 1993]. A work of art can reveal different levels of meaning, depending on the encoding techniques used. The meaning that is perceived at first glance is completely different from the meaning that it has as part of the whole artwork or as part of the overall artistic experience, which embodies deeper levels of meaning. The article pays attention to two exhibitions whose messages are resonating and understandable to contemporary society.

In 2022, the Great Hall of the Latvian National Museum of Art hosted two exhibitions that are unrelated to each other, but at the same time both of them surprised with their grandeur and captured the public interest. They are the exhibitions “Purvītis” (28.05.2022–16.10.2022) and “The Art of Imants Lancmanis” (12.11.2022–26.02.2023).

The exhibition “Purvītis” was dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the outstanding Latvian landscape painter Vilhelms Purvītis. Aija Brasliņa, the curator of the exhibition, points out that “*Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945), the founder of national landscape painting and its most ambitious moderniser, is recognised as one of the key figures in visual art in Latvia in the first half of the 20th century. At the turn of the century, the masterful painter of snow and early northern spring was noticed in St Petersburg, Paris, Munich, Berlin, Vienna and other European art centres. The best-known representative of Baltic modern art was equally involved in the new changes of the landscape genre, gaining success abroad, authority in Riga’s art life and a consistently high status in the Latvian art world. Purvītis deserves special recognition as the implementer of the idea of higher art education and the co-creator of cultural policy in the independent Latvian state, as the first rector of the Art Academy of Latvia and the head of the Landscape Workshop, and simultaneously as the director of the prestigious Riga City Art Museum (now the Latvian National Art Museum), the creator of the national art collection and the organiser of representative international exhibitions*” [Brasliņa 2022]. The exhibition “The Art of Imants Lancmanis” thematically grouped paintings by Imants Lancmanis from 1958 onwards. The curator Helēna Demakova notes in the exhibition guide that “*Imants Lancmanis (1941) is a Latvian painter, art historian, cultural administrator and public intellectual. He is a well-recognised authority in many areas of Latvian society*” [Demakova 2022]. Both exhibitions were very popular with the public. The exhibition “The Art of Imants Lancmanis” was attended by 67 940 spectators at the Latvian National Museum of Art in 2022 [Latvian National Museum of Art 2022]. Additionally, the exhibition “Purvītis” was visited by 75 972 spectators and has become one of the most visited exhibitions at the Latvian National Museum of Art in the last 30 years [Latvian National Museum of Art 2023].

In the context of this article, it is important to focus on the personalities of the artists themselves – Vilhelms Purvītis and Imants Lancmanis – and their position in the field of art, which directly influences the perception of national art and the construction and translation of national identity in society. Both painters are separated by century, yet the work of both is capable of intriguing and engaging contemporary society. The art field has its own internal rules, which are known to its participants [Alexander 2003; Becker 2008]. The position of the artist in the art field influences the possible scenarios of their interaction. Art and the artist cannot

exist in isolation from society. The sociology of art studies the social conditions that affect a particular artist and how he or she is able to position him or herself in the social space using the resources available to them. Pierre Bourdieu emphasises power relations and the fact that ideas in the field of art are socially constructed [Bourdieu 1993]. It is important to establish what positions painters can occupy in the art field and what the role of national art institutions is. The work allows one to identify the ways in which national art institutions and painters cooperate, how painters' interest and position in the art field determines their participation in the construction of national identity and the interpretation of content. Both painters had and have a lot of symbolic capital, which is a form of power that is not perceived as power, but contributes to the legitimacy and recognition of demand. Symbolic systems fulfil three interrelated but distinct functions: cognition (knowledge about art, religion, science, worldview), communication (providing society with recognisable messages) and social differentiation (ensuring the influence of the dominant group and the hierarchisation of society). The degree of influence of symbolic capital is directly related to the *habitus* of the painter. There are three basic concepts in this approach: position, position-taking and disposition (*habitus*) [Bourdieu 1996]. Painters occupy a certain position in social space, determined by education, occupation or proximity to power. The field of art allows for a different sociological interpretation of artists' work.

Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945)

Vilhelms Purvītis' life coincided with the formation of national consciousness and the creation of national art institutions. Biography of the painter and the development of the artistic style have been studied by Latvian art researchers, including Kristiāna Ābele, Aija Brasliņa, Eduards Kļaviņš, Dace Lamberga un Māra Lāce. Their publications have been used in this article to characterize Vilhelms Purvītis' position in the field of art. In 1890 Vilhelms Purvītis entered the Imperial Academy of Art in St Petersburg as a free listener in order to study painting. He created his diploma work "The Last Rays" and graduated with the title of artist first degree, the Large Gold Medals and the Prix de Rome for travels abroad [Ābele 2022].

After his studies, Vilhelms Purvītis, together with his fellow students Johann Walter and Janis Rozentāls, formed the core of Latvian art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period their symbolic capital was formed. From 1909 until the First World War, Riga City Art School was under the direction of Vilhelms Purvītis.

In 1913 Vilhelms Purvītis was elected as academician of the St Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts [Lamberga 2000]. In 1919 he was appointed director of the Riga City Museum by the government of Soviet Latvia, in August approved by

the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia as director of the Art Academy of Latvia. Due to the influence of the First World War the official opening of the Art Academy of Latvia took place in October 1921 and the first rector of the Art Academy became the painter Vilhelms Purvītis, who held this position until 1934 [Ābele 2022]. Thus, both national art institutions came into the hands of Vilhelms Purvītis. This article focuses on the personality of Vilhelms Purvītis, who largely laid the foundations of Latvian national art and contributed to its development to this day. This is where the sociology of art helps. As art historian K. Ābele writes “*The fifty-five years from the beginning of Purvītis’ studies to the moment of his death fully spanned two important epochs in Latvian art history, with his work becoming one of the main cornerstones in the story of the creation of national art at the turn of the century and its development after the establishment of the Latvian Free State, but also in the next, marked by the arrival of totalitarian occupying powers, the end of his life and the death of much of his life’s work in the final stages of the Second World War*” [Ābele 2022].

Vilhelms Purvītis’ social trajectory is determined by the presence of symbolic capital, as well as by the position of power in social space and in the field of art. At the beginning of the 20th century, Vilhelms Purvītis demonstrated outstanding organisational skills (founding the Art Academy of Latvia, building the collection of the Riga City Art Museum, serving as rector of the Art Academy and director of the Riga City Art Museum), as well as his significant contribution to Latvian art.

One can see how Vilhelms Purvītis’ position in the art field in Latvia at the beginning of the 20th century was shaped. In 1905, Vilhelms Purvītis distanced himself from the Latvian intellectuals’ demand for civil rights in Latvia, because it was directed against their main supporter – German society. During this period, Vilhelms Purvītis did not have enough symbolic capital at his disposal, nor did he have the necessary motivation and habitus to use existing resources in support of a civic initiative.

The situation was already different in 1909, when Riga City Board invited Vilhelms Purvītis to become the director of Riga City Art School, and in 1919, when he was appointed the director of Riga City Art Museum.

The founding and early years of the Academy of Art were associated with artists’ resistance and disagreements, when, in the early 1920s, disagreements arose between traditionalists and modernists, determined by generational differences in artistic views and personal motives [Brasliņa 2008]. The founding of the Art Academy of Latvia depended largely on the position taken by Vilhelms Purvītis in the field of art – it was planned to transform Riga City Art School, which he headed, into an art academy, and Vilhelms Purvītis’ habitus dominated discussions on the usefulness of the institution, which proved itself in the following years. Perhaps as a result, as art historian Andris Teikmanis writes, Purvītis’ foresight was proven – the Art Academy

of Latvia became the foundation for the national art school, preserving a humanistic understanding of art values in the context of the most controversial historical events [Teikmanis 2002].

With the establishment of the Latvian state, the national artistic heritage began to be acquired, in which the director of Riga City Art Museum, Vilhelms Purvītis, played a significant role. Justifying the need to acquire works by Latvian artists from the first exhibition of Riga Artists Group, Vilhelms Purvītis began to build a collection of Latvian classical modernism [Lāce 2008]. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Latvian art collection continued to expand.

The national art collection also included works in the collection of the Latvian State Museum of Art (founded in 1920), which were purchased under the leadership of director Burkards Dzenis. Riga City Art Museum and the State Museum of Art depended on grants from the state and city budgets. Both museums were led by personalities who saw the long-term importance of the artistic development process and were aware of the need to present artistic achievements to the nation, even though the process of acquiring works was bureaucratic and complicated and the budgeted funds were not always forthcoming. Both collections form the core of the present collection of Latvian National Art Museum.

Vilhelms Purvītis' work was directly aimed at the identification and dissemination of national identity. His *habitus* promoted the selection of professional works, which gave the public the opportunity to see outstanding Latvian art in the permanent exhibition of the Latvian art section, thus enhancing national self-confidence [Lāce 2005]. The museum held solo exhibitions, group exhibitions and joint exhibitions of Latvian art, as well as exhibitions of works by foreign artists.

The new state institutions underestimated the importance of the intelligentsia and the painters' contribution to the unification of the nation and the creation of the state, and critically cut state funding in 1924–1925 [Lāce 2008] and 1929–1932 (the time of global economic crisis) [Gerharde Upeniece 2016].

When commemorating Vilhelms Purvītis in the 21st century, the most popular reference is to his legacy as a painter – the landscapes of Latvia. The description of the 2022 exhibition at the Latvian National Museum of Art also states “*The name of the European Latvian classicist has become one of the symbols of national identity in Latvian art history and public perception. In the form of poetic archetypes, “Purvītis-style” images, motifs and moods maintain their presence in our sense and vision of the landscape*” [Brasliņa 2022]. Where at the end of the 19th century Latvian art depicted the national landscape in an idealised way influenced by the mythological space of the past (A. Baumanis (1866–1904)), at the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the works of Janis Rozentāls, Vilhelms Purvītis and Johann Walter, an image of a landscape symbolising Latvia emerged. These artists did not limit themselves to

depicting landscapes, but tried to give the motif a special meaning that would express the love of their homeland, the grandeur or beauty of nature. The accessibility of the visual image of the landscape to a wide audience allowed the dissemination of elements of national identity. Vilhelms Purvītis' landscape paintings have stood the test of time and their subjects and pictorial techniques are still considered Latvian.

Today, in the 21st century, we can appreciate not only Vilhelms Purvītis' outstanding achievements in painting, but also his personality as a phenomenal presence in the processes that shaped and strengthened the foundations of national art institutions.

Imants Lancmanis (1941)

Biography of Imants Lancmanis and the development of the artistic style have been studied by Latvian art researchers, including Helēna Demakova, Ginta Gerharde Upeniece, Eduards Kļaviņš. Their publications as well as writings by Imants Lancmanis himself have been used in this article to characterize Vilhelms Purvītis' position in the field of art.

The creative activity of the Latvian painter Imants Lancmanis takes place in several fields. Imants Lancmanis has been associated as long tenure as the director of Rundāle Palace (1976–2018), where he began to work in 1964.

After graduating from the Art Academy of Latvia in 1966, he devoted himself to the study of European cultural history. During his studies at the Art Academy of Latvia in the early 1960s, Imants Lancmanis established the so-called “French Group”, which included six members – Imants Lancmanis, Ieva Šmite (Lancmane), Bruno Vasiļevskis, Maija Tabaka, Juris Pudāns and Jānis Krievs. The group enjoyed talking about the latest trends in European art, listening to music and the cult of Paul Cézanne that dominated painting [Demakova 2017].

From 1971 to 1988, as a historian of art styles, Imants Lancmanis was a lecturer at the Art Academy of Latvia.

From 1976 to 2018, Imants Lancmanis was the Director of the Rundāle Palace Museum, where he devoted most of his creative life to the restoration of Rundāle Palace.

The aim of Rundāle Palace Museum was to develop the Rundāle Palace ensemble into an internationally important centre of art and cultural history, which is also connected with the study and promotion of Latvian and European ancient art [Regulations of the Rundāle palace Museum]. After the agrarian reform of the Latvian Republic in 1924, the Board of Monuments included Rundāle Palace on the list of state-protected objects. The restoration of the Palace began in 1932. After the Second World War, a grain collection point was set up in the Palace. In 1964 the Palace became a branch of the Bauska Museum of Local History and Art and

in 1972 an independent Rundāle Palace Museum was established, which under the leadership of Imants Lancmanis has become a cultural and historical object of European importance.

In the words of H. Demakova, curator of the exhibition “The Art of Imants Lancmanis”, “*The restoration of Rundāle Palace became a partisan war of his resistance, and painting – alongside the palace – the embodiment of his visions*” [Demakova 2022]. From his graduation from the Art Academy of Latvia in 1966 until the 1990s, Imants Lancmanis produced only a few paintings. All his time was taken up with the restoration of the palace. When he resumed painting, the artist turned to thematic narratives of Latvian and European historical points, which include stories from the past of the Latvian people. Now, after leaving his post as Director of Rundāle Palace Museum, Imants Lancmanis has turned to painting again.

Imants Lancmanis occupies a position of strong symbolic capital in the Latvian art field. This is evidenced, for example, by his participation in the creation of the Latvian Cultural Canon. The Latvian Cultural Canon, like those of other European countries and inspired from Denmark experience, is a collection of the most outstanding and remarkable works of art and cultural treasures, reflecting the nation’s most significant cultural achievements throughout history. The Cultural Canon includes the values that characterise Latvian culture in various fields of art, of which we are proud and which should form the basis of every Latvian’s cultural experience, ensuring a sense of belonging to Latvia. In the Visual Arts section of the Latvian Cultural Canon, it was decided to highlight only those artists who are no longer with us by selecting 15 specific works by 15 specific personalities. The group of experts on the visual arts of the Cultural canon, included the Director of Rundāle Palace Museum Imants Lancmanis [Latvian culture canon official site]. His presence in this commission in 2008–2009 clearly indicates his strong position in the Latvian art field and his symbolic capital.

Although Bourdieu refers to artists as unorthodox, as free from imposed social norms, this does not mean that artists are explicit agents of socio-political change. For example, in the exchange between Pierre Bourdieu and the artist Hans Haacke, it is identified that, firstly, the *habitus* of the artist is the awareness of the artwork as a political or social expression and, secondly, that artists are not easily organised and involved in political movements and actions because “good art” is presented as “disinterested” and “good artist” as “disinterested” [Bourdieu and Haacke 1995]. Thus, when he was in charge of Rundāle Palace Museum, Imants Lancmanis only slowly returned to painting, which, as the artist himself admitted, is saturated with symbols and references, and called it conceptual romanticism. The concept of the conceptual romanticism was created by his wife Ieva Lancmane [Kļaviņš 1999]. His wife was also the closest collaborator at the Rundāle Palace Museum.

In an interview with the author of the publication, Imants Lancmanis, answering the question of whether an artist can influence social processes, says “*Not only artists, but also culture in general can influence very little. Art, like literature, has an impact when people are oppressed, when, for example, under serfdom, Latvian songs (dainas) provide a moral foundation, or during the Soviet era, literature, metaphors or just wonderful poetry served as support for people, they flourished, they felt it was like a spiritual drink. But in a consumer society with so many temptations to pseudo-culture, Dan Brown will be read instead of real literature and pop music has largely driven into the cellar what I consider the only real music. Art has little opportunity to affect something – it is not a weapon of propaganda. It is a thing in itself, which, at some point, touches the string of a human soul, inspires, opens some horizons or develops subconsciousness. Man lives with dreams, fantasies – he feels support and emotional experience through art, literature and music. Art is not able to deliver anything better than emotions, and, which is important – an aesthetic satisfaction. Artworks do not just need to be made beautiful, they must bring in some sort of accomplishment; there must be a “missile”, which makes change in one’s mind. The social role of art has been greatly diminished and it will not be an aid calling to battle and an aid for rectifying broken souls*” [Grūbe 2010]. The significance of art is emphasized in crucial stages for the nation, thus indicating the artist’s essential role in social cohesion and the formation of national identity.

Imants Lancmanis states that he finds it important to encode a specific message in his works. An illustrative example is his series *The Fifth Commandment*. The 1905 Revolution and the First World War are depicted in eight paintings, accompanied by a very detailed explanation of each of the works and each of the images they contain. Imants Lancmanis explains that the working method is the embodiment of visions with the help of historical materials and analytical photographic studies, with each phenomenon searching for its unique, unrepeatable prototype. The exhibition is dedicated to: past and future victims [Lancmanis 2009]. They are works about the losses of war and the lessons of war. In 2009, Imants Lancmanis was nominated for the Purvītis Prize for this series of works. Purvītis Prize was founded in the 2008 to promote development of new projects and original ideas, acknowledge the best achievements in Latvian professional visual arts and popularise the success of Latvian artists both in Latvia and abroad.

Conclusions

Two centuries. Two painters. Two personalities with the potential to influence artistic processes in Latvia, including the development of national identity. As the curator of the exhibition “Purvītis”, Aija Brasliņa, points out, “*In Latvian art history and public perception, the name of this European Latvian classic has become one of*

the symbols of national identity. As poetic archetypes, "Purvītis-style" images, motifs and moods retain their presence in our sense and understanding of the landscapes that surround us. The painter's vision of his native northern nature, as well as his classically composed ideal Latvian landscapes in changing seasons, are considered to be the canon of national landscape [Brasliņa 2022]; the works of Imants Lancmanis, as Helēna Demakova, curator of the exhibition "*The Art of Imants Lancmanis*" points out, "*confirm the epic nature of the artist's vision combined with meticulous detailing. The nodal points of Europe and Latvia in his works are intertwined with local ethnographic and natural examples; the symbolic message of his paintings embodies motifs found in art history and real life*" [Demakova 2022].

Two personalities who construct national identity not only through their paintings, but also through the position they take in the field of art.

Both have proven themselves as personalities capable of sustaining and developing important national art and cultural institutions in times of change and of shaping national art and national identity through their position in the field of art.

Vilhelms Purvītis participated in the founding of the Art Academy of Latvia, in the creation of the collection of the present day Latvian National Museum of Art, was rector of the Art Academy of Latvia and director of the city art museum, and made a significant contribution to Latvian art. Vilhelms Purvītis' foresight and authority formed the Latvian Academy of Art as the foundation of the national school of art, and his diplomatic activity helped to guide it through the initial difficulties. Vilhelms Purvītis' contribution to the establishment of national art education is invaluable, and the foundations of the training system he created determined the development of Latvian professional art. Vilhelms Purvītis promoted the people's understanding of art both in painting, by creating the image of the Latvian landscape, and through his pedagogical activity, believing that the broadest masses of small nations could only become remarkable through spiritual culture. The painter's ability to work and fight for the realisation and improvement of national identity underlines the unchanging historical relevance of this value.

Determined leadership of Imants Lancmanis in the restoration of Latvia's cultural heritage – Rundāle Palace – required both patience in researching historical material and a great deal of work. His art is the same, where every detail is thought out and composed into a painting with a specific purpose and a message for the viewer. Imants Lancmanis' art is like a history book of Latvia, allowing us to follow the events of history through his eyes and at the same time reflecting on the individual's feelings about his or her place in the constant cycle of life. The art, and with along it the national identity, is in constant transformation and in search of itself.

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