

Absolute Textiles

The history of Lithuanian fine textiles and history in textile artwork

by Egle Ganda Bogdaniene

The exhibition *Absolute Textiles* captures the shifts in Lithuanian textile art over the course of history, offering, as it does, the image of these bygone days emerging in the artwork created in the medium. It seeks to tell the story of Lithuanian textiles as closely woven with the social, economic and cultural transformations experienced by the country as its fates turned. In Lithuania, the country that pursued its statehood throughout ages in the environment of the ambitious states, art has always been perceived as a significant form of expression of the national and personal identity. The works in the collection of the *Absolute Textiles*, in a direct or implicit manner, evoke the spirit of the setting where historical and cultural metamorphoses of Lithuania took place.

A look from a historical perspective reveals that as of the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the historic, heroic, military, heraldic and verdure tapestry panels to be the most sought-after decoration for the castles and court houses as a means to represent the ruler's ambitions and the owners' prestige. These circumstances stimulated the rapid growth of the weavers' shops all over the lands of the Duchy. In the wake of the Third Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian State and the subsequent engulfment of Lithuania by the Russian Empire, nearly all of the weavers' workshops that used to operate at the courts were destroyed. The early 20th-century political, economic, cultural changes and the national revival of Lithuania inspired textile artists to link their art with the national sentiment. As Lithuania's independence matured, textile art represented Lithuanian art and culture at the international events. It became an aesthetic form for the ideology of the way of life and the means to bring the national identity to the fore. The label of 'applied art', used by the Soviet art ideologists, lends itself to two readings. The artists managed 'to apply' themselves to the task of integrating Soviet attributes into their pieces, yet remaining anchored in the Lithuanian folk art in its form and spirit. As time went by, the medium, under a guise of 'decorative' art, distanced itself from the canons of Soviet Realism and developed modern modes of expression.

Textile artists were among the first who took the challenge of the new economic climate created following Lithuania's regained political independence. They defiantly broke the rusted Soviet stereotypes and isolation, explored all kind of international creative and networking opportunities. Today fine textiles develop as a living organism, which both, responds to changes but remains nourished by the longstanding tradition.

The building of the collection adequate for the goals of the event and the development of a scholarly study mapping the history of the medium was possible thanks to experienced project contributors. They

were a team of leading researchers into textiles, art critics and curators of textile exhibitions, Prof. Dr. Ieva Kuiziniienė, Dr. Lijana Natalevičienė, Dr. Virginija Vitkienė and the art licentiate student, Assoc.Prof. Monika Žaltauskaitė-Grašienė. The inclusion of the artwork from the collections of the Lithuanian Art Museum was possible with the generous assistance by the museum staff Nijolė Žilinskienė and Eglė Pinkutė.

The exhibition aspires to present, rather than individual fragments, a coherent whole of Lithuanian professional fine textiles with the clearly identified chronological periods from the 17th through 21st century, as stages of either consistent evolution of the medium, or a critical revision of its use. The retrospective opens up the aesthetic, ideological and semantic parameters of textiles and exposes the viewer to a variety of manifestations of the medium, be it figurative or abstract, polychromic or monochromic, soft or rough, smooth or textural, light-hearted or depressing. It also establishes textile works as vehicles for all kinds of message: historical, religious, philosophical, patriotic and critical or propagandistic. This illustrated collection of papers presents a critical overview of the chronological periods as identified in the exhibit. The authors bring into a closer focus the work of the leading exponents representing each of these stages and disclose key distinctive features of fibre art in Lithuania and in connection to world textiles.

The potential of Lithuanian textiles as one of the highest among the art industries has been proved by the popularity of the International Kaunas Biennial. This unique in its kind exhibition of this scale, held on a regular basis, attracts large numbers of international participants and receives a broad local and international media coverage. The Vilnius Miniature Textiles Biennial with a history of twenty years has also built its audience and acclaim. The success of the two projects has brought the medium into research focus, the strongest of which is on new opportunities of textiles and the development of new forms.

However, Lithuanian Soviet-period art heritage is one which badly suffers from the lack of analytical attention: the legacy of many an artist, who laid the foundations of professional textiles in the 20th century, has not yet been researched and acknowledged, not to mention the fact that the entire collection of the 17th through 20th century built by the Lithuanian museums, is almost inaccessible to public and researchers. It holds especially true regarding the retrospective part of the collection. It has to be noted that during the years of regained independence Lithuanian museums have acquired only a few contemporary works that manifest the newly shaped approach and transformations in textiles. The transformations of the medium over the last decades has not been recorded, researched or presented to public. In this situation we risk losing information on the developments in professional textiles at the turn of the 20th –21st century. This exhibition has provided good opportunity to fill in different gaps by presenting, to public and to art professionals, the all-embracing panorama of the Lithuanian textile art and of its evolution over time.

Though not an abundant group among the exhibits, the best extant 17th –19th–century specimen of tapestry, carpet and embroidery work from the collections of Lithuanian museums shed light on historical

roots of professional textiles in the country. Unfortunately for Lithuania, the most valuable tapestries from the Grand Duchy of Lithuanian period have landed in the museums in Poland, England, Russia and Ukraine. The textiles from the first half of the 20th century embody the spirit of the national revival of arts and crafts together with the artistic drives and craftsmanship of textile artists of the country that regained independence.

The collection from 1945 through 1990 (Soviet period) is in two parts – the works produced from 1945 through 1970, during post-war years and these of traumatic Soviet occupation, and the modern monumental textiles from 1970 through 1991. Alongside is included a humble collection of textile design, which sheds some light on the development of Lithuanian industrial textiles.

The exhibits from 1991 through 2014 manifest a changed approach to textiles, as it turns into an integral part of the contemporary art scene.

Our sense of a good timing and relevance of the exhibition is supported by the ubiquitous spread of the *neo craft* movement. The 2013 exhibition *The Splendour of Textiles*, curated by Michał Jachuła at the Warsaw National Art Gallery *Zachęta*, appears within the same trend. The Polish exhibit sought to alert the public to the beauty and role of textiles, as one of the most luxurious among Polish historical and contemporary arts. The Lithuanian and Polish textiles have developed in parallel for centuries due to the history of the two countries (after signing of the 1385 Kreva Treaty, and the Lublin Union of 1569, the Grand Duchy together with Poland created the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania). During Soviet era, Lithuanian students on textile study courses saw Polish examples as artefacts of modern art and as models of professionalism to be emulated. Quite a few of Lithuanian textile artists were influenced by the compelling, state-of-art work from their Polish colleagues. *The Splendour of Textiles* showcased the classical and contemporary work, including tapestry, fabrics, painting, photography, performance and installation. Not all of these are textile artifacts in traditional terms, but they keep the links with the medium via the frame of thought and the way patterns, structures or materials are employed. The exhibition showed the repeat pattern designs by the painters Władysław Strzemiński, Jadwiga Maziarska and Maria Jarema. The post-war collection featured works on patriotic theme – the knotted rugs by the artists Tadeusz Kantor, Stefan Galkowski, Zdzisław Głowacki, Aleksander Kromer and other artists.

Polish textiles gained ultimate recognition at the 1962 Lausanne Biennial when Polish artists' signature works were officially identified as a 'Polish school of textiles'. It was around the time when the artists Magdalena Abakanowicz, Ada Kierzkowska, Jolanta Owidzka and Zofia Butrymowich produced seminal for the development of world textiles pieces, outstanding in their employed natural, raw fibres, rough textures of unprocessed materials and combinations of diverse weave textures. It was an explosion of the vibrant spirit of experiment.

The *Auschwitz* tapestry by the painter Wojciech Sadley, on display at the biennial, developed the theme of the Holocaust and brought to the viewers' memory the disasters of war. The exhibition included the work by Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak (Excellence Award International Textile Competition '87 Kyoto), by Włodzimierz Cygan and by other internationally established artists.

The Polish *Splendour of Textiles* provided another important stimulus to revisit the making of Lithuanian textiles over the course of history and into the contemporary art scene.

Why *Absolute Textiles*?

Putting together a kind of a retrospective like the *Absolute Textiles* has been my long cherished hope. Yet in the process of conceptualizing a framework for the event, it would not readily prompt a title. In the middle of the work, I happened to look at the banner hanging over my work table. It read 'Absolut Textiles'. It was a final BA degree project by Gabija Kuzmaitė, created in 2000 led by the author of this essay. Done in bullion work, the flag played pun on that absolute fascination with the medium by the Department of Textile of Vilnius Academy of Arts. The style of lettering explicitly referenced the Absolut Vodka brand. '*Textiles sometimes strike as the most universal medium, which lends itself readily for the expression of postmodernist ideas: any of the multiple means can be selected, with a bounty of existing methods and processes adequate for the creation of an object or a performance...*', Greta Kuzmaitė says in her theoretical paper. Thus the title is a self-portrait with a pinch of irony and reflects the confidence of the artists who resort to the means of expression linked with textiles, the medium being virtually a form of existence embracing aesthetic, social and sacred dimensions. Please allow me to explain why I perceive textiles as being 'absolute'.

Among my cherished childhood memories is this special book greatly cherished at my Grandmother's house. It was *Brolių ieškotoja [In Search for Her Brothers]* by Stasys Zobarskis, with illustrations by Konstancija Petrikaitė-Tulienė. The colourful pictures in the book made such a strong impression on me that I would spend hours exploring them, especially the images of the main protagonists of the fair-tale, the sister of nine brothers, who sets out to find them after the war, and the evil witch. Their detailed costumes were embellished with the Lithuanian folk sashes. As a child, I was convinced that the story in the book actually took place in the times of the 'ancient Lithuania' when women dressed in national costumes, beasts helped those searching for truth and goodness triumphed. Both of my grandmothers, like most women in pre-war Lithuania, were connected to fibre work. My grand-grandmother Liudvika on father's side had graduated from a seamstresses' course in Riga. She kept a shop of textiles and haberdashery on Šančiai market place in Kaunas during the years of the first independence. My grandmother Jadvyga worked at Kaunas weaving factory *Flora* (now, *Liteksas factory*) before the onset of the Second World War. My memories of my mother are always with either the needles or a book in hand.

I can also recall my family gatherings and those tables adorned with tablecloths – my grandmothers' embroidery work. Textiles definitely seemed to be an intrinsic part of life.

This conviction of the universal role of textiles and the deep roots of it was only strengthened by my studies of culture and of the ancient mythology. Legends from different cultures portray goddesses as spinners or weavers. These very goddesses can effect changes in celestial bodies and weather, can promote growth and healing. The most powerful Greek goddess Athena is told to have set up a contest with Arachne who boasted being a better weaver, yet Arachne lost and was transformed into spider. The Cretan princess Ariadne is often dubbed a happy weaver. She assisted Theseus in his quest to slay the Minotaur, by giving him a ball of yarn that led him out of the maze. And we have not yet mentioned these beautiful images of women in ancient Greek and Latin poetry.

In Homer's world, all women exist mainly for the sake of spinning and weaving. In *The Odyssey*, the beauty Helen, Nausicaa, Queen Arete and even the nymph Calypso never part with a spindle. Penelope, the symbol of femininity, was weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes, for years, yet each night she undid the work that she had completed during the day, thus keeping her faithfulness and guarding her love. The Fates, Moirai in Greek, or Parcae in Roman mythology, control the metaphorical thread of life of each living and mortal creature from birth to death. Clotho is the spinner of the thread of life. Her Roman counterpart Nona, the Ninth, is called in during the ninth month of pregnancy. Lachesis uses a stick to measure the thread of life allotted to each person. Her Roman equivalent is Decima. Atropos cuts off the life-thread with 'her dreaded shears'. She selects how a man will part with his life when time is due. Her Roman equivalent is Morta, or 'Death'. Even gods fear the Moirai, as they have the power to snap the tread of their life at any moment. In Norse mythology, three goddesses Nornas – Urðr ('Fate'), Verðandi ('Becoming') and Skuld ('Duty') – decide a man's fate at birth. In Slavic mythology their counterparts are Rožanica, Narečnice and Sudiczki, in Latvia – Laima, Dekla and Karta.

In the natural religions of India or Central America, in the Mayan or African mythology, goddesses – and in some cases, even gods (Indra) – are connected with textiles. The medieval Christian iconography depicts the Virgin Mary as spinning or weaving when the Archangel Gabriel arrives. This is how the Holy Virgin is portrayed in paintings and prints. It is only natural, as textiles is a way of survival: it is our dress and abode, and a sack, its connection with elemental survival is fundamental. Cloth in mythology is a fruit of labour of Life and Death. The ancient goddesses spin, weave and launder the cloth. In the language of metaphor, these were the acts of cleansing of the body and spirit – of the renewal of the fibre of existence. These deities knew who was to come to this world – and who to leave it, they guessed what should to be combed out of a piece of cloth – and what should be woven together.

The conviction in the significance of textiles for the history of art and culture was further strengthened by the studies of art and by a thorough exploration of the impressive tapestry collections

safeguarded by Vilnius Cathedral (part of the Lithuanian Art Museum in Soviet years), by the annual exhibitions of applied art with the monumental and compelling fibre work at Vilnius Exhibition Palace, by practice research at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and the study of the historical textiles, including the unique pieces discovered by the Russian archaeologist Sergei Rudenko in the Pazyryk Valley, in the Altai Mountains in Siberia (some of which were preserved in ice for 2500 years).

The stance of the Lithuanian school of textiles was significantly strengthened by the opening, in 1987, of the Applied Art Museum or the Arsenal. The museum exhibited the most significant textile works from the collections of the Lithuanian Art Museum, accumulated during the two past decades. During infrequent at the time visits to Lithuania, our foreign colleagues were impressed by the richness of these collections, by the level of professionalism and also by the state culture policy, the provisions of which made the acquisition of artwork and the building of the national art collections possible.

Later on textiles became a guiding star for international studies and world travel. Professional tours and a tapestry weaving course in heritage technique at West Dean College in England, a computerised weaving course at Helsinki Industrial Art and Design University, a silk screening course *Konstnarern Kollektiv Verkstad* in Stockholm, and a traditional weaving course at Tasara Centre in India were enriching professionally and introduced to me a truly global community of textile artists.

The trips to Laos, Nepal, Vietnam, India, USA, Latin America, Egypt, Turkey, Azerbaijan and elsewhere have broadened my semantic field of textiles. I was amazed to see Laos' finger-worked inlay patterns of birds, so similar in technique to the colourful aprons from Suvakija or central Lithuania. The construction of the loom and the types of weave are the same worldwide, what differs is only imagery. One continent favours tigers, peacocks and lotuses, another, sparrows and cornflowers. Thus textile arts and crafts truly emerge as one of the forms of material language connecting continents and epochs, the way to immortalize the touch and thought of the people who make it.

Textile art in time and space

Every act of contemplating art and every interaction with it takes place in time. In case of textiles, this connection to time is critical. Though unlike musical compositions, the emotional impact of which is experienced over a certain duration of time, textile art is not temporal, yet it references to the prolonged periods of making, or, in some cases, to timelessness. Time spent on making textiles creates space for contemplation on things, both temporal and eternal. The making of textile pieces usually gives enough time for the work to nearly penetrate your body so that you nearly become one with your work. The *Absolute Textiles* aspires to show all kinds of approaches to textiles which dominated over different periods: from the age-old reverence to material, technique and the craftsmanship skills that have to be

polished over long years – to the prevalence of artistic conception which governs the choice of the means of expression, thus reducing fibre art to just one of the optional media. The exhibition tells of the historic decorative textile art as inseparable from craft and of the concept of textile design that emerged in the 20th century. At the turn of the 21st century textile design enters the stage of a totally new quality: it now evolves hand in hand with the innovations of science and technologies, playing a role in space science, in chemistry and biology, in medical sciences, also facilitating sustainable development. This is especially true in such specializations as smart textiles. Textiles become an interactive medium between body and space, enabling and driving the search for new forms of life. Another source for contemporary textiles is own history and mythology which keep inspiring academic and art researchers... A plethora of textile arts exhibitions round the world and scholarly publications on textile arts, design and technologies demonstrate that textiles are the focus of interest to a large and diverse community. To some of them it is a form of expression of choice and the source of inspiration to others. Textiles belong to an interdisciplinary realm of expression, rendering all questions as to whether it is art, design, technology or something else, irrelevant.

On the other hand, when textiles are perceived as technology, it is obvious that the practice deriving its name from *texere* – ‘to weave’ in Latin, is in decline. The future of textile technologies most likely, will not be connected to weaving, but rather to new nanotechnologies. They aided the emergence of the innovative textile processes, such like electric spinning, the formation of nanomaterials using low temperature plasma polymerization and other. The atoms of fibre thread are programmed according to preferred qualities, while the nanotechnology allows for the manipulation of molecule in electric, magnetic or chemical ways which cause molecules to bind in a material on their own. The microchips and LED light sources integrated into textile fibre create in them such qualities as modification and poly-functionality. The contemporary examples of textiles being applied in the construction of framework and membrane houses, in the manufacturing of automobile engine cases, in orthopedic braces and elsewhere foreshadow an even broader application of textiles with universal qualities in the future.

The origins

Woven tapestries represent one of the most telling parts of the cultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: dubbed ‘woven pictures’ or ‘soft walls’ during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, they mirror dominant styles and concerns of the times. It was for this reason that the ancient textiles were selected to open the exhibit. The beginning of professional textiles in Lithuania goes back to the weavers’ workshops, founded and active in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from the 15th through 19th century. The exhibition includes some of the earliest examples of the Lithuanian textiles in the collections of the Lithuanian National Art Museum, of Biržai Land Museum *Sėla*, of Mykolas Žilinskas Art Gallery and of

the Church Heritage Museum in Vilnius. The exhibition demonstrates the links of Lithuanian textiles with Western European and Asian cultures, and with the traditions of the Lithuanian folk art.

The classical tapestry represents an impressive part of world's historical art collections: the richness of artistic expression, their scale, ornateness and craftsmanship please every eye. The process of tapestry design, execution and instalment involved commissioning clients, merchants, artists, cartoonists, yarn producers and dyers, weavers and finishers. Textile artefacts were the most sought after elements of interior décor in the Grand Duchy, they were used to cover and insulate the walls and to form temporary partitions. The monumental-scale wall hangings performed representational and aesthetic function; the heraldic, historical, and battle compositions immortalized historic victories of individual rulers and the states. The compositions on mythological and antique themes featuring softly rendered naked figures were used to adorn the walls of public and private interiors and a source of aesthetic and emotional satisfaction. These classical tapestries could be 'read' like books following the imagery of the narrative.

The fine textiles for the decoration of the Lithuanian and Polish royal courts were mostly commissioned from the famous European and Asian ateliers, while the local nobility quite often used the work of the workshops founded at courts and staffed by the local weavers under supervision by foreign masters. Their products differed from the work by other European countries in such features like simplification of elaborate patterns and a rather rough weave. Besides European art, such local textiles were also under Eastern influences. The tastes of the weavers and the clients were modified by the Turkish and Persian, Indian and Chinese textile imports. The Grand Duchy weaving workshops owned by the Zaviša, Radvila, Pacas, Oginski, Sapiega, Potockis, Riomeris, Višnioveckis and the Tyzenhauzas families were producing textiles for the local needs and by European standards did not manifest any innovative aspects. They feature simple compositions and local character types clad in period costumes. One distinctive characteristic of these workshops was the fact that most of them – in contrast to Aubusson, the Gobelins, Beauvais, Savonnerie and other ateliers in France – did not belong to and were not supported by the state. They were run by the nobility of Poland-Lithuania, and especially of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The products from such large weavers' workshops of the lords of the Grand Duchy are the most interesting and valuable part of the Lithuanian historical textiles. Unfortunately, the rise of weavers' workshops, connected, in the 18th century, with the aspirations of the Enlightenment Epoch and King Stanislaw August Poniatowski's exceptional support to the development of textiles declined by the end of the same century. Most went bankrupt because of inability to produce and to sell their products on international markets. The dream of the Grand Duchy vice treasurer Antanas Tyzenhauzas about setting a European textile centre, a second Lyon, in the suburbs of Grodno never came to life. The third partition of the Republic of Poland-Lithuania led to economic and cultural decline. The hand weaving workshops were closing down, what remained of textiles was home crafting and industrial production.

The most exhaustive and systemic contributions in researching the textiles of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the links to other historic forms of artefacts creation are by the scholars Dr. Lijana Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė (Audimo manufaktūrų veikla Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje, *Menotyra*, 1996, No. 1), Dr. Ieva Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininė (*XVI–XVIII a. gobelenai Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje*, VDA leidykla, 2000; *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valdovų rūmų gobelenai*, Vilnius: Nacionalinis muziejus, Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valdovų rūmai, 2011) and Gražina Marija Martinaitienė (*Kontušo juostos Lietuvoje*, Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2006).

The 1st half of the 20th century. The place of textiles in the independent Lithuanian State

The exhibition follows the trajectory of Lithuanian textiles throughout the 20th century, the turn of which saw the crafts movement rise in Europe and the interest in traditional crafts in the then Russia-occupied Lithuania rekindle. After a century of political and economic decline, which collapsed the network of textile workshops on the territory of Lithuania, the traditional textiles were used in the effort of reviving national identity. Intelligentsia supported the efforts and facilitated the creation of textile workshops all over the territory of Lithuania.

The return of textile craft was demonstrated by the fact that the early 20th century exhibitions showcased textiles woven on horizontal looms and vertical frames. Of note is the fact that Vilnius weaving shop created during the First World War was headed by the painter Antanas Žmuidzinavičius.

The development of arts and crafts was among the economic and cultural goals of the newly declared independent state. A great number of weavers' shops, up and running in the cities and villages of Lithuania, and regular weaving courses evidence great popularity of textiles. The practice of weaving, knitting and embroidery achieved a massive scale and popularity. The ethnic culture and craftsmanship were staples of the national textile school ideology. Applied textile artefacts were exhibited at the international exhibitions to represent the young country. Lithuanian President Kazys Grinius and his wife, Joana Pavalkytė-Griniuvienė, built a collection of 300 Lithuanian aprons – it was exhibited in 1900 and in 1927 at the Paris World Exposition.

It was the time of laying the foundations of professional textiles. The process involved some distinguished personalities, like the painter and textile artist Ona Bagnickaitė, the textile artists Anastazija and Antanas Tamošaitis, the graphic artist Viktoras Petravičius and the scenographer Liudas Truikys. These notable individuals shaped the character of Lithuanian professional textiles at its seminal stage and subsequently. In the mid-20th century this work was largely continued by the artists Juozas Balčikonis (in Vilnius) and Zenonas Varnauskas (in Kaunas): at the time the Lithuanian school absorbed Western modernism and Oriental influence, blending them with the local folklore.

Anastazija and Antanas Tamošaitis nurtured Lithuanian folk style as artists and educators. Some art researchers find their concept of folk art too straightforward, but it was probably determined by the political and cultural agenda of the time – the search for the right expression for the national quality in decorative arts. Tamošaitis was convinced it was not possible without externally visible qualities, folk ornament in particular. This viewpoint may strike as superficial at times, but it was a way of forging a new national style anchored to the Lithuanian folk arts and crafts. Notably, Tamošaitis had warned against the temptation of a direct borrowing of forms and patterns from folk artefacts, urging to research, to analyse and to classify folk motifs in order to reveal their archaic nature.

In Lithuania the work of Anastazija and Antanas Tamošaitis was not considered very innovative, but was highly acclaimed at the international exhibitions. The stylized starlets and tulips borrowed from the Suvalkija hand-made aprons rang a note of novelty and modernity abroad. The woven textiles by Anastazija Tamošaitienė won the gold medal at several of the international expositions in Paris (1937), a honorary award in Berlin (1938) and the first prize in New York (1939) exhibition. During pre-war years, the Tamošaitis' tapestries participated in every major international cultural event with Lithuanian participation, as there was a perception that foreign audience was mainly interested in the professional art styled in folk aesthetics. Paulius Galaunė wrote about Tamošaitis' textiles: *their works show that a huge, a very important and useful feat for our country has been commenced. At the same time it shows the 'return to one's self'* (Lijana Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė. *Antanas Tamošaitis. Gyvenimo ir kūrybos kelias*, Vilnius: VDA leidykla, 2003, p. 243).

Lithuania's participation in the world expositions besides cultural, had also ideological implications and mirrored the art policy pursued by the young Lithuanian state.

The Tamošaitis family were involved in creating Lithuanian textile design and organized multiplication of textile products. They arranged educational activities aimed at styling Lithuanian interior design. Stylistic staples of the concept for such design were the woven textiles in folk patterns and their modern interpretations in carpets. The Tamošaitis consolidated the period's cultural policy and inspired the trend of folk artefact collection; they fostered the sloping national traditions and authentic craftsmanship. The family promoted the production of folk art souvenirs, thus laying foundations for the development, after Scandinavian model, of authentic Lithuanian applied art in good taste. The Lithuanian inter-war modernism at the exhibition is represented by an impressive knotted rug by Antanas Tamošaitis, woven in the 1930s in Ažuolų Būda.

Soviet period textile art

1945–1970. Post-war and traumatic years of occupation

Unfortunately, the Soviet ideology brought by the occupying government following the end of the Second World War dealt a painful blow to the expectations of the builders of the Lithuanian textile school. Decorative work of the graduates of the Department of Textile founded at the time at the State Institute of Art was initially based on the Lithuanian folk art tradition. Yet soon the curriculum had to be altered accordingly to the regulations from Moscow's inspectors and Soviet ideologists. Already in the 1950s textile artists were pressured to produce work in line with the Soviet propaganda, but it was also the time of the emergence of unique and industrial textile design, influenced by both, folk art and modernist ideas.

The Afghanistan Pavilion of the 51st 2005 Venice Biennial featured an installation by the contemporary Afghani artist Rahim Walizada, featuring modern carpets woven by Afghani women. The canonical carpet patterning was enhanced with the motifs of tanks, of automatic rifles and of other military equipment. Such an explicit representation of the Afghanistan war that started in 2001 made a tremendous impression on the visitors to the pavilion.

The museums in Lithuania hold large collections of equally potent textiles – records of the experience of the post-war Soviet occupation: the neatly knotted portraits of ideological figures and the leaders of the Soviet Union, 'Soviet heraldry' framed in garlands of Lithuanian folk ornaments. The *Absolute Textiles* exhibition included examples of such works in order to illustrate the outcome of creative activity of this particular period. It is also a reminder of the traumatic experience and of the artists' trials they went through when they had to deal with the imposed ideological aesthetics. The focus on this period is overdue, as the contribution of it to the development of Lithuanian modern textiles has never been perceived reducing these works to a stigma nobody talked of. The ideological claims on art affected everybody, students were no exception. The *Absolute Textiles* includes fragments of the woven work – parts of the huge carpets designed during Soviet era and preserved by the Department of Textile of the Academy.

Today we perceive textiles created from 1945 through 1960 as unique creations by the artists of the occupied country, stamped by political dualism of Soviet ideology and the Lithuanian spirit. It is the art of an occupied nation, replete with pain and drama. No other country has such a collection of wall hangings and rugs. They were created in the years of resistance and the deportations of Lithuanian people, at the time of organized partisan war. The official art was abused by the ideological propaganda and the work was commissioned for public interiors in order to glorify the bright life and 'truthful' policy. The collection was intentionally not exhibited, yet it is time to revisit the history of our culture in relation to its context, its political environment and cultural background. It is not because we want to admire the artefacts of these days, but due to the pressing need to understand the causes behind the genesis of those works. We need to imagine the predicament of those artists and our countrymen in hope to prevent the emergence of similar circumstance. These textile works employ traditional weaves, rhythmic compositions of repeat patterns, and the composition, mostly central, of Oriental rugs, with four pattern

repeats or several diagonals. In terms of technique the work is flawless, while Soviet symbols seem to dissolve amongst the twines of those lilies, tulips and horses and Lithuanian lads and lassies. I tend to think of this part of Lithuanian textiles as a form of silent resistance.

From 1970 through 1991

The exhibition covers quite extensively the developments in Soviet – period textiles. As of the 1970s, textiles in Lithuania were mostly perceived as applied art. Both exhibition halls and public interiors with rare exceptions were dominated by woven textiles of monumental scale. At the time the foundations of professional Lithuanian textile art were consolidated reconciling due respect to the traditional craftsmanship and professionalism with the individual aspirations for an authentic plastic idiom. It was a good rationale to guide the work of future generations.

The role of importance played by this branch of art during the last decades of Soviet Lithuania is revealed in the book *Lietuvos gobelenas [Lithuanian Tapestry]* compiled by Daiva Načiulienė, and in research articles by Prof. Juozas Adomonis and Assoc. Prof. Laima Cieškaitė-Brėdikienė, published in the catalogues of exhibitions of the period. It was the art created in reflection of the well-being of ‘the people’s state’. State commissions meant tight control over creative process. Applied arts exhibitions of the time were impressive in scope and scale, the art museums selected works from these exhibits and purchased them for their collections. Themed competitions (on themes like sports, nature, history, patriotism, social, anti-war, ornamental) were also held. Dailė, the arts and crafts manufacturing centre commissioned work from textile artists for public interiors providing them with the opportunity to realize their projects in material. Lithuanian textiles were highly esteemed all over the Soviet Union as being modern, innovative, of high artistic and professional level.

In the 1970s–80s Lithuanian textile professionals experienced the influence of new outside-world-trends and could test themselves at the international exhibitions (in Lausanne, Lodz, Kyoto, Budapest and elsewhere). The creators of the study programmes in textiles, such as the artists Prof. Juozas Balčikonis, Prof. Vladas Daujotas, Vitalija Bartkuvienė, Marija Žilevičienė, Genorata Razmienė, Jūratė Urbienė, Medardas Šimelis, Anicetas Jonutis and Jonas Stankevičius, contributed to the shaping of a distinctive style of Lithuanian textiles. The distinct Lithuanian textile school, anchored to modernist and Lithuanian folk art synthesis, enriched by European and Asian heritage, became a fertile soil for the emergence of such unique female artists as Danutė Kvietkevičiūtė, Ramutė Jasudytė, Violeta Laužonytė and Kazimiera Zimblytė who were to create works of tremendous and unparalleled originality.

Over the 1970s applied textiles rose in popularity and stimulated the operations of the art production centres. At the same time, artists started gaining opportunities to exhibit their work abroad – in Finland, Poland and Czech Republic. The arts and crafts manufacturing centres gradually diversified their production, the trend that reflected in growing need in models for their limited textiles editions. Textile

design was also gaining impetus. Design prototypes had to be created for the mass production factories and companies. Artists participated in the competitions for the entire Soviet Union. As the number of commissions for public interior works in Lithuania and the Soviet Union was growing, so was the prestige of applied textiles in society. The regularly held periodical exhibitions received plentiful visitors. Decorative textiles were desirable, and not only in public, but in private interiors as well. According to Prof. Juozas Adomonis, applied art became a daily companion of Soviet people by introduced some variety into their mundane life and helping them to work and to rest.

The 1970s saw new enterprises grow in Lithuania and operate with impressive outputs: they were working centralized commissions from Moscow, and it was exactly there where a distinct industrial Lithuanian textile design style was honed. The textile artists could get state-coordinated job placements with one the following factories: *Kilimai* (Lentvaris), *Audėjas* (Vilnius), *Audiniai* (Kaunas), *Medvilnė* (Alytus), *Linai* (Panevėžys); *Kaspinas* and *Liteksas* (both in Kaunas). The *Kilimai* Factory was famed across the Soviet Union and was staffed with a group of Lithuanian textile artists: Genovaitė Žilinskaitė, Angelė Bilevičienė, Anicetas Jonutis, Stanislava Gedvilaitė, Liucija Aniūnaitė-Kryževičienė, Stanislava Černevičienė, Zita Mickonienė, Rima Viliūnienė, Aušra Sutkutė, Kęstutis Balčikonis, Vilija Vizgirdaitė, Rasa Lapinskaitė, Aurimas Rekašius and Olga Ochmanienė.

Though decorative textiles were to satisfy utilitarian human needs, textiles at the same time started positioning as fine art. These works developed aesthetic appreciation, spiritual aspirations and the sense of citizenship in its users. Steeped in the Lithuanian folk art motifs, fibre artefacts fostered the national sentiment. Notably, in the 2nd half of the 1970s, the grip of Social Realism was loosened on textile practice as the Soviet ideologists concluded ornamental art as such being limited to a decorative function. Surely, there is no denying that commissioned work was not immune to propaganda programme. Even in such cases, these works meshed the explicit elements of Soviet agenda with the ethnic motifs, and with the features of monumental art thus creating a unique style of decorative textiles of Soviet Lithuania.

Gradually textile works started escaping from the realm of ornamentation. The increasing number of textile works was designed not for the sole purpose of beautifying interiors, but simply as creations of fine art dedicated to tackling of artistic problems. Works of this trend aspired for a strong artistic quality and authenticity, thus making the boundaries between decorative and fine arts wash out. This trend made itself felt even stronger during the joint exhibitions of applied and visual arts. In contrast to fine artwork created during Soviet years, most of which imitated reality, applied arts, textile including, aimed at the metaphorical and the generalized. In this sense Soviet-era applied arts were more advanced compared to fine arts. The former were not restricted by the canon of Social Realism requiring that a given moment be rendered in a realistic manner and its subjects depicted with anatomical precision. This established aesthetic quality and craftsmanship as the biggest merits in the field of applied arts. Textile artists sought to convey the spirit of time and place and to communicate the artist's aesthetic platform. The command of

techniques and materials was also valued. A clear distinction was made between professional production and creations of folk artisans, the pseudo-folk makings were not to be mistaken for art.

The strengths of the applied decorative textiles of the period were their ethnic foundations and monumental scale; yet the inflated exhibitions of the time revealed shortage of true momentum and shallowness of ideas, personal touch was scarce and experiment also rare. That said this period nevertheless emerges as a golden age of Lithuanian decorative applied textiles related also to the rebirth of textiles worldwide. In Lithuania it was greatly dependent on a number of strong personalities who contributed to the creation of the national school. The use of the knotting technique was reducing, though it was dominant yet a decade ago. Attempts were made to abandon the traditional square as a format and to switch over to free plane and to spatial forms. Compositions no longer depended so heavily on decorative patterns, often tending to be figurative. Individual works were characterized by lyricism and musical parallels, simplicity and understatement, and a strong sense of the national. Textiles demonstrated awareness of their Lithuanian roots, of historic and cultural heritage and contributed to the formation of the national self-consciousness. At the same time, the links with the developments in world textiles were intensifying. The 1980s were marked by the tendency to improvise and to abandon some obsolete traditional canons of creation. Artists often tended to resort to rough and relief textures. Their works feature different types of weave, combinations of traditional and author's techniques, of diverse materials and fibres. Textile pieces separated from the plane of the wall and started sprawling over the place, assuming a three dimensional character. These again were the symptoms of worldwide developments in textile arts. They also introduced new modes of the creative process, such as creative groups, symposia and discussions.

The decade saw the link between textiles and interior design to further develop. Lithuanian *tapestry* matured and became one of the most sought forms of interior decoration. Woven textiles with emphasized material qualities transformed the atmosphere of architectural spaces, lending them cosiness, warmth and softness.

The rapidly expanding construction industry stimulated production of textiles for interiors. In connection to that, complex questions of a connection of textiles to architecture had to be answered. The works commissioned for and installed in specific interiors usually tackled themes of relevance and demonstrated great results of successful collaborations between textile artists and architects. Impressive tapestries produced by Juozas Balčikonis, Vladas Daujotas, Mina Levitan-Babenskienė, Ramutė Jasudytė, Marija Dūdienė, Zinaida Kalpokovaitė-Vogėlienė, Genorata Razmienė, Bronė Valantinaitė-Jokūbonienė, Marija Švažienė, Kęstutis Balčikonis, Aušra Tuminaitė-Kučinskienė, Regina Sipavičiūtė, Medardas Šimelis, Jūratė Urbienė and other artists are landmarks of the Lithuanian visual culture, outstanding in their scale and the sweep of artistic concept. The generous state investments into these works are also to be considered. It is deplorable that so many pieces of this exceptional textile collection disappeared under

unknown circumstances when the buildings that housed them passed into private hands in the newly independent country and when new fashion trends started shaping public tastes.

When creating works for exhibitions, artists were open to interpretations and experiment and showed true creativity. Man and the Universe, reality and illusion, human relationships, the natural world, the connection between the micro- and macro worlds were the subject matter of their work. Laborious efforts to build an individual plastic idiom gave obvious results in the works of Salvinija Giedrimienė, Danutė Kvietkevičiūtė, Marija Švažienė, Birutė Vaitekūnienė, Ramutė Jasudytė and Feliksas Jakubauskas.

For the most part woven tapestry panels came close to monumental paintings in scope and in content, communicating equally potent artistic messages. They retained a vivid connection to the traditions of folk art, but gave up its straightforwardness. Now a lyrical, romanticized atmosphere of the past was evoked by the colour schemes and shapes. Artists themselves would often admit their attempts at capturing the national spirit. The national peculiarities became particularly evident at the exhibitions of the Soviet Union: the tapestry of the Baltic countries was highly valued due to its synthesis of the national and modern. Noteworthy is also the practice by the museums to buy the most artistic textile pieces featured by the Lithuanian and All-Union exhibitions.

The dynamic development of textile arts (including miniature works) in the 1990s following the regained Independence of the Republic of Lithuania

Challenges

An important segment of the exhibition is composed of the artwork from the last decade. Being so recent, it mirrors brand new concepts and trends. The political breakthrough of 1990 that led to an independent Lithuania spelled major changes for textile arts. The exposure to contemporary art theories and practices stimulated the departure with the traditional guild mentality and prompted gravitation towards interdisciplinary approach and crossovers in the wide field of arts. The place of textiles on the art scene and its creative strategies could be redefined. Together with textile design, textile art entered a new stage: not only did it expand its generic boundaries, but also mastered the conceptual language. The milestones along this road were such events as the First International Miniature Textile Exhibition (1992) and Vilnius based symposium *The Road of Flax* (organized by Liucija Kryževičienė, head of Textile Section of the Lithuanian Artists' Association and textile artists Jūratė Urbienė, Zinaida Kalpokovaitė-Vogelienė and Alina Kavaliauskienė), the 1st and the 2nd Kaunas international textile biennials, titled, respectively, *Textile Tradition and the Present Day* (1997) and *The Line* (1999), both organized by Marijona Sinkevičienė, head of Kaunas Textile Section of the Lithuanian Artists' Association, in collaboration with the art critics Raimonda Kogelytė-Simanaitienė, Algė Gylienė and Snieguolė Siurblienė. These

exhibitions laid the foundations for the International Kaunas Biennial, today one of the leading world's international textile events.

Vilnius Academy of Arts has gradually redesigned the curriculum of the study programmes in textiles with the goal of equipping students with the knowledge of a dynamic application of artistic textiles both in the narrow, specialty-specific mode and the broad spectrum of social contexts. The studies develop in students the ability to find ways and points of departure for settling the tensions between art and craft, cloth and body, body and architecture, handwork and new technologies, concept and realization. Students build a critical mind-set, a background in technologies, materials and visual culture, and the skill to anchor their decisions to research and investigation. Textiles may be there to satisfy the aesthetic and functional needs for society, but the medium also lends itself to creations that stimulate human mind and emotions. These works are equal players on the contemporary art scene. Textile artists create work that meshes modern theme with traditional skills and innovative techniques and participate in international art exhibitions and competitions. The contemporary Lithuanian art of textile is a realm where tradition is interpreted and new conceptions forged.

The past 25 years were different and productive for Lithuanian textiles. They were marked by the artists' dynamic search for new modes of expression and achievements, and offered plenty of opportunity to showcase the results. Paradoxically, textile art has fallen out of favour with the state cultural institutions (Lithuanian museums have not acquired any new works illustrating new trends) and other major players of Lithuanian economy. Due to a new type of budgeting and new procedures in construction industry, textile artists receive no commissions for the interiors of public buildings. The biggest textile factories, such as *Kilimai*, *Medvilnė*, *Audiniai*, *Kaspinas*, *Linas*, *Audėjas* in Vilnius, *Spartakas* in Anykščiai, *Vernitas* in Marijampolė, and some other were privatized, few of them managed to adjust to Western markets after losing their main clients in the former Soviet Union.

This crisis catapulted the practice of textiles into the deeper and broader waters. Inspired by youthful zeal and the passion for novelty, frequently spontaneous experiments in the medium started looking more and more as conceptual art. The opportunities to show one's work locally and internationally was a strong stimulus for the young artists to build their own idiom. Alongside, traditional craftsmanship was celebrated in the form of meticulous tapestry weaving, crochet, applique, felting and patterning. These skills were to remain staples of textiles practice.

The revival movement was a platform for generation dialogue, which most focused on sharing of experience and promotion of innovative ideas.

The new approach was heralded by the first curated event hosted in 1995 by Vilnius Contemporary Art Centre (curators were the art critic Dr. Lolita Jablonskienė and the artist Zinaida Kalpokovaitė-Vogėlienė) *Soft Form*. It was a [...] local scale attempt to present experimental textile and jewellery artefacts like independent objects in the face of a new artistic situation, noted Dr. Skaidra Trilupaitytė (S. Trilupaitytė. Introduction, 1996: *Taikomoji dailė*: catalogue, Vilnius, 1996, p. 4).

According to the art critic Dr. Rūta Pileckaitė, *The exhibition abandoned the earlier popular classification of [applied arts] according to its kinds, bringing to the fore characteristics unifying rather than distancing artists across different branches* (R. Pileckaitė, *XX amžiaus Lietuvos juvelyrika: nuo aksesuaro iki priekūnio*, Vilnius: LDS leidykla, 2008, p. 89).

The 1998 CAC exhibition of applied arts and architecture the *Liberated Things* (curators Rūta Pileckaitė and Valdas Ozarinskas) posed the question as to what extent the Lithuanian applied art, having embraced the new forms of object art, installation, photography, was truly integrated into the processes of contemporary art. Whether, having selected the direction of anti-utilitarianism, it is capable of concerns adequate for contemporary artists, or is probably unprepared to take the challenge and only mimics the clichés borrowed from others.

The said exhibitions of the 1990s should be perceived as milestone events. They sought to analyse the development processes in applied arts rather than simply recording them and placed them into a wider art context in order to test the advantages and identify setbacks along the path selected by the representatives of this field (R. Pileckaitė, *XX amžiaus Lietuvos juvelyrika: nuo aksesuaro iki priekūnio*, Vilnius: LDS leidykla, 2008, p. 88–89).

The design of the show was an experiment in itself: all the exhibits were organized as one installation inside a polythene hothouse (design concept by Valdas Ozarinskas). Encouraged by the artists' unorthodox approach and by the success of the exhibition, Dr. Rūta Pileckaitė curated two more contemporary textile projects, the 2001 exhibition *New: Contemporary Lithuanian Textiles*, Ghent Provincial Centre for Art and Culture, Belgium) and *Forever Young* by the Baltic and Swedish artists (2003, INFRA Gallery, Vasby, Sweden). These were among the first comprehensive, professionally curated presentations of contemporary textiles hosted by the prestigious galleries abroad. The idea was to show the bold explorations of contemporary Lithuanian textiles with unconventional textile materials (plastic, paper, Lego blocks, etc.) on the one hand, and conceptual approaches integrated together with typical of textile art forms of expression.

Collaborations

The new economic environment and privatisation of textile factories led textile designers seek new forms of cooperation. In response to the need to identify new opportunities for current textile artists and designers, the Department of Textile of VAA held international and local symposia, competitions, workshops and conferences of textile arts and design. In 1998, third-year-textile students Austė

Jurgelionytė, Karolina Kunčinaite, Miglė Lebednykaitė, Rasa Leonavičiūtė, Laura Pavilonytė, Julija Vosyliūtė and their professor, author of this article, initiated the 1st International Felt Symposium in Anykščiai, organized with AB *Velteksa*. The participants created vibrant felt panels of monumental scale, while Prof. Saole Bapanova from Kazakhstan National Art Academy introduced the participants into traditional felting technique and its peculiarities. AB *Velteksa* was the main sponsor and partner of the event, which brought together students from the Estonian, Latvian, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian art universities. The *Velteksa* administration kindly gave up their entire space to the young artists: the administrative premises, corridors, shops and yards were bustling with creative activity round the clock. The felting technique seemed to put the participants under a spell, and the experiments in passionate search for artistic expression would not stop even at night time. These third year students created their group *Baltos kandys* at the symposium. It keeps working successfully and organizes the international felting symposia every four years.

Starting with the 2001, the Department of Textile of Vilnius Academy of Arts collaborated with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ina Dagtė from the Public Communication Department of Vytautas Magnus University in organizing six international symposia in carpet design. From 2001 through 2006, discussions, conferences and exhibitions hosted by the *Kilimai* Company in their historical count Tiškevičius manor house dealt with problems of textile mass production in Lithuania. Entrepreneurs, architects, textile artists were considering chances of finding a niche for Lithuanian textile artists and manufacturers on the oversupplied Western market and how Lithuanian textiles could be attractive or even emulate their foreign competitors.

The yearly symposia of carpet design and crafting were dedicated to the pertinent themes of the time. The 2001 event, themed the *National and individual aspects of carpet design for mass production*, aimed to encourage the young artists of the Baltic countries to seek ways to reconcile individual creativity and mass production requirements. The 2002 symposium, *The Lithuanian carpet: the experienced seniors and uncompromising juniors* brought together students and some experienced senior artists to consider communication possibilities between generations and the fostering of the Lithuanian textile school. Of established artists, Prof. Juozas Balčikonis, Prof. Regina Songailaitė-Balčikonienė and Mina Babenskiene took part in the competition together with the students and the emerging artists. The professors demonstrated their carpet designs and provided commentary on them. The 2003 theme *Lithuanian textile in architecture* brought together architects and textile designers. The 2004 international outdoor workshop *Wind, Water, Sand* was held in Nida and was followed by an exhibition at Vartai Gallery in Vilnius. Showcased was the work of the winners of the carpet design competition, realized in tafting technique using the machinery of the AB Kilimai. The participants of the 2005 international Turkey – Lithuania carpet creation symposium and conference *Inter-tradition in contemporary textile design* analysed the effect and reflections of traditional Asian textiles on contemporary carpet design. The 2006 carpet creation symposium *Contemporary interpretations of Baltic symbolism in professional textiles, leather*

and jewellery emphasized interdisciplinary collaborative method. The participating textile, leather and jewellery artists applied the principle of team working. The events were intended to stimulate the emergence of a new generation of textile designers. The laureate of the 1st symposium Rūta Butėnaitė, also Eglė Strielčiūnaitė and Sandra Politikaitė worked with the AB *Kilimai* for many years, where they designed bespoke carpets for private interiors. When *Kilimai* Company limited its operations, the design and production of unique customised carpets shifted to sole proprietorships.

Innovation

Over the course of time innovation has been increasingly daringly embraced: textile artists opt for spatial compositions and installations and use a range of unorthodox for textiles materials and fibres, like tulle, Nylon, paper, wood, silicone, glass, coffee, hair, polyethylene, synthetic fibres, wire, bark, metal thread – you name it. Interdisciplinary experiments marry textile, photography, video art, music, dance and new media. *Lithuanian textile artists do not mind any boundaries in their creation. Technical or technological difficulties no longer seem to exist. Classical tapestry, computerised Jacquard and traditional folk weave (ticking, dimity cloth), wool felting, embroidery on silk, traditional or borrowed and well-mastered technologies of cloth dyeing and thermal shaping – there is not only complete command, but refinement in these techniques.* (R. Andriušytė-Žukienė. *Aistringoji Lietuvos tekstilė / The passionate textile of Lithuania*: catalogue, Kaunas: Tekstilinkų ir menininkų gildija, 2009, p. 4–10). According to Dr. Virginija Vitkienė, the art critic and chief executive of Kaunas Biennial, *the dynamic textile culture of our country – numerous and regular solo, group, thematic, international exhibitions, competitions and curated shows – has recently been breaking out of local bounds of Vilnius and Kaunas. It is not surprising at all – the vibrant and eddy current does not only carry things along, but breaks away from the monotonous river course, changing also the climate of the ‘environs’* (V. Vitkienė. Lietuvos tekstilė svetur // Dailė‘2009 /1, p. 90-95. ISSN 0130-6626).

During the 2013 presentation of the contemporary Lithuanian fine textiles at the Galleries of Philadelphia Art Alliance (event curated by Sarah Archer and Eglė Ganda Bagdanienė), the annotation of the exhibit commended Lithuanian artists as the vanguard of contemporary textiles, both keepers of the refined-through-ages craftsmanship skills and creators of new conceptions. Philadelphia saw a collection of Lithuanian textiles of the 1990s – the works from the contemporary Lithuanian textile artists, which already gained local or international acclaim. The artists presented in the exhibit demonstrated their conceptual approach and effortless and elegant command of the medium in manipulating and transforming their materials, superb craftsmanship and the potential to shape a new language of visual arts.

Laima Oržekauskienė presented her woven cycle from subtly patterned yarn, entitled *Mundane Rituals* – a stunning piece with the aura of sacredness and enchanting magic of the still-life. *The Levels* by Žydrė Ridulytė is a piece woven of wire, which seems to absorb the warmth from the quivering ambient

light. *The Breathing* by Monika Žaltauskaitė-Grašienė depends on the interplay between two kinds of texture – human skin and woven fabric. Severija Inčirauskaitė showcased her whimsical cross stitch embroidery on tin utensils – the artist transforms them into unique artefacts. Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė and Laura Pavilonytė exhibited works from the series *Felted Gardens*, evocative in their pristine beauty of white stucco and marbles by Baroque masters. The objects by Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė transcend the bounds of traditional textiles: the artist gives priority to conceptual ideas which drive her formal and technological experimentation. Vita Gelūnienė, a virtuoso of classical tapestry, uses the human body as a tool for her eloquence: in her work, it opens up as a poststructuralist narrative, as the main vehicle for her explorations of identity stereotypes. Preoccupation with the issues of identity is behind the artistic artefacts by Lina Jonikė, who combines, to a modern look, needlework with photography. The works by Jūratė Petruškevičienė stand out by continuous change of technique: her creative treatment of patchwork and applique technique, multiple layers and subtle interactions of materials result in an aesthetic effect of great complexity. Greatly original is Jurga Šarapova's conception of textiles. Her incredibly tiny figures integrated into objects of different sizes are replete of subtle wit; Lithuanian melancholy is also there and references to 'a different' perception of time and of existence. A group of young artists Try3 (Vladas Daškevičius, Aleksas Gailieša and Audrius Lašas) are concerned with a complexity of the process of cloth making and the value of tradition in the new generation aesthetics.

Textiles in Lithuania these days are obviously on an ascending path. It is witnessed by a wide diversity of plastic language and ingenuous approaches in individual textile pieces, as well as a host of interesting events of textile arts (Kaunas Biennial and Miniature Textile Art, Lithuanian Textile Art Biennial are continuous projects, besides there are single-time group and solo exhibits) held in Lithuania. Participation and representation at the prestigious foreign events and competitions has also been a success. The authors of the *Absolute Textiles* have awards under their belt from important textile art forums in Lodz, Kyoto, Peking, Budapest, Bratislava, Kaunas and from other textile art exhibitions-competitions. This has been a time of intense explorations into new modes of expression, discussions and visual renditions of all kind of possible relations between tradition and contemporarity. Artists combine technological diversity with the quest for existential sense-making or adopt elaborate programmes of meaning referencing to the function of textiles in traditional myths. Other works are informed by all kinds of contemporary issues and philosophical aspects of time and its meaning. Unlimited creative discoveries, knowledge and skills in new textile technologies, concepts and approaches to contemporary design, fashion, ethics and philosophy are all textiles where a final outcome is hard to project, as the creation of new artistic quality is a vibrant and never ending process.

Miniature textile works

The collection of *Absolute Textiles*, among others, includes miniature works, selected best examples of the achievements in this genre over the last three decades in Lithuania. The 1992 international symposium of

miniature textiles and the exhibition *The Road of Flax* was the first presentation of Lithuanian fine textiles to the world. The European and American artists invited to Lithuania to create in a collaborative spirit laid the groundwork for international cooperation and exchange. From 1992 through 2013, Vilnius saw eight biennials of miniature textiles, all with international profile. Consistent research into the process of creating textiles in miniature and the dissemination of such works make these events attractive equally to participants and the audience. The ability to creatively to address current global concerns in small scale fibre works also adds to event's popularity.

As it has been already mentioned, the 1st International Miniature Textiles Biennial was held in 1992, organized by the artists Liucija Kryževičienė, Jūratė Urbienė, Zinaida Kalpokovaitė-Vogėlienė, Alina Kavaliauskienė. The exhibition resumed, after an intermission, in 2005. Behind the project were Prof. Žydrė Ridulytė, Prof. Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė and Dr. Lijana Šatavičiūtė-Natalevičienė in cooperation with Vilnius Arka Gallery of the Lithuanian Artists' Association. The 2005 exhibition *Open Letter* encouraged participating artists to tackle issues of globalization and exchanges. Held in 2007, *The Archetype of Flax* offered opportunities to go back to the sources of textile craft. The 2009 biennial *Centuries and Moments* was dedicated to the interpretations of historical heritage, while in 2011 the theme *Perish/Survive* challenged the artists to consider the chances for survival of the human race. The event of 2013 *Thoughts Are...* analysed the situation of an individual artist in this ultramodern world of conceptual art.

In 2014, a collection of miniature textile works was started to build with the goal of recording the development of Lithuanian textile works of small-scale and preserving examples of creative discoveries and of exceptional craftsmanship. The Golden Collection of Lithuanian Miniature Textiles is being built on the basis of the following criteria: creativity, visual appeal, aesthetic qualities, innovativeness and technological diversity.

This collection of textile miniature works made its debut appearance in 2014, at Bratislava Galleries of Bratislava Artists' Union as a satellite exhibition of the International Bratislava Textile Biennial. There are plans to fashion it as a travelling, constantly updated exhibition. The nucleus of the collection comprises works presented at the Lithuanian miniature textiles exhibitions and the winners of international awards.

Authors: Jūratė Aleksandravičienė, Agnė Bačiulytė,

Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė (2nd diploma from the 2009 International Vilnius Miniature Textiles Biennial *Centuries and Moments*, work *Dead on the Same Day. Married*. In 2012, at the International Bratislava Miniature Textiles Exhibition *Banality and Grace* awarded Excellency Prize for her work *Baby*);

Danguolė Brogienė, Rūta Būtenaitė,

Virginija Degenienė (in 2002, won 3rd place for her work *Cinderella's Footsteps of* at the 2nd International Textile Biennial *Interlacements: Fibre and Metal* (USA); in 2004, 3rd place for *Venice Square 2004* at the 3rd International Textile Biennial *Square-carre-cuadrado* (Venezuela), in 2005, diploma by the 4th International Miniature Textiles Biennial *Open Letter* (Lithuania) for her work *Impressions from Venice*.

Severija Inčirauskaitė-Kriaunevičienė, Feliksas Jakubauskas (in 2013, his work *The Breath of Earth* awarded 1st diploma for excellency at the exhibition *Thoughts Are...*)

Lina Jonikė (in 2011, awarded a diploma for her work *How Much I Like...of You* at the exhibition *Perish/Survive*)

Agnė Jonynaitė (in 2011, awarded a diploma for her work *From the Past* at the exhibition *Perish/Survive*);

Eglė Jovaišaitė, Gintarė Juodelė, Kristina Karvelytė, Jūratė Kazakevičiūtė, Virginija Kirvelienė, Vaiva Klakauskaitė, Žydrūnė Kriūkaitė-Juciuvienė, Liucija Kryževičienė-Hutcheon,

Indraja Kubilytė (in 2007, the work *Shoulder Pads* awarded a diploma at the exhibition *Archetype of Flax*);

Laima Oržekauskienė (in 2007, her work *Flax* awarded Studio Logotipas prize at the exhibition *Archetype of Flax*);

Jūratė Petruškevičienė, Gintarė Pociūtė, Genorata Razmienė, Žydrė Ridulytė, Lina Ringelienė, Dovilė Rukšėnienė, Eglė Sakalaitė, Elzė Sakalinskaitė, Jurga Šarapova, Gražina Aleksandra Škikūnaitė, Jelena Škulienė, Jūratė Urbienė, Eglė Vengalytė, Renata Vinckevičiūtė, Zinaida Vogelienė, Lina Zavackė.

Textiles within a broader social context

In the 2000s, Lithuanian textile artists have reached outside their professional field, taking their professional methods and means to broader social contexts. They organize social actions, experimental art therapy labs operating on interdisciplinary principle and are part to the effort of art for human health and public welfare.

The 2004 performance *Trans-Parade: (Trans) Gender Fashion*, hosted by the Akademija Gallery of the Academy of Arts, was a capsule event of the international seminar *Gender and Popular Culture*. According to the art critic Laima Kreivytė, *Contemporary textiles are not simply applied or fine art. It*

deals with transformation, with the marking of body and place, and with changing identities, and for this reason, it is not only conceptual, but also performative. The daily ritual of (un)covering of the body is happening in textile environment of clothing, of table cloth, of bandages, of rags, and, sure enough, of felt. What is its role in the (de)construction of a multifaceted identity of a contemporary individual?

The answer to this question has been provided by Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė, professor of the Department of Textile, and students Luiza Achramovič, Gintarė Baranauskaitė, Marta Černovskaja, Viktorija Eglinskaitė, Nijolė Giedrimaitė, Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, Dovilė Trinkūnaitė and Eglė Vengalytė.

To an electrifying musical rhythm, students changed into 'male' or 'female' costumes of their own make. Their white felt costumes were explicitly naked and showed no reticence of gender signs, female breasts, male genitals or a pregnancy belly. Participating in the performance men and women swapped their 'bodies' unhesitatingly, boldly pulling on a cast of another gender, then changing back it into their own. It was a straightforward demonstration how social gender is constructed in regards to the rutted in society norms of masculinity and femininity, yet at the end of the day, one's (in)dependence of/on gender is determined by the owner of the body.

The *Trans-Parade: (Trans) Gender Fashion* revealed the potential of performative textiles: it does not only dress, but constructs the human body, by merging the sight, touch and action.

The performance, as it has been noted, was part of the seminar Gender and Popular Culture (the series of seminars *Openly about Gender* was organized in 2003 – 04 by the Equal Opportunities Development Centre. More detail available at <http://www.gap.lt/lt/filmuprograma>. From unpublished research materials of 2009 by Laima Kreivytė.)

The collaboration started in 2005, between the Department of Textile of Vilnius Academy of Arts and the public agency Psychic Health, resulted in the creation of an art therapy lab project, involving the National Vilnius Psychiatric Hospital and the club *13 ir Ko* with the goal of research into and the development of a dialogue between artists, health professionals and patients with psychic disorders. The creation of such a laboratory responded to the need to define (a previously absent) art therapist's professional qualification and to describe models for potential artist/ health specialist/patient interactions and applicability of art therapy methods with clearly articulated evaluation of results gained through desirable systemic applications of art therapy methods and methodology. In 2005 the lab for organized art therapy methods application, set up by the therapists Danguolė Survilaitė, Nijolė Goštautaitė-Midttun and the textile artist Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė, included also junior textile artists seeking to understand and strengthen artist's role in art therapy.

The experience of creative collaboration has demonstrated that inclusion of artists into projects with patients encourages them to research into art therapy methods and to look for inspiration for their work, while the outcome can often aspire to the status of a work of art.

Art therapy of tri-party participation – of a professional artist, therapist and patient – when the act is organized creatively, with clearly set goals, objectives and outcomes, as well as with carefully selected ideas, when materials are suitable, communication space is attractive and the environment safe, it has the potential of becoming an interdisciplinary project which creates value for the patient, artist, therapist and society. Such art therapy seminars were organized for a period of time every second year (*Felt*, in 2005, *Clothing to Your Health*, 2007, and *Spring Blossoms*, 2009 –10). Though art does not heal directly like medication, the inclusion of it into healing process may give positive effect, such as reducing anxiety and helplessness, strengthening the sense of meaning and self-confidence as well as providing opportunities to better understand one's own person and others. By trying out new creative techniques, psychic patients acquire new applicable skills, at the same time, while working together with other people and observing work by others, they can gain a better perception of themselves among other people. Art therapy is a useful and meaningful help to individuals with mental disorders.

The project *Let's be Together, Let's Create Together* was started in 2008 by the Department of Textile of the Academy of Arts and the public agency We Are. Its goal is to demonstrate the potential of textile techniques in organizing creative work and leisure for individuals who have mental and psychic disability, thus including them into different kinds of socializing. The summer workshop was dedicated to teaching professional textile techniques, composition and colour. In the course of collaboration, one group learned speciality knowledge, tolerance and patience, the other group of participants practiced working together on creative tasks and finding new spaces to apply their knowledge.

Final observations

Textiles since olden times held a special place among the arts of each epoch. During the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of the Polish-Lithuanian State, it performed a function of representation, when the wars and the years of occupation scathed the country, it suffered all economic and political hardships together with the nation, with the wave of the national revival and in the struggles for independence, textiles came to reflect the high patriotic sentiment. Nowadays textiles are an open forum for artistic expression mirroring individual and universal human concerns, they can be poetry and philosophy, socially and politically engaged. There seems to be a worldwide intent to revive the creation of textiles which do not necessarily grow out of a concept, but are in themselves exquisite pieces of superb craftsmanship. As textile art develops through new modes of expression, it creates unique opportunities to experience new artistic reality. Aware of its boundaries it is nevertheless unpredictably

sprawling far beyond... What the future textiles are going to be? Open to innovation, reverent of the roots of the craft. A form of expression – individual and collective. Textiles bring us together, just like openness and creative approach to our profession. Just like that single thread that takes us back to our community, to our home, to our nest called textiles. All philosophy, ideology, with all its roots are to be found in that nest, but you have to understand who you are, what you do and why. You cannot just sit and ferment, because one day you will find yourself in a quagmire.

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