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Landscape in Latvian Textile Art. Capturing the Essence of a Place

In my doctoral dissertation I am focusing on the textile art in Latvia, where I examine artist's oeuvre of a certain period what can be relevant to the landscape expression in textile. The aim of the research is to expand the traditional understanding of landscape in visual art and detect the link between the imagery system of textile artist and the perception of the geographically limited environment. I argue that landscape in textile art represents artist's personal attitudes to the place as sensory experience and perceiving relationships rather than portray of the picturesque view.

The case study of my dissertation is centred on Latvian textile art in period marked by newly established academical education in the field. Since the foundation in 1961 till 1992, the textile art department in Art Academy of Latvia was headed by artist Rūdolfs Heimrāts (1926-1992). Despite the fact that development of the field occurred within the framework of Socialist Realism, Heimrāts succeeded in creating his original curriculum what turned the visual expression of the weaved textiles to the abstraction and pictorial qualities. As key issues, he emphasized traditional Latvian folk-art studies, visual awareness and working on technical skills.

Before Heimrāts textiles in Latvia functioned primarily as conservative applied arts in the form of clothing, rugs and furnishing fabric. The execution of the fabric was merely based on the traditional techniques used in folk-art. The innovation introduced by Heimrāts was tapestry. His interest could be related to the renewed international interest in tapestry after World War II. Rediscovered qualities of tapestry weaving determined the understanding of textile artwork as a decorative yet pictorial form of art. Textile artists who gained education until 1992 formed the Latvian textile art direction what is locally known as Heimrāt's School. Characteristic feature of this phenomenon was predominance of natural scenery in the imagery of weavings. Most of these artworks were neglected by soviet critiques as formal and worthless compiled images of native land.

The methodology of research has been selected for the purpose to define landscapes in textile art considering medium specificity, predominance of abstraction and highly stylized symbols. The research questionnaire is based on ambiguous content of landscape term and its attributing problems. This includes the geographical approach of understanding landscape as visible features of an area of land, its landforms and notion of landscape as genre in fine arts along with landscape variations appeared in traditional folk-art weaving. Thus, in addition to formal and iconographical analyses, other research methods were applied. Assuming that landscape images were selected by textile artists on the basis of visual experience widely discussed in human geography, there was

chosen the biographical and geographical method of research. Thus, investigation of artist's connection with particular geographical place could detect the key for identifying landscape in textile artwork.

In Latvia professional textile artists wove their own works, supposedly creating them intuitively and spontaneously on the loom rather than designing them beforehand with model or cartoon. This method of artistic expression allowed them to configure the artwork narrative not only by visual perception but also by involving the other senses where above all must be considered the sense of touch. To think in material is essential skill what enables textile artist not only to observe the visible scenery from the literal edge but percept the landscape from the within. Thus, the intimate perceptions of local landscapes, sensory experience of the colours and fibres converted into weavings could be considered as variation of landscape genre in textile art.