

# REVEALING A HIDDEN LIFE — Landscape as a Visual Metaphor In Latvian Art of the Early 20th Century

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Among the publications on turn-of-the-20th-century Latvian art there is a number of detailed studies on its iconographic and stylistic particularities, on Neo-Romantic and Art Nouveau imagery, etc. Their aim has usually been to recognise, define and analyse those features of the visual idiom which would fit in easily usable, convenient interpretation schemes, providing possibly clear, unequivocal answers on questions like "What is typical of...?" A comprehensive inventory of the late-19th and early-20th-century subjects and motifs is offered in several summarising articles and teaching aids by Eduards Kļaviņš (1983, 1998, 1999, etc.), whereas the changing concept of space in the work of Latvian artists in the Art Nouveau period has been discussed by Stella Pelše (1999).

Still, there is something which mostly remains beyond the focus of contemporary art historians but would have been very important to those Symbolism-inspired early-20th-century artists and critics who saw the puzzling fascination of art in the increasingly intricate, meaningful interplay of pictorial form, subject matter and emotional expression. It is the way how pictures speak to us and open new, unexpected aspects of the visible world, evoking a wide range of associations. As the young critic Ģiezēns wrote in 1904: "The task of our art is not a sculptural representation of natural forms that may be achieved by any photographic camera, but the particular impression and feeling which an object in its occasional situation and surroundings evokes in the mind of a sensitive beholder" (Ģiezēns 1904). This idea of a sensitive, empathic beholder was a perfect epitome of turn-of-the-century artistic ideals, which simultaneously resulted from the sharp visual sensibility of Realism and Impressionism combined with Symbolist imagination, Neo-Romantic overtones, Post-Impressionist and Art Nouveau interest in the expressive properties of stylised pictorial form, as well as ech-

oes of the s.c. art education movement (*Kunsterziehungsbewegung*). Step by step people were taught to see that a delicate remark, a slight suggestion, a small vignette or some empathic lines may be more meaningful than a detailed description of nature (Rozentāls 1903a: 118) and furthermore – that there even exists a link between formal simplicity and expressive power. The living, animated result of this association, be it a poem, a painting, a song or anything else, was in its very essence no more literal, but slightly or intensely metaphoric.

Therefore, the central issues of my paper are neither pure elements of Symbolism which may have also been used simply as inserted borrowings from an international idiom without a real contextual significance, nor Neo-Romantic moods which may have sometimes appeared as a mere misty veil enveloping a quite conventional pictorial structure, but rather the particular "integrated imagery" which is worked unobtrusively into the contexture of numerous works of art, turning them into peculiar visual metaphors.

In the greatly earthbound artistic climate of early-20th-century Latvia, the metaphoric presence of a hidden pictorial life usually pervaded various depictions of Latvian scenery ranging from simple and small vignette designs in magazines to landscape settings of several famous figure scenes. A small selection of case studies should outline the variety of this phenomenon as an essential aspect of Latvian visual arts which may bring us to a better understanding of something simultaneously so elusive and so obvious as the subdued metaphoric animation in the intricacies of message and form.

Among other examples it is intriguing to follow how a vigorous sense of elaborate visual analogies has linked Janis Rozentāls's (1866–1916) half-naked *Jubilant Children* (1901, State Museum of Art, Riga) with delicate saplings on the sloping hill. Originally entitled *The Song of Spring* [*Frühlingslied*], this *Bild von anheimelndem Reiz und glücklich gewählten Farbentönen* (Revaler Beobachter 1904) or a similar variation of the same subject was shown in the 4th Wandering Exhibition in Tallinn and inspired the art critic W.S. to illustrate his review of the event with a spontaneous poetry quotation from Arno Holz (Revalsche Zeitung 1904).

The singing children in the picture look like young and slender trees with shining, translucent crowns and smooth, warm, sun-burnt trunks, but the world around them seems suddenly swayed by a swift wave of cheerful sound. The bold brushwork turns the lone apple-tree on the slope into a pale pink cloud that

leans upwards as if wishing to join other, white clouds in their procession over the sky. Rosy tints of the blossoming tree and twigs reappear in the youthful flush on the girl's cheeks, and these children could ask the same question as Latvian writer Jānis Akuraters (1876–1937) in his *Servant Boy's Summer*: "And my joy, is it not unconscious as that of some young plant or flower that, fresh and lush, blooms in the sunshine?" (Akuraters 1908: 144.)



Figure 1. Janis Rozentāls. *Jubilant Children* (1901, State Museum of Art, Riga).

A similar interest in a painterly translation of visual analogies appeared in a flowering spring scene from c. 1909 with a very young child toddling downward the path of a blossoming orchard (State Museum of Art, Riga). Covered with spots, dots and patches of lavishly utilised paint, the lovely impressionistic landscape is bathing in a simmering shimmer of caressing sunlight. The tiny figure of the girl looks as if it is made of yellow buttercups, blossom petals and fragrant air. Though hardly visible, she is herself a sprouting flower or a little sun that imbues the homely spot with a cosy radiance.

Very evocative is the sensuous tapestry texture of Rozentāls's *Sun Maidens* (*Dream of a Herdboy*, 1912, State Museum of Art, Riga), where short and cross-current pastel strokes have woven together the dream and reality into an enchanting, slightly eroticised and at the same time very decorative noon-day

slumber vision. In fact they visualise the summer light that shines from the milky sky condensing in the wings of birds, in the blossoming foliage and the lanky bodies of half-naked girls among clustering repoussoirs of trees on the lakeside. Everything in this area really *scheint zu schwellen, zu atmen, ineinanderzugleiten* (Hamann, Hermand 1967: 298), as if illustrating some brilliant pages of Hamann and Hermand's history of German artistic culture, and this mystical "sundreaming" (Hamann, Hermand 1960: 288) as a Neo-Romantic corollary of Impressionist vision inevitably makes me remember the artist himself writing that Arnold Böcklin's "fairy-land creatures ... are born of the feeling that the landscape with its shapes and colours has evoked in him" (Rozentāls 1903b: 242), since this description has been perhaps even more appropriate to Böcklin's Latvian admirer.

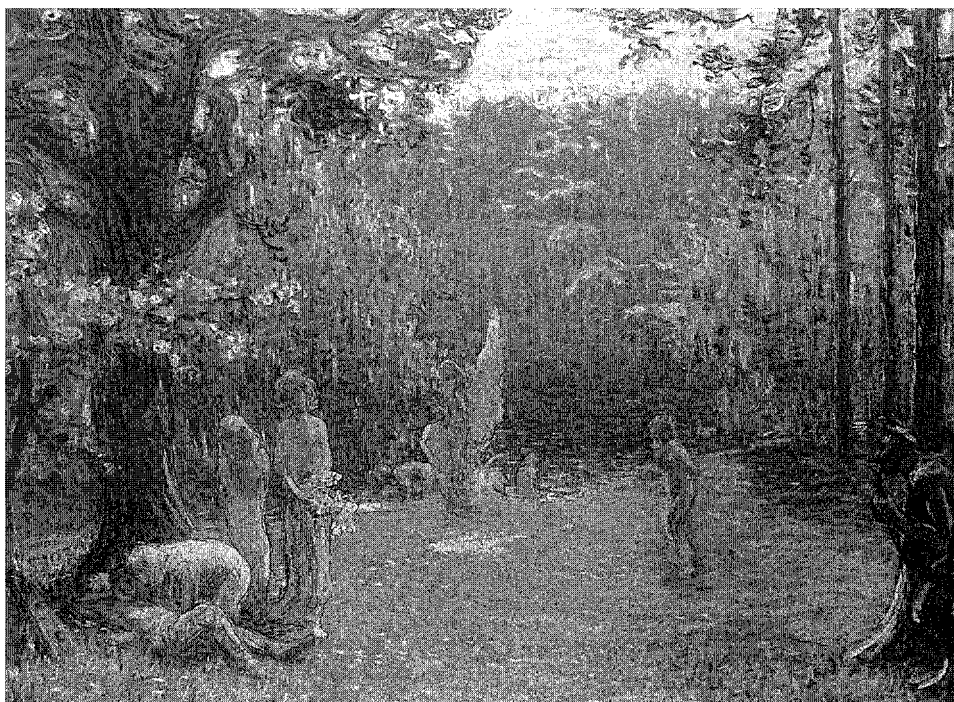


Figure 2. Janis Rozentāls. *Sun Maidens* (1912, State Museum of Art, Riga).

But now we should turn from this exuberance of sensations to its very opposite in terms of style and season. The first Latvian artist who urged the early-20th-century public to realise that a refined simplicity can be no less evocative than the rich pictorial language of Rozentāls was the winter landscape painter

Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945) in the moody studies from the time of his 1904 one-man exhibition. Purvītis's monumental and classicising later achievements made people forget this delicate aspect of his early work, but I would like to save it from the undue oblivion by discussing one of those few surviving pastel studies (c. 1900–1904, State Museum of Art, Riga) that were praised for their serene lyricism and give the best possible evidence to some unobtrusively metaphoric developments in the art of the new 20th century. We must agree that the study is *raffiniert in der komplizierten Wirkung einfacher Mittel* (Neumann? 1904) – the



Figure 3. Vilhelms Purvītis. *Winter Landscape* (c. 1900–1904, State Museum of Art, Riga).

painter has deliberately limited his means to a few essentials with soft, loose dashes suggesting the slight vibration of water and filigree lines of trees merging into the sky. The pale pinkish grey of the cardboard surface shows through like an afterglow of dim winter light, and we cannot even say that there is nothing going on in the scene. The utmost sensibility of touch has imbued the gentle atmospheric study with a presence of subtle overall animation, of a subdued, sleeping life. This illustration to the once much-admired part of Purvītis's creativity also shows a particular poetic device of pictorial expression which was widely used by turn-of-the-20th-century artists and could be described as the effect of a double mirror. One of the "mirrors" was certainly the two-dimen-

sional picture itself, but it often contained a represented surface of quiet, vibrant or rippling water with distinct and clear or dim and blurred reflections. The water mirrored something that was only partly shown or totally left beyond the boundaries of the depicted scene, and this intricate playful arrangement even in modest studies usually helped to achieve admirable pictorial integrity.



Figure 4. Johann Walter. *Spring* (1907, State Museum of Art, Riga).

From the very beginning of Purvītis's artistic career in the late 1890s, the whole turn-of-the-century period in Latvian painting was typified by a particular interest in the transition from winter to spring as a time of hopeful expectations: *Die Natur ist noch nicht wach, aber sie wartet auf den ersten warmen Sonnenstrahl, der sie vom Schlummer erwecken soll. Dann werden auch die letzten Schneereste verschwinden ... und mit einem Schlage wird es lebendig werden.* (Moritz 1898.) Nevertheless, Johann Walter's (Jānis Valters, 1869–1932) *Spring*, also titled *The Orphan Girl* (1907, State Museum of Art, Riga) and signed in the second year of the Latvian-born German artist's Dresden period (1906–1916), was bound to

transform the conventional optimism of nature's triumphal awakening into an ambiguous scene of decay before a new life may be born. At first glimpse, the interlacing areas of the muddy brown and melting snow-white may remind the underlying schemes of some of Purvītis's or Isaac Levitan's pictures, but this similarity here only helps to convey the opposite message. Visually, the dark, slushy earth acts as an expanding mass of flood water tiding up with a turbulent inner force. The fleeting, distorted figure of the lonely walker reads as an integral part of the undulating surface pattern, as if her head were one of the snow islands fading into the all-absorbing mire, and this optical fallacy as a visual metaphor imparts to the picture its unusual evocative power. Forcefully empathic, it highlights the transitory aspect of life, the ambivalence and drama of any movement, evolution or change.

The problem of integrated imagery inevitably brings into discussion the peculiar landscape studies of the painter and graphic artist Pēteris Krastiņš (1882–c. 1942/1943) who was continuously haunted by the desolate, marshy Northern Latvian scenery of his native Aijaži neighbourhood. "I am as ever closely bound to our nature, the native landscape – to our evenings and nights, even so dark that sometimes every train of thought gets lost... I would like to live where I have grown ... behind the brown bog, amid the large forest, always seeing the white birches," Krastiņš wrote from Florence in 1909 (Jaunsudrabiņš 1921), longing for the key images of his early work. Between 1905 and 1907, he produced particularly small and delicate, but boldly stylised series of clouds, forests, marshes and bogs in pastels, watercolour or mixed soft media on various rough paper backgrounds, and his writer friend Juris Kosa has recorded Krastiņš's idea of a large chain-enclosed picture as a symbolic representation of the depressing boggy area (Kosa 1962). Marked by a daring modesty of form, an associative use of colour and texture, and an overpowering intensity of feeling, the existing studies in the collection of the State Museum of Art convey the artist's heartfelt empathy with the life of nature and represent emotional experiences ranging from moody lyricism to anxiety, depression and fear. We are fascinated again by a meaningful, evocative simplicity which is however deprived of any polish, subtlety or refinement *à la* Walter and Purvītis acquiring new, different features. "Krastiņš's little essays in colour," the writer and artist Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš wrote in 1908, "give a truly peculiar impression. They look very much like coloured drawings, yet it seems that the drawing has no other use as to conduct the grand



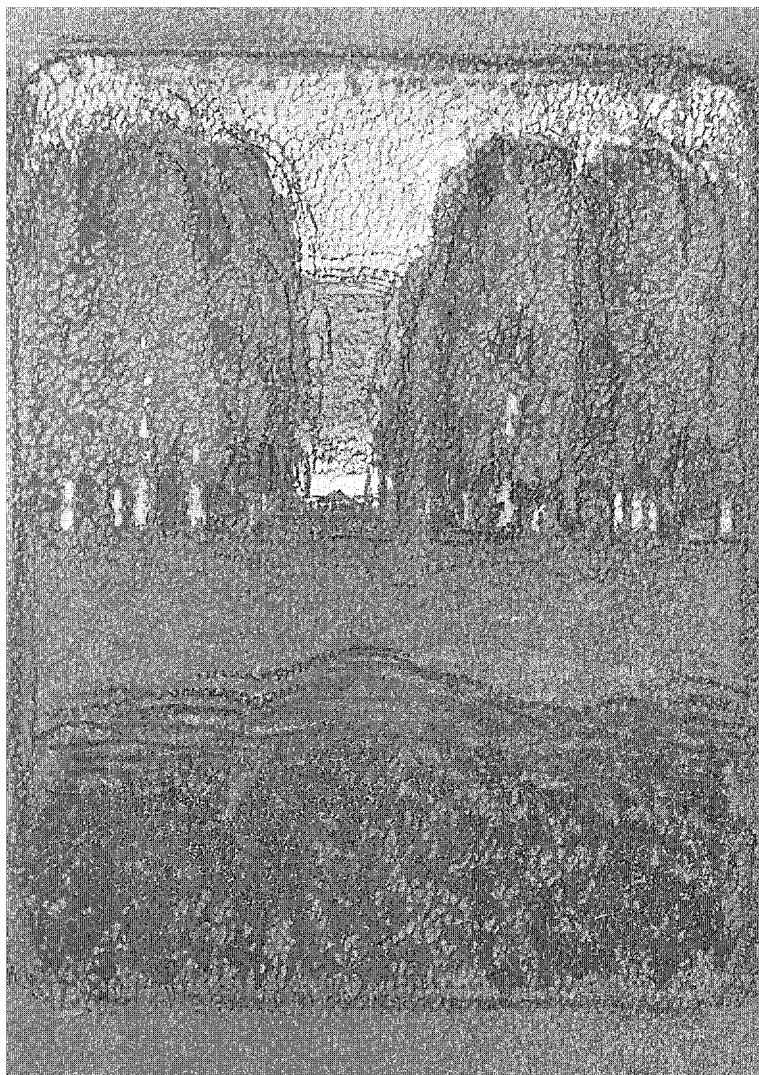


Figure 5. Pēteris Krastiņš. *Forest* (c. 1905–1907, State Museum of Art, Riga).

symphony of colour. He selects narrow motifs which create, upon closer examination, an illusion of spaciousness, evoked by a strong decorative sensibility. And every fragment is brimming with life and vitality, even though the whole is veiled in a deep sense of melancholy." (Jaunsudrabiņš 1908: 194.)

Let us look at some elements of Krastiņš's imagery, which in the absence of human scale, have acquired particular importance and suggest that we see a spontaneously metaphoric reflection of the "world within" – of the artist's earth





Figure 6. Pēteris Krastiņš. *Clouds* (c. 1905–1907, State Museum of Art, Riga).

bound and strongly claustrophobic "inscape," this term being borrowed from something so far from art history as Laurens van der Post's interpretation of Jungian psychology (Van der Post 1976: 20, 146). There are heavy clouds looming large over the landscape or transformed into indistinct, threatening masses, and there is the dark, spongy, quivering mire with gloomy remnants of decayed vege-

tation implying the worst outcome of one's confrontation with the all-absorbing unconscious.

Some of the nearly abstract marsh studies are dominated by the glow of the setting sun that evokes unwitting associations with the underlying impulses of Edvard Munch's *Scream*: "The sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood-red. I sensed a scream passing through nature..." (Hodin 1977: 48.) Latvian art student Krastiņš in his rural isolation must have experienced similar sensations, and there is no wonder that the glowing orb could also appear in a direct association with a shrieking, shrivelling animal-like human in order to emanate the destructive intensity of unrelievable pain.

The use of a human figure, however, was limited to very few exceptions, but the gloomy, despondent marsh imagery certainly had one figuratively human element – the individual tree. The artist undeniably identified himself with the distorted marsh pines which were bound to a miserable existence in the swampy plains. As a metaphor of the unconscious, the miry marshland took much of Krastiņš's own life, since his promising artistic career was untimely ruined by a mental breakdown before the First World War had even begun.

Krastiņš's evocative landscape miniatures certainly formed a perfect supplement to the earthbound picture of early-20th-century Latvian art, but their formal and emotional particularity set them apart from the painted work of other compatriots. In a recent publication on this subject, I have therefore sought helpful analogies in the heritage of European nature Symbolism (Ābele 2000). In terms of emotional expression and formal stylisation, similar effects were frequently achieved by Jan Stanislawsky, playwright August Strindberg in his painterly experiments, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde, Paula Modersohn-Becker, the early Mondrian and other artists of international reputation whose work has been analysed in Robert Rosenblum's classic monograph *Modern Painting and Northern Romantic Tradition* (Rosenblum 1975) and numerous other publications on the turn-of-the-20th-century vision of nature in the art of Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. Many of them on certain stages of their career shared Neo-Romantic longings for unspoiled nature as a metaphoric mirror of the human soul and produced stylised depictions of landscapes representing overpowering emotional experiences. For Krastiņš, the humble but haunting neighbourhood of his father's farmstead provided a truly authentic bond to this aboriginal source of artistic inspiration. With very few exceptions, the Latvian

student of the Stieglitz Central School of Technical Drawing (St. Petersburg) before his Western European study trips (1908–1910) did not and could not even use first-hand borrowings from the work of foreign colleagues, but his individual development toward a peculiar, rudimentary version of Proto-Expressionism proceeded within the same stylistic idiom and a similar artistic climate.

Although Krastiņš's unconscious affinity to the international context highlights the surprising modernity of this lonesome Northern Latvian dreamer, another aspect not to be overlooked in the interpretation of his integrated imagery is that of close analogies in the early-20th-century Latvian poetry that was typified by the frequent conception of nature in human terms and *vice versa* – of human "inscape" in terms of boggy Northern Latvian plains with crippled, awkward trees observing the afterglow of distant sunsets and grieving over the hopelessness of their marsh-bound existence or striving anxiously to overcome the depressing isolation... Thereby Krastiņš has unwittingly visualised the "inner landscape" of Atis Ķeniņš (1902: 107), Augusts Saulietis (1906: 8), Antons Austrīņš (1907: 36) and other young Latvian nature symbolists of his time, whose literary heritage in turn offers the best possible verbal descriptions of the artist's evocative imagery.

If you remember the opening quotation of this paper, in Krastiņš we see the other extreme of those impressions and feelings which "the object in its particular situation ... evokes in the mind of a sensitive beholder" (Ģiezēns 1904). It was this highly developed visual sensibility and the empathic interest in the surrounding world as a source and mirror of human sensations that generated and nurtured the metaphoric under- and overtones of many divergent early-20th-century works of art, making them more personal, individual, ambiguous, inspiring and "brimming with life," which did not have much to do with a mimetic three-dimensional representation of reality.

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