

# Mythological Matter: Folklore Images in the Landscape of Latvian Textile Art in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Introduction

The presence of folklore in the contribution of textile art in the period between the 1960s and 1980s has been previously noted and described as the observation of natural beauty of peasant life (Sturme 1978) as the poetic vision of the world adopted from folk songs (Kalniete 1989); however, beyond the detection of this fact, the purposeful research of corresponding works has not been continued. The examples pertaining to the theme of folklore in textile art can be identified by the first lines of folk songs included in the artwork titles (Celmiņa-Ķeirāne 2016: 151), although this approach leaves out a considerable part of the weavings containing images of ancient oral poetry and mythological notions in a significantly wider comprehension.

Chronologically, most of the artworks dedicated to folklore in Latvian art relate to the time marked by First National Awakening emerged during the 1850s and independent Latvia (1918–1940) when formulation of the national identity was a topical problem for society in its entirety and for the majority of creative industries. In the period following World War II, when Latvia was incorporated in the USSR as a socialist republic, socialist realism was established as the only creative method in art in Latvia, imposing a hierarchy of themes, and a full typology of images (Kļaviņš 2009: 103), diverse visualization of the folklore-inspired motifs unaffected by the official ideology was discontinued. However, the national character was considered desirable in the internationally oriented socialist community, and this enabled development and continuity of traditional values in applied arts (Sturme 2009). The heritage along with various landscape motifs became a thematically unifying core of Latvian textile art. Since the 1960s, when the first pictorial weavings of Rūdolfs Heimrāts (1926–1992) were exhibited to the public, culminating in a new wave of national romanticism at the end of the 1980s (Kalniete 1983: 4), the imagery proposed by local nature and folklore expanded into a broadly represented, invariably leading theme in the reformed textile art, thus undeniably affecting the public opinion, strengthening national consciousness, self-awareness and the force of resistance to the occupation power.

The article aims to provide a thematic insight into the development of Latvian textile art, highlighting the representation of folklore and mythical notions in the visual content of the artwork. The task is to focus on the interpretation of the weavings, instead of formally evaluating only the features of material and technical performance

according to the general practice prevailing in applied art, but instead by interpreting visual content. The study chronologically encompasses the period of development of Latvian textile art in the 1960s–1980s designated as late socialism (Kristberga 2020: 9), when political and institutional changes fundamentally altered the performance in the field, introducing academical education, state commissions and extended international experience. The article examines the creative work of professional textile artists who acquired education at the Art Academy of Latvia under the leadership of Professor Rūdolfs Heimrāts. The samples of the summarized material highlight a variety of textiles where visualization of folklore-related themes can be identified and interpreted in narrative meaning. Research methodology includes content analysis of written and iconographic sources, biographical data analysis, interviews, case studies, and field notes.

## Changes of the visual content. Woven picture

The appearance of folklore-inspired images in Latvian textile art in the period between 1960s and 1980s was determined by several relevant circumstances. The first was the extension of practised weaving techniques. By the beginning of the 1960s, textile artists in Latvia primarily used the shuttle weaving techniques obtained from traditional folk-art weaving practice. The favourite approach was the weaving method involving pile rug or knotted weave (Heimrāts 1960), which enabled creation of a rich fabric texture since the main feature was long fringe. However, that had limited possibilities in terms of the presentation of detailed images and sinuous lines. The new visual expression shift was indicated by introducing tapestry or the woven painting, better known in Latvia as the gobelin weaving.

In Europe, a tapestry is commonly known as a hand-produced luxury craft historically developed by the professional communities of French and Belgian weavers. The medium developed in close connection with painting and commissions of nobility and the Church. The plain weaving technique or tapestry allows the complete freedom of compositions and has proven itself to be particularly suitable for the reproduction of realistic monumental compositions (Phillips 2000). After a certain period of decline in the 19th century, by the middle of the 20th century, tapestry experienced a new wave of popularity known as the post-war tapestry revival. The process initiated the larger concept of tapestry as an independent, medium-specific modern art form (Wells 2018). The Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962–1995) became a paramount international event of this movement. Located at the confluence of the western and eastern approaches, these Biennials rapidly evolved as a powerful platform for exchanging artistic experience in the textile medium.

In Latvia, by the beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw in the late 1950s, information on the art phenomena in the West increased to a significant extent (Knāviņa 2019: 62). Although far from being a linear process of liberalisation of culture and politics (Bittner 2008), opening of information channels to a comparatively larger degree brought considerable developments in

the field of textile art. The ideas about new tapestry and its monumental features reached the artistic community in Latvia through increased information from international exhibitions and publications and therefore must be considered as an influencing circumstance. The tapestry weaving technique in Latvia was not a novelty, it was known since the 1930s. The detailed technical description could be found in the weaving manual compiled by Anna Antene (Antene 1931). A broad overview of the history of textile art and types of fabrics was provided in the publication of “Mākslas vēsture” (“History of Art”) (Pēngērots 1936: 91). Small-scale, intimate tapestries were woven by the older-generation textile artist Milda Klēbaha (1906–1975) (Rinka 2016: 591). However, the first tapestry, which fully revealed the features of the technique in the light of the new approach was executed by Rūdolfs Heimrāts (1926–1992) in 1960. The monumental wall hanging *Uz Dziesmusvētkiem (To the Song Festival)* represents a realistically depicted figurative scene demonstrating the principal difference in image formation from the previously used techniques. The smooth tapestry surface with picturesque qualities, the vibrant, active contrast-based colour usage, and mural properties revealed hitherto inexperienced tapestry possibilities. The traditional folk dresses, which were woven and thus rendered in native materiality as a fabric into the fabric, yielded an entirely different impression from that achieved in, for example, painting. These differences could be expressly observed in the comparison of Heimrāts tapestry, for instance, with the painting of Džemma Skulme (1925–2019) of the same period *Svētku deģa (Festive dance, 1958)*. The flowing, supple lines, determined by the weaving structure, bold dyed yarn materialized in plain colour fields introduced a different kind of medium-specific reality.

The other creative explorations of Heimrāts pertain to the period attributable to the founding of the Textile Arts Department at the Art Academy of Latvia. From 1961 to 1992, Heimrāts held the permanent position of the head of the department. The most accentuated professor's requirements in creative work were based on the in-depth exploration of the heritage of Latvian ancient folk art (Bankovičs 2010). The selected approach was not used as a formal examination of published sources but instead was based on personal experience and direct presence. Folk art had to be seen in close-ups, through practical encounters, researching and accepting the original samples in the museum repositories (Eglīte 2019: 39). As a result, the imagery and applied colour usage of young artists developed in a unified, traditional value-oriented way, which, on the one hand, maintained a relationship with tradition, whereas on the other—provided a solid basis of an age-tested initiative that was not mechanically copied but instead had to be creatively developed. The opportunity arranged by Heimrāts to obtain access to the holdings of historical funds could be comparable to the findings of ethnographer, described by Jānis Niedre as overall unfettered interaction that preserves the moral, physical and mental integrity of the people (Niedre 1985: 25). This approach also resulted in a simultaneously physical and spiritual relationship with the human material and intangible heritage, a culture of colours and patterns, familiarity and acceptance of certain forms of visual expression, the understanding of their natural origin, a place in an individual life which, as a consequence, might encourage young artists to focus on a relevant theme in folklore.

Assessing the content of the diplomas created during the 25 years of the Heimrāts-led Department of Textile Art, it should be concluded that the thematic circle remained unchanged

in its essential nature (Heimrāts 1986). In general, it could be described as images inspired by folk art, observation of nature, and Latvian folklore, unified by a particular choice of colours, materiality, and weaving technique. The notional coloured areas rendered in the textures of various wall hangings emerged from ethnographic blankets, ornamental patterns of embroidery, and knits, combined with the principles of narrative representation, created a new but at the same time nationally affiliated material reality.

In the context of the development of folklore motifs, it should be noted that art life was subordinated to a state-defined ideology that determined the themes of the works. In USSR, the folk art as a form of peasant art had been officially praised as an expression of truly popular creativity since the mid-1930s (Karpova 2020: 51). Moreover, demonstration of nationality was one of the principles of socialist realism doctrine, where the art had to be national in form and social in content (Ansonė 2009: 10). Simultaneously, the theme chosen by the artist could be consistent with the iconographic typology of socialist realism, while still containing hidden national and political desire for independence, creating a double code (Kļaviņš 2009: 113). In this context, Latvian textile art, where the national theme in tapestries was revealed in a serene self-centred mood, without artificial pathos and the glorification of the worker's life, with an exploratory view of ancient myths and cultural roots, developed intuitively discernible layers of the parallel world supported and protected by properties of the decorative medium. While decoratively interpreted imagery inspired by the folklore world retained a leading position next to poetically portrayed landscape motifs and rural life scenes textile art stored and maintained a latent tradition promoting a sense of belonging to a particular country and culture, dissolving the expected social content in a mentally free national form.

## Colour and weaving. Divine origin

The tapestry weaving method enabled academically educated artists to expand creative imagination into a notional reality that in equal measure supported the free arrangement of abstract geometrized structures and nuanced, realistically executed graceful shapes. This direction was unlike painting, where a realistic readable narrative played a crucial role in the textile art as an applied art field, it proved acceptable to use a notional, symbolic image. The conventional way of depiction used in weavings opened the possibility to explore the themes that could not relate to the actual real-life processes. The rich source of imagery permitted by the ruling power was found in the ancient history, folklore, and folk art; thus, it became a lasting, valuable field decisively. The skills involved in the creation process of textile artwork have proved to be essential and linked to the scenery contemplated by folklore, not only in terms of visualization but also in a material-based haptic sense.

The tapestry *Vērpēja, tinēja un audēja (Spinner, Winder and Weaver, 1968)* by Ruta Bogustova (1935) is one of the first textiles woven by Heimrāts' students. It clearly marks

an approach which differs from the idea of decorative textiles. The entire plane of the tapestry is occupied by three female figures. Their bodies are profoundly simplified, even generalized, devoid of detail, nevertheless, the order of lines and coloured shapes in their entirety creates a clear notion of the event. Women's clothing and the tools used in folk crafts indicate the background of antiquity. In superficial observation, this scene certainly could be associated with a fairy tale of the same title, where instructive insight into the hard work of processing the fibre emphasizes the role these skills in human life (Arājs 1988). Veronika Kučinska reflects upon this weaving by Bogustova in the following words: "It finds not only a beautiful colour mix close to that used in folk art but also imparts the wisdom contained in the folk song, *Balta nāca tautu meita...*" (Kučinska 1987), indicating the desired female representation in folklore—the lines of the song quoted by Kučinska—"White came the maiden..." indicate whiteness as pureness, virtue. However, the subject matter of particular weaving could also be interpreted in connotation adhering to the mythical context of the event. In the mythological notions preserved in folk heritage, the sun is the day or light weaver, and she weaves the fabric of the universe along with the dominant deity Māra (Kursīte 1996). The day, the light, the sun are inherent participants in the cycle of creation. According to olden notions, the life thread is also spun by the sun or the sun's daughters. A deity of destiny, Laima, in addition to weaving also spins and has a mastery of embroidery skills (Kursīte 1996). This division of responsibilities certainly reveals the unique role of textile-handling manual skills in human life, their feminine origins, and their creative nature. In many other cultures of the world, weaving is also understood as a life-generating cosmogony act, reflected in different notions, myths, legends. Typically, the deities responsible for creation of life are portrayed as feminine spinners and weavers (Gordon 2011). Thus, the subject matter of the composition could be interpreted not only as a reference to folklore-related theme but also as a picture of symbols representing a mythical preconception of woven origin of the universe.

Colours have no nationality (Kęncis 2013: 51); however, the attitude to colours in different cultures is not incidental. Over many centuries, it has been formed closely with the populated environment, where natural dyes and fibre were obtained. According to the ethnographer Aina Alsupe, the dyes used by the people are also the witnesses of people's lifestyle. In cultural history, both individual colours and compositions thereof have been used as a source of information to expose the specific features of a particular period, not only in the aesthetic development of individuals but even whole ethnoses (Alsupe 2008). In Latvia, the attitude towards colour was formed by natural sampling (Šmits 1937), which resulted in the most difficult to obtain or expensive colours assigned a particular importance and honour (Karlson 2018). In folklore, colour has its mythical role; it can express symbolic information and influence the context of perception (Kursīte 2018). In antiquity, the dyeing skills were an essential weaving companion (Alsupe 1982). The meaning of each colour contained in folk songs is related to the colour used in textile art because it was particularly understood as dyed wool yarn or other available natural fibre, thereby associated with specific practical skills of the weaver and local preconditions.

Textile artist Lilīta Postaža (1941–2011) in her tapestry *Krāsotājas* (Dyers, 1970) depicts the process of dyeing yarns as an important, even crucial part of the textile creating process. Here, the valuable red of the madder, coupled with the intensive indigo blue, forms the

primary expression of the entire image. Indisputably, the author had aimed to highlight the importance of these colours that existed in antiquity, however, obtained through the educational process, the acquired knowledge of ancient folk art samples could be viewed as respect extended to the valuable matter of red. Composition is rendered in heavy, saturated tones, using a highly notional language of images. The absence of specific indications, the highly simplified abstract shapes highlight the generalized nature of the process of obtaining colour. The figures of the four women are standing around the dyeing bowl and patiently awaiting the moment of transformation. The dyer's eyes are focused on the hot depths of the bowl, the heated air reflecting in a red glow on their faces. With a certain peace, they indulge in the flow of time. The composition itself does not demonstrate a particular reference to the folklore motive, although special attention to the dyeing process determines the value of the following weaving is evident.

The yarn dyeing in textile art from the 1960s to the 1980s was an essential stage in producing the textile artwork, which, like all other works, was concentrated in the author's hands. Like in ancient times, creation of fabric had to pass through several phases of fibre preparation. The dyeing process is highlighted as one of the most crucial stages of tapestry creation. The success of the weaving was largely dependent on the results of the dyeing (Oša 1986). However, textile artists used chemical dyes, which provided for a more simplified application procedure than the plant dyes used in the past, the process of treating the fibres—washing, heating, rinsing, and drying—itsself included certain ritualized activities which referred to the information on the subject matter of colour extraction stored in folklore.

A similar emphasis on the importance of colour usage is detectable in the tapestry by Anita Celma (1944) *Darbs dara darītāju* (translated as *The folk song motif*, 1977). The composition is organised around the colour flow of the light spectrum highlighted in the middle of the tapestry, which are surrounded by four female figures. The intensive colour accent emanates from the middle of the woven structure as the heavy weaves of long fringe clearly associate with preciously brightly dyed yarns. The images of women and the surroundings of the composition are pictured in off-white, pale tones, which, on the one hand, draw attention to the vibrating power of the central colour accent; on the other hand, they impart a notion of some unreal act. Such compositions could also be carried out as murals. Yet, the fibre content of the saturated colours of the spectrum, the unambiguously tactile sensing structure of the yarns, and the ritualized nature of the dyeing process gives this scene a different dimension, aligning it with the act of creation in a mythical meaning (Eliade 1995).

The white colour, most frequently present in Latvian folk songs (Greble 1992: 163) appears in a significant proportion of textile art. Overall, the symbolic connotation of white is obtained from the folklore, relating to morality, chastity, but it is also a sign of special intimacy and love. White has also been associated with the feminine creative origin, mother's milk, and the idea of revival (Kursīte 1996). In this context, the considerable example is the artwork authored by Heimrāts, where the presence of white colour is always associated with goodness and spirituality (*Gaidīšana* (*Waiting*, 1978), *Tautasdziesma* (*The Folk Song*, 1978), *Saudzēsīm dabu!* (*Let's save Nature!*, 1981)). Furthermore, the applications of white

attributed to symbolical associations obtained from the world of folklore are detectable in the artwork of numerous Heimrāts' students.

It can be concluded that the features of the artistic image, related to the physical structure of fibre materiality, were open to unlimited interpretations of mythical preconceptions. The symbolic meaning of colour as dyed yarn combined with archaic weaving skills created the basis for variable textile visualizations rooted in folklore and mythical thinking. Almost each textile artist who acquired his or her academic education in the period from 1960s to 1980s has authored an artwork linked to local nature, folklore, ornamentation and colour system, national celebrations, and traditional anniversaries. Among these are several individual artists whose oeuvre represents a continuing relevance of these cultural values. In these cases, a close relationship with local nature through the specific site, rural lifestyle, and mythical notions construct the fundamental basis of the imaging system.

## The mythical aspects in image system of Aija Baumannē

Aija Baumannē (1943–2019) entered Latvian textile art as one of the first academically educated artists. Already in her graduation work, Baumannē turned to the use of narrative content, creating a large-scale, figurative composition titled *Zelta zivtiņa* (*Golden Fish*, 1967). Handwoven in tapestry technique, this wall hanging depicted the fairy tale of the Latvian folklore, although this nomad fairy tale theme also has variations in other cultures. Art historian Gundega Ivanova, describing this work, concludes that through the colour accents and line movements, the author shows her intimate knowledge of the nature of the fairy tale. The intended narrative has no break, continuously showing four scenes—they are compositionally closely associated with each other (Ivanova 1967: 8). The absence of subsequent interpretation of the weaving content in terms of organization of composition, selection the particular motifs, colour scale or included scenery is an example confirming that the works in the applied arts sphere were not exposed to such a perspective, either in this case or in the following decades. For example, in the context of tapestries by Baumannē, the attitude toward folklore, art historian Brigita Sturme only stated "... on the subject of folklore, Aija Baumannē had woven the tapestries *Bāleliņi* (*Brothers*), *Pilskalns* (*Hillfort*), *Pūra lades motīvi* (*The motifs of the dowry chest*) (Sturme 1978: 39).

In the late 1960s, Baumannē created a series of tapestries dedicated to the subject of land defenders—*Pilskalns* (1968), *Vecā zaldāta dēkainā dzīve* (*The Life of the Old Soldier*, 1969) based on the folk tale and *Bāleliņi* (1970). The tapestry *Pilskalns* depicts a scene of olden times that in general terms can be attributed to folk legend, but equally well—to a historical scene. The static and peaceful organization of composition suggests that the depicted event is a romantic reflection of legendary history. Yet, the author underlines



that the narrative is based on an evocative idea of the nation's resistance to the conqueror, where the river is perceived as a protector of defenders from the evil power (Rozenieks 2004). Another composition of a similar orientation, *Bāleļiņi* (1970), is devoted to the sons who are departing to the war. Two images of riders are positioned in the centre of the weaving. Their faces are turned away from the viewer toward the depths of the weaving, heading toward the unknown future. On both sides of the road the viewer can discern those who are left behind. These are the images of women who stare at the inevitable fate in a gesture of farewell. The figures are executed with remarkable simplification, rendering their silhouettes sturdy, their shapes—stiff and solid, as if cut out from the stone. If folklore-based evidence is taken into account, then the stone has been presented as a symbol of soldier's heart, assigning symbolic importance not only to the stone, but also to the soil and the charcoal, where the stone symbolizes the hardness of the vow, while the sod and the charcoal are linked with hearth (Kursite 2014). Thus, it becomes possible to connect the solution of the brown-grey-red-purple colour combination and the robust forms with the inevitable fate of the soldier's mission. The foreground-placed pole fence could be interpreted as a possible reference to the time when the soldier would return, characterized in folk songs as a point in time when the poles would blossom—in other words, never.

Extensive experiments with the spatial capabilities of the fibre material occurred in Latvian textile art during the 1970s, when classical tapestry weaving had been mastered (Lamberga 1981: 42). The first attempt in this field, titled *Meža māte* (*Mother of the Forest*) (1971), was created by Aija Baumane. The Mother of the Forest appears in Latvian mythical notions as a guardian of the forest. It is a mother of everyone inhabiting the woods, and she can live in a wooden cavity and be a tree herself (Šmits 1926). The hanging large-scale woven and twisted green-shaded fibre structure reminds of the deep forest thicket. A recognizable form of spruce branches affirms the dominance of the natural forces rising above the entrant in their superiority. Unlike the expected idea of the Mother of the Forest as an anthropomorphic figure, in contrast to the entities that are visualized, for instance, by Latvian writer Anna Brigadere (Brigadere 1943), this deity in Baumanes' version is revealed as a fragment extracted from the real forest, and raises associations that more likely recall archaic fears of getting lost in the forest and create a sense of humility in front of indisputably superior natural power.

Along with spatial compositions created in the 1970s, Baumane wove several tapestries dedicated to nature and folklore. In the tapestry *Maziņš biju, ganos gāju* (*When I was young, I herded sheep*) (1970), the author in the words of a folk song imparted her own experience as a shepherdess in the days of her childhood. The pasture was located in the grassy solitary woodland, and the existential experience of those early days is recognizable in vague images of the composition. This haunting world of intangible images also appears in the compositions *Līgo nakts* (*Midsummer Night*, 1971) and *Sapnis* (*The Dream*, 1972).

The theme of the Midsummer Night celebration appears in the tapestries of several authors, but never in the same sense as the depiction of this special moment in nature and human life in Baumanes' weaving. In this case, the typical attributes of bonfires and oak leaves, the figures dressed in traditional costumes, are missing, yet there is a clear idea of the substance of

this magical moment. It is obviously the night of the solstice, the transitional state of the sun, when the mythical forces are released and the fern blossoms. The fern's flower was protected, according to the faithful, by various forces associated with the world of the Hereafter: monsters, dragons, wizards, ghosts. (Kursīte 1999). In this context, the folklore depicted the fire as an antidote to the fight against evil forces, because, on the Midsummer Night, the witches and wizards were particularly forceful. For example, beliefs portray the witches, wrapped in white sheets and their hair freely flowing over their shoulders, are wandering around with a bucket for milk in hand, milking the cows of the neighbours, thereby conjuring the milk away from these cows to their own (Līdeks 1940). Thus, the perceptible movement in Baumanė's weaving between intangible forms of life and areas of real matter provides a convincing picture of the magical nature of solstice, paying attention to the mythical fulfilment of the moment rather than another decorative arrangement of traditional festive attributes.

Furthermore, in the tapestry *Sapnis* (1972), a vision filled with disembodied images is revealed in a fragment of the tree's trunk structure. The lurking ghostly faces, materializing from the rugged bark, disappearing and emerging from the surface, give the impression of the emotive experience of a dream or even nightmare, where the mythical dark forces appear as images of old stories and fairy tales pretending to exist in woven fibres. According to people's notions, the human soul leaves the body and travels around different worlds during sleep. A man in a dream sees the places where his soul travels. While her owner is sleeping, the soul wanders around in the form of a bird, a snake, a butterfly, a fly, a frog, a mouse, etc. (Kursīte 1999). In this context, the tapestry is considered as an attempt to interpret a dream not as an imaginary visualization of something wonderfully desirable, but as an uncontrolled world of the human mind, a concentration of unconscious notions, revealed in the form of dynamic creative chaos.

The 1980s was the time of detectable changes in the image system of Baumanė's artwork, but the folklore impressions still played an important role. A remarkable work of this period is a 1983 tapestry, *Bērņības zeme* (*The Land of Childhood*). Woven in classical tapestry weaving technique, the wall hanging represents a landscape in which a bird rises above the green hills. The bird's silhouette consumes the entire centre of the composition. Its shape is generalized and does not correspond to a realistic prototype. It is more like the mythical Firebird mentioned in Latvian fairy tale which with his song returns the gift of sight to the blind (Bauga 1974). Rays emitted from the bird intertwine the weaving surface and dissolve in the nuanced green shades of the land, reviling the non-trivial features of fiber expression. The land of childhood is undoubtedly a place of particular significance to the author and is confined to personal experience. In this context, a general reference has been made to the area in the rolling landscape with hills and gentle slopes of the Talsi district. Thus, the mythical bird that rises above the fields could be explained as the materialized indication of the past. The folklore and personal memory stories interweaving create a no longer existing, and therefore a miraculous fragment of the past.

In 1988, Baumanė once again turned her attention to the visualization of the Midsummer celebration theme in the tapestry *Rūtoja Saule* (*The Sun sang*). This time, the composition

has been created figuratively, focusing on emphasizing the central attributes of the traditional celebration of the summer solstice. The centre of the tapestry shows a couple dressed in traditional costumes with wreaths of oak leaves. Their slightly curved figures give the impression of rhythmic swing affected by the song. “Līgo” as a part of summer solstice songs is commonly known throughout Latvia, but in Latgale, there is also a variation of “rūto” or “rūtoj” (Šterna 1998: 130). Particular weaving established a tangible link to tradition through woven checkered folk art patterns and connection with the ideological parallel of the folk song refrain “rūtoja”, which also could be understood as activities associated with decorating.

Besides the folklore-inspired motifs, Baumanes’ artworks contain specific place-based symbols attributed to mythical thinking. Particularly notable in this respect is a forest lake in vicinity of Baumanes’ family property and associated with mythical stories. This lake belongs to the so-called lakes of the abyss or bottomless lakes. Several of them are situated in Latvia. Such a lake has a bad reputation, coming from the stories that the devil himself was pulling the swimmers in. The name of the small lake is Diemests, which in Latvian language means “dropped by God”. These lakes are linked to ancient knowledge (Vīks 2001). The image of Diemests alongside the central, dominant image of the river is depicted on several Baumanes’ weavings. The field notes and were applied, investigating Baumanes’ family property to clarify the nature of the place where Baumanes grew up and retained a connection to throughout her life. In all probability, the place characterized by absolute solitude and untouched nature, its rural environment, and lifestyle affected the poetic perception of the world similar to that reflected in folklore, the mythical way of thinking which underlies the entire creative output of Baumanes.

## Annual customs and celestial bodies. Inga Skujiņa

In the period from 1960s to 1980s, among the themes represented in textile art is a considerable amount of artwork dedicated to the observation of natural phenomena and the attitude toward the place. In terms of depicting seasonal changes, Latvian textile art headed by Rūdolfs Heimrāts was a particularly perceptive successor of the textiles of ancient folk art. Similarly to the ancient times, when the seasonal colours, images of the floral world, stars, and surroundings became the inspiration of the weaved blankets (Alsupe 1982), the rhythms of nature and the mythical processes of the universe became important narratives reflected by the numerous contemporary tapestries (Kalniete 1989). In addition to the works inspired by an observation of seasonal changes, the representations of the traditional annual customs occupied an important place in the artists’ imagery. In the mythical sense of the world, natural rhythm and annual customs as the most important milestones, are reflected in the calendar, where celebrations essentially mean creating a new time-space. The celebration is associated with time or a part of its formation because the cultural space, just like its time, does not arise naturally but must be created by a special effort (Rubenis 2018).

The traditional annual customs, dedicated to the turning points of the solar year—summer and winter solstices—are the most often rendered representations in the weavings. In terms of numbers, the most widely represented are the celebrations of summer solstice *Jāņi* or Midsummer Night. The summer solstice celebration is most frequently depicted as figurative compositions illustrating the subject matter reflected in folk songs (Heimrāts *Līgo (Midsummer Eve Celebration)* 1977, Postaža *Jāņu nakts (The Night of Jāņi)*, 1982), Pigozne *Jāņu rītā (Morning of Jāņi)*, 1985), Rozenbergs *Zāļu vakars (The Grass Eve)*, 1986), Baumann *Rūtoja saule (The Pattern of the Sun)*. The works devoted to the theme of winter solstice similarly represent ritual activities of this time (Postaža *Ķekatas (Mummary)*, 1983), Eltermane *Ķekatas manās bērnu dienās Mummary in My Childhood*, 1982), Žūriņa *Ziemas mēneši (Winter Months)*, 1980).

In these depictions of the cyclical rhythms of nature in connection with human life, a notable example is the oeuvre of textile artist Inga Skujiņa (1952). From 1977 to the last works of the 1990s, the thematic line remained unaltered. The dominant theme of all weavings by Skujiņa is rural nature, folklore heritage, and annual traditions interwoven in a personal view of contemporary cultural space. The images revealed in the tapestries are peculiarly dual. They could equally refer to the imagery of antiquity and the perceptions caused by contemporary events, like how a folk song comes alive when it is linked to a particular human voice, sound, and the place. A particular artwork also features the remarkable interpretation of tradition inherent in artwork by Skujiņa, characterized by placing an ancient passage in the scenery of contemporary environments, thereby allowing to perceive the folklore-based narrative closely to natural feelings and similarities.

The tapestry by Skujiņa—*Gaismas vārti (Gate of Light)*, 1981—is notable as one of her fundamental works based on national cultural values. The key figure of composition is Latvian folk song collector Krišjānis Barons also known as Father of Dainas (*Dainu tēvs, dainas*—Latvian folk songs). The wreath of the oak leaves, the bonfire flame placed in the centre and surrounded by dark background, clearly indicates the event's substance. This tapestry could be easily interpreted as a dedication to the outstanding achievements of Krišjānis Barons. However, despite the accentuated central position of the Barons' figure and symbolical rendering of his image, idealization or targeted ideological weight is not perceptible. The merry-makers located in the shaded second plan of the composition is depicted intimately singing the songs, thinking, and conversing. The figure of Krišjānis Barons in the foreground is marked just as a natural underlying reference of the shared world view based on the retained tradition and folklore.

The gates and doors, in general, are symbols of the borderline, threshold, and appear the folklore of many nations as a division between two worlds, particularly in the songs pertaining to family customs, in the songs of marriage and wedding, as a partition between the life in father's home and the society, in the funeral songs as a dividing line between the secular world and the realm of the dead (Mežale 1992). These parallel worlds are detectable in *Gaismas vārti*, simultaneously distant and unreachable, while at the same time approachable and alive. The contemporary environment and portrait images of the weaving (self-portrait of the author, portraits of Juris Zihmanis, Zigmunds Skujiņš, Imants Ziedonis) and the prevailing manifestation of

natural processes tied up in a single wholeness reveals the freedom of creative spirit, which is Skujiņa's creative signature. The naturally captured vision of Ligo eve, with the actual time references, such as the incorporated portrait of Imants Ziedonis on the television screen, suggests that the depicted events form an integral part of human life, where a successive relationship with folk traditions appears as an intuitive desire to follow and safeguard the once-established forms of culture rather than adherence to certain rules and authentic attributes.

A special place in the imagery system of Inga Skujiņa is dedicated to celestial bodies and the mythological understanding of the universe. In her imagery, the insignificant scene of human life inserted into the endless universe of the night sky transforms into the premature movement of existence. The sun, the moon, and the entire cosmic world create the basic structure of Skujiņa's artwork. The sun, the moon, and the stars were assigned a vital role in antiquity, and human life was organized following them (Rubenis 2018). In Latvian mythology, the expression of the celestial cult pertains to most of the ethnographic material, particularly ornaments, as well as the system of annual customs, whose ritual cyclicity has been formed in close connection with the passage of the sun in the sky and the dependency of land life on it (Kokare 1999). All the nations have their own mythology of celestial bodies, constellations, and cosmic phenomena, and special attention has been designated to the moon. The moon is a spectre that grows, shrinks, and disappears. Real time was always measured through the phases of the moon and this celestial body was considered to be alive (Rubenis 2018). With the help of myths and symbols associated with the moon, a man comes into a mysterious relationship with time, birth, death and resurrection, fertility, the world of the plants, and the rest of the space of the universe (Eliade 1999).

Skujiņa's tapestry *Dzīvā daba ar mēnessnīcu* (*Nature vivre with moonlight*, 1977) reveals a natural destruction and rebirth of time reality, where the words of the folk song can equally succeed in fulfilling the content of the vision, as a thematic frame or as a patterned theme of a decorative accentuation. In the semidarkness of the summer night, under the tranquil light of the moon, evenly arranged, the naturally vivid structure of bodies is placed in front of the viewer. The flickering figures of nude women in the moonlight, who indulge in the cooling glow of summer water, fill the dark-shaded weaving area with the visible warmth of their golden skin. The ancient bathing ritual, the proximity of wildlife symbolized by the passing figure of the elk, and the presence of infinity of the cosmic space refer to folk songs, which, placed around the entire composition in a distinctive frame, interweave the details of the artwork into a complete whole. The folk songs included in the tapestry as a textual frame complement the perception of symbolic meaning. For instance, the reed in folk songs appear as a universal place of pre-birth or rebirth. The reed takes shelter like the sun, its mythical animals, birds, and a man born of the reed. The reed bridge is the interface area that separates and simultaneously connects the sky and the earth realms (Kursīte 1999). White colour in Latvian folklore (later—also in literature) is a sign of morality, chastity, special closeness, sweetness (Kursīte 1996). Rose appears in folk songs as an image of life force, a symbol of fertility. A red rose symbolizes love and fertility, including feminine beauty (Kursīte 2018). Thereby, the symbolic fulfilment, coupled with the corresponding image, introduces a different perception to the composition content, where the presence of the ordinary bathing (Skujiņa 2020) transforms into a ritual action filled with mythical meaning.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several textile artists turned to the theme of swimming and bathing. Sarma Eglīte *Pirts* (*The Bath*, 1970), *Pēc darba* (*After Work*, 1981), Egils Rozenbergs *Peldētājas* (*The Swimmers*, 1978) and Rūdolfs Heimrāts *Sestdienas vakars* (*Saturday Night*, 1980). More likely, the soft, nuanced poetry saturating the tapestry by Heimrāts could be interpreted as an act adopted from a folk song. Still, compared to the mythic subtext-filled, alive and pulsating weaving of Skujiņa, it is more perceptible as a lyrical visualization of a commonplace event.

The cosmic space, natural processes, and human life in Skujiņa's artwork are closely intertwined with the calendar rhythms. The distant flow of seasons and traditional celebrations becomes an important initiative and fulfilment of the expression. In the textile arts of the 1960s to the 1980s, the depiction of seasons invariably remains within the range of topics (Kalniete 1989). In textile art, colour sources observed in nature can be represented almost directly in the fibre material because the base is not distinguishable from the colour material. The dyed yarn is the form and the colour at the same time (Wells 2018). Topics affected by natural seasonal changes can be found in the artwork of all Heimrāts students. Inga Skujiņa is not an exception here. However, the artist's seasonal tapestry cycle (1983) has not been formed as a set of scenes solely based on the landscape observation. The seasons in the interpretation of Skujiņa have obtained the gender expression specific for the Latvian language, where autumn, spring, summer, and winter are depicted as four allegories, thus approaching the worldview of folk songs. Winter and Summer, in this case, are depicted as anthropomorphic images, where Winter puts on her shoes, while a good Summer has fattened a foal (Kursite 2018). In turn, Autumn and Spring have been identified as male opposites of these female images, creating a fully balanced model of natural creative forces.

In 1984, Skujiņa finished one of the four intended works of the traditional annual customs cycle. A monumental, large-format wall hanging *Laimis liešana* (*Casting of fortunes*) is devoted to the closing stage of a calendar year which was traditionally associated with future divination rituals. On Christmas Eve, also in anticipation of the New Year, until midnight people tried to predict the destiny in a broader sense, endowing this process with a certain drama: how long has a person left to live?; will the next year bring prosperity and faith or misery? (Olupe 1992:29). The overall image of the tapestry is composed as a fabled but simultaneously a familiar scene, where each element refers to what was once seen, felt, pictured, written in literature, and alluded to in folk songs. The warm shades of colour used in human figures combined with the surrounding fields of winter stillness mottled by stars in the blue night sky reliably reconstruct a landscape reminiscent of an ancient ritual. The dynamism of figures arranged throughout the tapestry surface involves New Year's mystery and fascinates the viewer with a sense of possible happiness to be found in divination. The interflow of folklore-based images with contemporary forms links the historical notions and the reality, where by only slightly changing the characteristics of images, for instance, by introducing elements of a folk dress in women's clothing, a reference to the nation's past is created, elevating the idea of the event to the understanding familiar to the viewer. Regarding folklore interpretation, Skujiņa's tapestry demonstrates the modern approach to the adopted archaic settlement, where placing the scene within the existing environmental conditions makes it possible to perceive the image with an intuitive sense of belonging.

In the 1980s, textile artists' interest in reflecting folklore-related themes increased due to the significant event—the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Krišjānis Barons (Kalniete 1989). This remarkable period appeared in textile art in numerous visualizations of scenes obtained from folklore, annual customs, and abstractions based on ethnographic heritage research. Textile art had already proved its ability to express itself in imaginative language thanks to the fully mastered tapestry or woven painting technique. Ethnic style as a folk art continuity and textile art affiliation with the field of applied art, where primarily technical qualities were considered brought to life the inner anticipation of the national idea. In this context, textile art eventually became a significant part of national non-violent resistance, strengthening the national consciousness in an intimate spiritual manner through medium-specific visualizations of local landscapes, folklore motifs, and traditional colour selection.

When looking at the situation in neighbouring republics and the Soviet Union as a whole, the links with folklore and traditional crafts were typical for the representatives of all textile schools. Similar to the Latvian situation, mastering of the tapestry weaving method yielded an opportunity to render various realistic images in textile. However, significant differences are detectable in the interpretation of the subject matter and the application of the possibilities offered by woven painting. For instance, Russia saw a different situation in interpreting the subject matter in textile art. It followed the idea proclaimed by socialist realism to portray reality in its revolutionary development (Groys 1992). Russian authors focused on proposed themes such as glorifying construction of the future, worker's life, a friendship of nations with additional involvement of ideological attribution. In this respect, Latvian textile art development led by Professor Rūdolfs Heimrāts, contained no significant deviations in the direction of reintroducing the Soviet attributes. Textile art alongside fine art proves that the referable development processes in the Soviet Union were not homogeneous, and their alignment with the general trend is not acceptable. The Latvian School of Textile Arts was formed as a structure based on the inherited textile culture and national traditions, which never lost an association with its national identity and recognizable disposition. National affiliation was clearly exposed in the specific use of colours and ethnographic patterns, folklore motifs and various interpretations of local landscape. To summarize, if the mythical presence is the bridge that helps an individual or a larger human collective (the nation, the country, etc.) to cross the abyss of the crisis and see the possibility of a revival (Kursīte 1999), Latvian textile art during the late socialism period existed as a mainstay of this noetic bridge.

## Conclusions

The flourishing of Latvian textile art refers to the historical period acknowledged as late socialism. The official doctrine did not permit unlimited experiments with the medium or free thematic choices in art. The confined conditions restricting the circulation of information and the available material base affected the development artistic, creative thinking. However, in textile art, from the perspective of local cultural heritage research, this situation

proved to be more conducive than a subversive role, since the interest in local nature, folk art, and ancient knowledge became the basis of disengaged artistic expression. Furthermore, the dominance of available natural fibre materials in conjunction with the artist's handwork, similar to the traditional craft skills used in antiquity, created fertile ground for the extensive exploration of portraying the spiritual world of folklore. The crucial factor for the thematic orientation of the field consisted of the creative interests and aesthetic ideals of Rūdolfs Heimrāts, the undisputable leader of Latvian textile art, the author of the curriculum of the Department of Textile Art of the Art Academy of Latvia. His rendering of woven paintings or tapestry in Latvian textile art supported the introduction of a narrative image in textile artwork. The pictorial features of the tapestry weaving opened up the possibility to develop realistic imagery in the textile medium.

It is possible to interpret woven textiles executed in tapestry technique according to the methodology used in the fine arts. The applied formal, descriptive, and iconographic analysis of folklore-based textile works detects the clusters of artworks representing processes related to weaving and processing of fibres, tapestries visualizing topics influenced by folk songs, fairy tales and notions of mythical worlds, as well as weavings dedicated to annual customs, seasonal cycles, and associated rituals. In this context, the special treatment of material like the dyed yarn, contributes to the iconographic content of the textile image, further supplementing the symbolic meaning determined by the choice of colour. The individual artists gathered in the study as representatives of Heimrāts School reveal the development of various folklore-based textile images reinforced by natural, traditionally used fibres, knowledge of folk art heritage and artist's handweaving. In this respect, an illustrative example is provided by reviewing the creative thinking of textile artist Aija Baumanė and her artwork in which belongs to the period from the 1970s to the 1980s. The confluence of personally significant folklore-related theme and the experience of rural lifestyle in ancestral farmstead forms the basis of imagery in numerous Baumanė's weavings. Beginning with the literal depiction of fairy tale characters supported by woven picture technique, folklore-inspired images gradually merged with the natural environment of their local origin, constantly transforming into abstract signs of visual language. Another considerable example is the oeuvre of textile artist Inga Skujina. The artist's naturally-formed relationship with the rural setting organically constitutes the insight into traditional annual customs and rituals. Mythical notions obtained from the world of folklore developed as a unifying supporting narrative in medium-specific imagery of tapestries. In these works, realistically treated images of handweaving in combination with traditionally used organic fibres and contemporary scenery reveals the inherited myth in a particularly comprehensible sense.

This research indicates the range of folklore themes that have ignited the creative interest of textile artists and calls for further study in this area, significantly enriching the scholarship of folklore depiction in Latvian art.



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# Mitoloģiskā matērija: folkloras tēlojumi Latvijas tekstilmākslas ainavā 20. gs. otrajā pusē

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**Atslēgvārdi:** gobelēns, senā tautas māksla, tautasdziesma, nacionālā māksla, tekstilija

20.gadsimta 60.–80. gados Latvijas tekstilmāksla piedzīvoja uzplaukuma periodu, kas bija saistīts ar politiskām izmaiņām, profesionālās izglītības reformu un jaunu tēlveides paņēmienu apgūšanu. Īpaša loma šī perioda tekstilmākslas attīstībā pieder Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas profesoram Rūdolffam Heimrātam, kura ieviestā izglītības metode, kā arī personīgie radošie mērķi ietekmēja kopējo nozares virzību vairākas sekojošās desmitgades. Attīstot tekstiliju par pilntiesīgu mākslas darbu, kurā iespējams vizualizēt māksliniecisko tēlu šizetiski vēstošā nozīmē, izveidojās īpašs laikmetīgajai tekstilmākslai raksturīgs tēmu loks. Tajā nemainīgi aktuālu vietu ieņēma folklorā un tautas mītiskajos priekšstatos balstīti tēlojumi.

Raksta mērķis ir sniegt ieskatu folkloras tematikas atklāsmē Latvijas tekstilmākslā ietverot periodu, kad par vienīgo radošo metodi mākslā tika noteikts sociālistiskais realisms. Pētījumā tiek skaidrots, kādi apstākļi ierosināja un veicināja folkloras tematikas izvērsumu tekstilijās, aprakstīta tēlu atveides tekstiliskā specifika, kā arī ir izveidots pārskats par raksturīgākajiem piemēriem, kuros konstatējama ne tikai nosaukumā minētā atsauce uz folkloras avotu, bet arī plašākā simboliskā nozīmē attiecināms vēstījums. Papildus atsevišķiem piemēriem tiek pētīts, kā interese par folkloru un tautas garīgo mantojumu kopumā ietekmējusi atsevišķu tekstilmākslinieku radošo darbu, īpaši izdalot Heimrāta skolas pārstāvju Aijas Baumanes un Ingas Skujiņas daiļradi. Pētījumā izmantotās metodes ir lietisko un rakstisko avotu analīze, biogrāfisko datu analīze, intervijas un etnogrāfiskā datu ieguves metode. Pētījumā ir secināts, ka folkloras tēma Latvijas profesionālajā tekstilmākslā atklājas īpašā, tekstilmateriāla īpašību ietekmētā veidā, kas ļauj izteikt māksliniecisko tēlu ne tikai tēlojoša satura veidā, bet arī materiālā kontekstā.