

Miss Riga and the Symphony in Stone.

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The whole central part of Riga is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, because it contains the finest concentration of Art Nouveau buildings in Europe. Riga is a real Art Nouveau Metropolis. About one third of the whole inventory of buildings there are Art Nouveau ones.

A number of Art Nouveau façades display sometimes lavish adornment. It is a background for the fact, that Art Nouveau in architecture is still regarded as a change in the decorative finish of buildings replacing the previously practised forms of Eclecticism by new ornamentation that had already been developed in other visual arts of the time.

However, ornaments do not define the essence of Art Nouveau. The style's architectural starting point was functionally convenient layout of spaces and use of appropriate building materials and structural elements which dictated the building's overall dimensions and artistic image. The essence of Art Nouveau lies in its creative methodology – how to make the useful beautiful. Art Nouveau thus can be seen as the cradle of contemporary system of architectural styles.

Art Nouveau was conceptually anti-historicist. It refused classical vocabulary of architectural orders or any historical form. At the same time, due to the historical continuity, Art Nouveau inherited from the Eclecticism its overall saturated finish of both façades and interiors of buildings. Especially at the early stage of the development of the style, rich decoration still remained as an aesthetic ideal. It was seen also as an instrument for providing beauty for everybody and everywhere, what was closely linked with the popular idea of “Total Art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*).

The most wide-spread use of decoration of the façades of Art Nouveau buildings is reliefs on spandrels, which integrate pieces of fine art into the basic architectural form of buildings. Sometimes reliefs depict scenes of work-related or mythological themes. Paradigmatic decorations are extravagant tensile lines, stylised exotic floral motifs, masks of smiling or menacing faces, reliefs of peacocks, swans, reptiles, dogs, cats, wolves, bears and dragons, and other fantastic creatures or – austere geometric patterns. Female motifs are among most extensively used. Decorations reflect the pictorial spirit of the style, imagery, euphoria of fertility, pathos, melancholia, tension of the times, a distinct narcissism, disposition to everything exotic etc.

A special spirit of glorifying beauty is embodied in various female masks, reliefs or sculptures. They can be found on the facades of about 20% of all Art Nouveau buildings in Riga, among them on nearly all buildings constructed between 1900 and 1905. Such rather expensive finish was not a caprice of the owners or a fancy of architects but obviously the wide public demand for beautiful environment. The first Art Nouveau buildings in Riga were constructed as early as 1899 (FIG.).



Apartment building Audēju iela 7. 1899. Alfred Aschenkampff

The powerful impetus for the development of the style was the city's 700th anniversary exhibition in 1901. Art Nouveau language dominated not only in the architecture of numerous pavilions, but also in the exposition stands and exhibited articles. Everything manufactured in Riga – products of textile, electro-technical, mechanical, glass, furniture, building materials, food and other fields of industry – was among the exhibits.

Construction activities of the early 20th century sprung up to a real building boom in the last four – five years before World War I. Among architects, which were active in Riga, several had extraordinary wide practice. More than 250 multi-storey buildings were constructed according to the projects by Konstantīns Pēkšēns. Karl Johann Felsko was architect of about 120, Jānis Alksnis – 130, Eižens Laube – 90, Aleksandrs Vanags – 70, Oskars Bārs – 90, Edmund von Trompowsky – 100, Ernests Pole – 40 and Paul Mandelstamm – more than 50 buildings. Architects were responsible also for decorative finish of the façades, but in many cases executed sculptural elements differ from those in the project elevation drawings. Most often, exact attribution of reliefs and sculptures embellishing façades is still not known. Only few facts are fixed of can be clarified indirectly from publications in periodicals of that time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were at least four firms in Riga producing sculptural decorations for buildings: “August Volz”, “Lotze & Stoll”, “Otto & Wassil” and “Ferdinand Vlassak”. Eduards Kūraus, one of the owners of popular decorative painters' firm “Kurau und Passil”, opened also stonecutting works in 1911. The biggest was the August Volz's company employing about 130 stonecutters.

“Otto & Wassil” (sculptors Sigismund Otto and Oswald Wassil) sculpted decorative finish for the buildings at Smilšu iela 8) and Ģertrūdes iela 10/12 (both 1902, architects Heinrich Scheel and Friedrich Scheffel; **FIG.**).



Ģertrūdes iela 10/12. 1902



Smilšu iela 8. 1902

These are samples of eclectically decorated Art Nouveau with extraordinary lavishly adorned façades peculiar for early stage of the style. A number of decorative details glorify female beauty. These are masks interwoven with leaves, snakes and flowers, as well as women's statues crowning balconies. The impressive interior finish of the lobby at Smilšu iela 8, sculpted by M. Lotze from “Lotze & Stoll”, with its expressive female figures as well as floral embellishments and reliefs form a masterpiece of ornamental art. The analogous figural female reliefs are in the lobby of the building at Brīvības iela 110, constructed in 1902 according to a project by architect Jānis Alksnis.

“Lotze & Stoll” created sculptural finish also for the façade of the apartment house at Tallinas iela 23 (1901, architects Konstantīns Pēkšēns and Eižens Laube). This narrow

façade having only three windows on upper floors is a brilliant piece of early Art Nouveau. Principle of the composition based on contrasting colours as well as varying surface textures was utilised applying different materials – red brick, light and smooth or alternatively dark and rustified plaster, metal and dark grey natural slate. In the central part of the façade is a bay window, while the top floor has been built into the mansard roof. Several decorative reliefs and sculptures are included in the masterfully balanced play of architectural volumes and surfaces. The entrance of the building resembles a fantastic monster's mouth with gigantic tusks supporting the bay window. Birds strut among stylised flowers in the relief on the bay window, but, higher up, on the gable, there is a relief of leafage with a bird cage. Fabulous reptiles laze in the sun on the parapets of the balcony crowning the bay window. Sculpted heads, which may be portraits of Eižens Laube, adorn the ends of the cornices. All the sculpted ornamentation was created by the sculptors firm *Lotze and Stoll*. Originally the plastered surfaces of the façade were in a light green tonality, but metal elements – in a dark green colour. At the time green was viewed as a very fashionable colour. In the 1930s, Eižens Laube had considered this building the mistake of his youth.

To some extent similar decorative and at the same time highly tectonic and logically structured architectural finish of the façade has the building at Smilšu iela 2 (1901, architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns). Mouldings around the windows of the second and third floor at the first look seem similar, but actually each of them is of different ornamental outline. Peacocks, flowers, plants, masks, wolf's heads, squirrels, owls and other sculpted beings adorn the bay window. The woman's herm under the bay window (**FIG.**) once was acknowledged as Miss Riga among the city's stone ladies.



Smilšu iela 2. 1901



Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 20. 1907

One of the sculptural women on the façade at Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 20 (1907, architect Herman Hartmann; **FIG.**) might be considered as Vice-Miss of Riga. This sculpture supposedly is made by August Voltz (1851–1926). Some formal peculiarities indicate his artistic manner. Moreover, the workshop of the sculptor was located directly on the opposite side of the street.

The highlight of decorativeness of Art Nouveau in Riga is Alberta iela. A row of five apartment houses (at Alberta iela 2, 2a, 4, 6, and 8; FIG.) constructed in 1903–1906 according to the projects by civil engineer Mikhail Eisenstein is like a lavish exhibition of all possible means of visual expression of the style, using patterns that were well-known throughout Europe. The same regards to several more Eisenstein's creations – buildings at Strēlnieku iela 4a (1905), Alberta iela 13 (1904), Elizabetes iela 33 (1901), 10a and 10b (both 1903), and Brīvības iela 99 (1905; FIG.). Women's statues and masks prevail among different exaggerated decorations on the façades of all these buildings.



Alberta iela 2. 1906



Brīvības iela 99. 1905

From a distance, most of them do not differ much from the very detailed and saturated compositions of 19th century Eclecticism, but they literally dazzle with richness of ornamentation, wherein traditional historical elements are interwoven with various combinations of Art Nouveau motifs.

At Alberta iela 13, both central bay windows above the cornice are crowned by multi-level gables lavishly adorned with sculpted reliefs and masks bearing a variety of facial expressions. The decorations include dragons, cartouches, straight and curving lines, circles and various geometric figures. The central mask wearing a shining diadem represents freedom, the sun and victory. The sinuous lines and the arrangement of shapes in the corners of the composition are reminiscent of the lines of carriage springs. With them Mikhail Eisenstein seemingly intended to remind of his primary professional status as head of the Department of Traffic Roots of the Vidzeme Provincial Government. Ornamental motifs in the form of springs appear also on the facades of the neighbouring building at Strēlnieku iela 4a and at Elizabetes iela 10a, both designed by Mikhail Eisenstein in 1903.

The façade decoration also makes much use of the widely popular Art Nouveau female form. It can be seen in both a full-figure presentations above the cornice of the attic, in various large and small masks, in busts above the main cornice and in the glorified pathos of the inspirational reliefs that crown its corner piece, as well as in the winged herm figures above the portal on Alberta iela. Several of the faces of the fairer sex are dreamily pensive, others are laughing saucily while others yet clutch their heads in horror.

Mouths of two huge masks in the façade on Alberta iela are also half-opened in a scream. Above them raise upside-down cone-shaped projections supporting the bay windows of the attic floor. They dominate among all decorative features of the entire

façade. Relief on the right side depicts a man with the hooves of a horse, symbolizing the devil or hell. (The religiously-themed reliefs on mediaeval houses of worship always depicted Hell on the right side because Jesus Christ sat in the middle and pointed to hell with his left hand). The image of the devil and the woman-shepherdess portrayed in the left-hand relief is associated with the legend of Pan and Syrinx.

A variety of motifs are woven into almost each one of the countless decorative elements. There is Art Nouveau's symbol of splendour – a peacock with his tail fanned out, as well as the heads of knights guarding a woman's beauty, and symbols of caution and betrayal – serpentine snakes appropriately depicted in the sinuous twisting lines of a floral or geometric shapes and a whole series of diverse adornments. The metal railings of the balconies follow a typical Art Nouveau pattern of lines.

All this wealth, comparable to a veritable sculpture museum, was long neglected and in critical condition but with the essential authentic features still intact. During the Soviet period this building housed a military establishment. In 1998 it was purchased by the Soross Foundation, and given as an endowment to the Riga Graduate School of Law. The building was renovated from 1999 to 2002 to suit the school's needs. The facade was carefully restored, as were all the priceless luxurious interior finishes. The newly constructed courtyard area now forms a common functional space for both the institutes currently housed in the building, that is, the Graduate School of Law and the School of Economics. There are also several offices in the building including the Corruption Prevention and Combating Bureau.

Female faces of somehow dreadful expression surmount the bizarre and abundantly decorated façade of the apartment house at Elizabetes iela 10b. Some critics of the period had mentioned that façade of the building create an impression of an unfair exhibition.¹

A whole series of Art Nouveau buildings in Riga boast impressive compositions of smiling, laughing or crying women's masks. In 1900, such buildings were constructed at Tirgoņu iela 4 (architects Heinrich Scheel and Friedrich Scheffel) and Brīvības iela 55 (architect Wilhelm Neumann), in 1901 – at Baznīcas iela 4a (Konstantīns Pēkšēns) and Blaumaņa iela 11/13 (Alexander Schmaeling)², in 1902 – at Brīvības iela 110 (Jānis Alksnis), Strēlnieku iela 6 (Pēkšēns and Aleksandrs Vanags), Šķūņu iela 10/12 (Scheel and Scheffel), Nometņu iela 43 (supposedly also Scheel and Scheffel), as well as above mentioned buildings at Smilšu iela 2 and 8, and Ģertrūdes iela 10/12, in 1903 – at Blaumaņa iela 28 (Karl Felsko), Brīvības iela 141 (Paul Mandelstamm), Elizabetes iela 23 (Hermann Hilbig), Jauniela 25/29 (Wilhelm Bockslaff), Rūpniecības iela 1 and Vīlandes iela 2 (both by Rudolf Heinrich Zirkwitz), in 1904 – at Brīvības iela 105 (August Witte), Krišjāņa Barona iela 13/15 and Eduarda Smiļģa iela 10 (both by Alksnis), in 1905 – at Baznīcas iela 26 (Wilhelm Hofmann) and Matīsa iela 43 (Alksnis). J. Alksnis repeated the composition of a beautiful mask encircled by a ring in buildings at Krišjāņa Barona iela 81, Blaumaņa iela 8, Stabu iela 77 (all 1903), Artilērijas iela 2/4 and Bruņinieku iela 82 (both 1904).

Façades of many buildings are decorated also by women's reliefs or sculptures that symbolise beauty, cheerfulness, vitality, victory, pathos, triumph etc. Examples can be found at Vīlandes iela 1 (1898) and 11 (1899, both by Zirkwitz), Teātra iela 4 (1903, Scheel and Scheffel), Matīsa iela 40/42 (1907, Alksnis), Brīvības iela 172, Vīlandes iela 16 (both 1910, by Pēkšēns) and Smilšu iela 1/3 (1906, Nikolai Proskurnjin). Somewhere masks of figures are interwoven with allegorical shapes of various jobs, professions, arts,

¹ Berkholz A. Moderne rigasche Neubauten // Rigascher Almanach. – 1903. – S. 138. (New Modern Buildings in Riga; in German)

² Ornaments below four masks crowning the façade symbolise architecture, civil engineering, painting and sculpture.

festivities or gaieties. A witch on a broomstick adorns the façade at Lāčplēša iela 100 (1910, Nikolaj Yakovlev).

Widespread motif is a composition with two figures flanking a cartouche, coat of arms or other heraldic attributes. Always one of the figures, sometimes also both, is women. These compositions mainly depict themes of labour, art or family. Characteristic examples are at Lāčplēša iela 18 (1906; FIG.), Matīsa iela 40/42 and 44 (both 1907), Brīvības iela 129 (1910, all by Alksnis), Brīvības iela 72 (1909, Max von Osmidoff), Kaļķu iela 22 (1912–1913, Paul Mandelstamm) and Doma laukums 8 (1913, Paul Mandelstamm, sculptor A. Volz). One of the most elegant and characteristic sculptures by August Voltz flanks the entrance portal of the building of Farmers' Mutual Assistance Society of the Vidzeme Province (1911, Edgar Friesendorff).³



Lāčplēša iela 18. 1906

Exaggerated decorations generally are not characteristic feature of Riga's Art Nouveau. Rational trends, such as "Perpendicular Art Nouveau", prevail. Nevertheless, even quite restrained buildings usually are rich enough in their decorative finish, which with the development of the style became more and more integrated into the basic architectural form. Latvian art critic Jūlijs Madernieks wrote: "If ornament has to fulfil its function, it is, to evoke a sense of beauty; it must evolve organically and grow out from architectural forms. With a view to achieve complete seclusion and integrity, it has to be closely linked with its bearer – the architecture."⁴ Similar ideas are reflected in a number of publications of other Latvian architects and critics of the time.

One of the most peculiar trends of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture is National Romanticism, an attempt of Latvian architects to establish a national style based on local building traditions. It was not a parochial reproduction of vernacular patterns but rather a highly imaginative approach linked with the interpretation of ethnographical and folk art elements. Architect Eižens Laube, one of the promoters of Latvian National Romanticism, wrote in this respect: "Having collections of our antiquities, we, the Latvians, have the chance to explore the spirit of our ancestors, and the deeper we go into it, the stronger the old spirit will reborn within us and in a renewed way most powerfully take over each of us and our entire life and our deeds. Then also our buildings will display truly independent and Latvian character."⁵

³ Today the building houses the Ministry of Education and Science for the Republic of Latvia.

⁴ Madernieks J. Rīgas jaunieceltie nami un viņu arhitektūra // Dzimtenes Vēstnesis. – 1909. – 31. augusts. (New-built Houses in Riga and their Architecture; in Latvian)

⁵ Laube E. Par būvniecības stilu // Zalktis. – 1908. – Nr. 4. – 147. lpp. (About the Style of Architecture; in Latvian)

One of the main tools of implementation of the idea was the use of natural materials, avoiding any kind of imitation. The material and its decorative effect were blended into one. Ethnographical ornaments were popular motif of decoration in National Romantic buildings. Architect Aleksandrs Vanags used them more naturally, whilst Laube mostly transformed them according to his own individual taste. Human masks, floral motifs or other “living” patterns of Art Nouveau were hardly ever used. Nevertheless, Laube left two rectangular surfaces of the ground floor façade of the building at Brīvības iela 62 (1908) unplastered and let bricklayers carve reliefs of women directly in the brick surface. One of the women is holding a house in her hands, whilst the other one carries a female sculpture and a stone-cutter chisel (FIG.). Symbolism is unambiguous: architecture and sculpture, the latter being a field of visual arts closely linked with architecture.



Brīvības iela 62. 1908

Marvellous piece of Art Nouveau decoration is a colourful tableau titled *Spēks* (“Strength”), which adorns the tall triangular gable of the building of the Riga Latvian Society (1909, Eizēns Laube and Ernests Pole; FIG.). Similar murals made in mixed fresco and mosaic techniques – *Saules sveiciens* (“Greetings from the Sun”) and *Pie avota* (“By the spring”) – crown the bay windows of the building. They all depict allegorical figures from ancient legends. Another four thematic tableaux – “The Arts”, “Knowledge”, “Agriculture” and “Industry” – embellish the sides of the bay windows. All these works of art were designed and executed by outstanding Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls.



Merķeļa iela 13. 1909

Art Nouveau buildings are like music stiffened in a stone where every detail is subordinated to the basic idea. Ornamental reliefs, sculptural details, murals and other decorations are exploited in Art Nouveau on the quality of synthesis of art, making each building as a piece of "Total Art". They are creations enjoyable for anyone who wishes to perceive and is capable to appreciate beauty. The whole central area of the city centre of Riga is a World Heritage site due to the Art Nouveau buildings forming a harmonious symphony in stone.