

Our Own Estonian Art History: Changing Geographies of Art-Historical Narrative

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The geography of art serves as the basis for delineating art-historical material and for constructing the narrative accordingly. This article poses a question about the content and character of 'the geographies of Estonian art history' – i.e. the geographical image in art-historical discourse and the so-called truth-value, or its correspondence to visual material, on which such argument rests. In what follows, the Baltic German, the Baltic-Nordic, the Estonian and the Soviet versions of art-geographical comparative method are under examination. All these models of art-historical inquiry were defined by their emphasis on aesthetic judgement, which, as closer inspection reveals, was overshadowed by the ideological agenda of a particular period. Thus, the past narratives of Estonian history of art should be subjected to critical reinterpretation. Given the new approaches to art historiography that are being practised today, whereby issues of art's aesthetic value are historicised and the focus is on the investigation of the historically specific mechanisms and processes that generate meaning in art and culture, it no longer seems adequate to rely on art-geographical method alone.

From the point of view of art-historical research and writing, the date and location of an artwork seem rather dull facts. However, we become more ambivalent about such details as soon as we abandon the inventory level, if not before. Knowing the date and location of execution, we may immediately begin to imagine how a particular artwork looks, even without having seen it. Of course, by 'we', I mean art historians, although this might also apply to other persons well versed in historical artworks and art history texts. Such a revelation occurs because we know about the process of art history and have an idea of its network of historical-geographical relations. Art-historical knowledge enables one to enter into and engage with a fascinating field of research, eventually generating a narrative that, as a rule, ties in with a stylistic-geographical

construction in one's head.¹ Without being fully aware of it, I have myself experienced the shackling effect that this can have. For example, as a researcher of early modern architecture and art in Estonia, I have continued to proceed, in searching for comparative material and in drawing my conclusions, within parameters defined by a geographical region and fixed long ago by earlier researchers: i.e. the Baltic Sea region, and especially the northern territories of the Holy Roman Empire. However, with thorough work, research can overturn the traditional art-geographical definitions; a good example of this is Epi Tohvri's doctoral thesis, which she recently defended. Instead of the usual intellectual and geographical context of the German Enlightenment era, Tohvri places neo-classicism in Tartu within the much wider historical-geographical context of continental Europe and the British Isles.²

The geography of art can be understood in two ways. Firstly, as a description of art or artistic developments that indicates and utilises geographical determinants such as country/state, town, region, mainland, etc. For example, art-geographical descriptions are presented in Pliny the Elder's history, in later treatments of art by Giorgio Vasari or Karel van Mander, and so on into the twentieth century. Secondly, the geography of art may be understood as a research method in art history that was generated and theorised during the early twentieth century.³ It is clear, however, that the geography of art existed as a basis for presenting art-historical material long before it was provided with theoretical foundations and adopted as a method of research.

In this light, I would like to pose the following question: what kinds of geographies have been present in Estonian art-historical narratives? While demonstrating the existence of several such geographies, I will also analyse the reasons behind their emergence and subsequent changes – after all, the actual geographical location of the area called Estonia has not itself changed. Naturally, I am also interested in the arguments that have been used to support the various geographies, and in their so-called truth-value, or the correspondence between an argument and the visual material on which such argument rests. Finally, I would like to consider the concept of the 'geography of art' in general and inquire about its prospects for producing further art-historical research.

This paper does not rely on a very extensive or detailed historiographical study and, especially in dealing with the period up to 1918, I owe a great deal of gratitude to Jutta Keevallik, Rein Loodus and Lehti Viiraja who have produced a remarkable three-volume collection of selected texts on Estonian art and architecture.⁴ Based on that selection and some additional material, this article is a first, tentative attempt to analyse art-geographical constructions in Estonian art-historical narratives.

1 In 1940, Erwin Panofsky described the situation as analogous to an 'organic situation'. See E. Panofsky, *The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline*. – *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. E. Fernie. London: Phaidon, 1995, p. 189.

2 E. Tohvri, *Valgustusideede mõju Tartu arhitektuurikultuurile 19. sajandi alguses [Intellectual history of the architecture in the early 19th century Tartu]*. (*Dissertationes historiae Universitatis Tartuensis 18.*) Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2009.

3 See T. D. Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 17–106.

4 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiraja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist / Texte über Kunst und Architektur 1–3*. Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus 2000, 2004, 2006 (Bd. 1, *Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1777–1863 / Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1777 bis 1863*; Bd. 2, *Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1864–1900 / Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1864 bis 1900*; Bd. 3, *Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1900–1918 / Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1900 bis 1918*).

Wilhelm Neumann's art-geographical construction

The first art-geographical construction applied to art and architecture of the area today known as Estonia, emerged in the writings of the Baltic Germans – the social, political and cultural elite in Estonia from the thirteenth to the early twentieth century. Although comparisons between the local artistic culture and the cultural heritage of other European countries, especially in architecture, were already present in seventeenth-century travel books and in the ‘topographical notes’ of pastor August Wilhelm Hupel in the eighteenth century, they did not appear as a more systematic writing strategy until the second half of the nineteenth century when, as elsewhere in Europe, local art histories describing architecture and artistic legacy were first compiled. Local institutions and individual scholars adopted the academic standards established by German universities and sought to map the origin of forms of local Baltic German art and architecture by using comparative methods. This led to the formulation of a geographical sphere of influence. As was typical of the time, it was believed that it was through art that the *Zeitgeist* was accumulated finding expression in ‘style’, while circumstances such as climate, materials, etc., contributed locally specific features.

Although relying on his earlier predecessors in the mid-nineteenth century, Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919) was the scholar who first managed to produce a more or less compact art-historical narrative of the ‘Baltic style’ as an offshoot of the ‘Nordic German style’. Neumann was born in Mecklenburg and studied at St. Petersburg Academy of Arts in the 1870s, later working as the town architect of Daugavpils in Latvia. In 1892, Neumann acquired a degree in philosophy at the University of Leipzig and then travelled to Riga.⁵ From then until his death in 1919, he remained closely connected with two of the Baltic provinces of the Russian empire: Livland (Livonia), which included territories of both ethnic Latvians and Estonians, and Estland (Estonia), which was the northern region of present-day Estonia. He designed buildings, advanced the protection of heritage and, from 1905, headed the Riga Art Museum for fourteen years. Naturally, he was also involved in the research and documentation of local art history.

Neumann's aim was to prove that the local artistic legacy existed as a special historical phenomenon that had been in continuous development. He first made this claim in his book *Grundriss einer Geschichte der bildenden Künste und des Kunstgewerbes in Liv-, Est- und Kurland* (1887).⁶ His lengthy article ‘700 Jahre baltischer Kunst’ (1900), in which he uses the eponymous umbrella concept *baltische Kunst*, aimed for a greater degree of generalisation.⁷ For Neumann, Baltic art was a blossom of Germany, *das Mutterland*, which resulted from the insemination of ‘virginal Livonia’ by the ‘Christian bearers of culture’, and which continued in its role of borrowing and receiving from the motherland. According to Neumann, medieval architecture first arrived in the Baltic provinces via Cistercian monks from Westphalia and Lower Rhineland, and also partly

5 Eesti kunsti ja arhitektuuri biograafiline leksikon [Biographic lexicon of Estonian art and architecture]. Gen. ed. M.-I. Eller. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 1996, p. 342; J. Keevallik, *Kunstikogumine Eestis 19. sajandil. Kunstiteadus Eestis 19. sajandil* [Art collecting in Estonia in the 19th century. Art history in Estonia in the 19th century]. Tallinn: Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Ajaloo Instituut, 1993, pp. 156–157.

6 W. Neumann, *Grundriss einer Geschichte der bildenden Künste und des Kunstgewerbes in Liv-, Est- und Kurland vom Ende des 12. bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Reval: Kluge, 1887.

7 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*. – *Baltische Monatsschrift* 1900, Bd. 50, pp. 319–334, 410–432.

from the territories of Saxony and Thuringia; in the fifteenth century, the towns of the Hanseatic League were a further influence. Neumann explained that the Livonian War (1558–1583) and subsequent political chaos were responsible for the scarcity of renaissance art in the region, and this hindered the emergence of ‘free artists’ in Livonia, and also the guilds’ domination of skilled craft. Nonetheless, following the onset of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), artists and artisans arrived from Germany and introduced some ‘fresh elements’. German artists themselves had voluntarily adopted a new style of art from the Dutch, their ‘kinsmen’.⁸ Next he writes of the devastating effect that the Great Northern War (1700–1721) had had on cultural life, which gradually began to revive in the mid-eighteenth century, having been ‘many times broken from Germany’ (*vielfach unterbrochene geistige Verkehr mit Deutschland*).⁹ Neumann praises at length the influence of particular figures of the German Enlightenment, including Johann Gottfried Herder who was from 1764 until 1769 based in Riga; he goes on to associate the rising interest in collecting art with the ‘scientific research of art’ that had emerged in Germany, mostly in the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn and especially Johann Joachim Winckelmann.¹⁰ Thanks to the intensified interest in art among the local elite, the best German and Italian architects and artists eventually made their way to Livonia. Regarding the Empire style, Neumann mentions that St. Petersburg is ‘totally under the French influence’, although later the school of the Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel had an impact in the Baltic region, which lasted until the 1860s. Neumann notes that German art had the leading role in the era of romanticism throughout the whole of Europe.¹¹ He also mentions that at St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, German lecturers played a significant role.

Neumann also addressed the search for a style that would suit the national spirit that had begun to emerge in Germany during the mid-nineteenth century. As far as he was concerned, it had ended in fiasco, although the resulting ‘historical style’ was followed by Baltic German architects. That *Moderne* was being introduced into local architecture at the time of writing the article, was presented by Neumann as further evidence of Baltic architects wanting to ‘keep abreast with the times’.¹²

Summarising the history of Baltic art, Neumann’s main points of emphasis are: art in the Baltic provinces has never been independent or created its own schools; it has been cultivated exclusively by Germans and is thus essentially a reflection of German art. Moreover, he argues that since the love and understanding of art are a reflection of the social and political circumstances in any given era, their development cannot be forced. Therefore, art cannot be democratised, and can only be influenced by the masses if their level of education increases considerably.¹³

As Neumann himself admitted, his treatment of Baltic art relied on ways of interpretation that had been disseminated by the Berlin school of art history, particularly in the writings of Franz Kugler and Wilhelm Lübke. As we know, the Berlin school adopted

8 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 332.

9 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 411.

10 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 412.

11 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 415.

12 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 428.

13 W. Neumann, *700 Jahre baltischer Kunst*, p. 432.

a conception of art in the manner of Winckelmann – as a phenomenon that carries the spirit of the era – and combined this with Herder’s understanding of *Volksgeist*: while the theoretical production of the school relied on the tradition of aesthetics, in terms of methodology it saw the study of art as a historical science.¹⁴

Autochthonal art history

Estonians’ own conception of art history slowly began to take shape during the late nineteenth century as a consequence of national emancipation that took place during the so-called national awakening period. It began with attempts to define ‘art’ and ‘nation’, a process that paralleled literary constructions of the history of Estonians as a nation of heroic and oppressed people, and coincided with the beginning of interest in local history among ethnic Estonian pastors. In 1885, an anonymous author wrote in the daily newspaper *Postimees* (*Postman*) that ‘Estonians have not had any art of their own’: that they had come to know art from the Germans ‘and even adopted the name for it from their language [---]. If Estonian books and writings tell about artists, such as painters and others, those artists always belong to foreign nations...’¹⁵ The same author then pointed out that the situation had recently changed with the emergence of the first professionally educated Estonian artists: Johann Köler, August Weizenberg and Amandus Adamson. In 1887, writer Juhan Kunder claimed that ‘a nation is determined by ... the local climate and the surrounding nature; but the heads or tails of its spirit are acquired through individual great men that – in the manner of serious heroes – give their people their mood and national character’.¹⁶ Each of these comments indicates that Estonia’s own history of art was regarded as having only just begun.

Reading the Baltic-Estonian debates that raged in the early twentieth-century print media, a paradox emerges: in the course of those debates Estonian authors turned the Baltic German narrative – the history of Baltic culture as derivative of other (i.e. German) cultures – against the Baltic Germans themselves. Oskar Peterson’s article from 1909 accused the Baltic Germans of ‘not having managed to adopt or emulate this great and high [level] that the German nation did in its homeland’.¹⁷ Many others also criticised the historical intellectual poverty of the Baltic Germans.

In that respect, it is fascinating to observe how fervent Estonian intellectuals attempted to transform the Estonian folk art legacy into ‘real art’, with the aim of shifting the beginnings of ‘Estonian art history’ away from the mid-nineteenth century and the first professional painter Johann Köler, and farther back to an ancient period.¹⁸ In

14 G. Bickendorf, Die ‘Berliner Schule’: Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785–1843), Gustav Friedrich Waagen (1794–1868), Karl Schnaase (1798–1895) und Franz Kugler (1808–1858). – *Klassiker der Kunstgeschichte* 1. Von Winckelmann bis Warburg. Ed. U. Pfisterer. München: Beck, 2007, p. 53.

15 Cited in J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiroja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist* 2, p. 327.

16 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiroja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist* 2, p. 329.

17 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiroja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist* 3, p. 227.

18 See L. Viiroja, *Eesti kunstist ja kunstikäsitusest 19. sajandi lõpust kuni aastani 1916* [On Estonian art and the understanding of art from the end of the 19th century to the year 1916]. Tallinn: Eesti TA Ajaloo Instituut, 1993; R. Loodus, *Kunstieliu Eesti linnades 1900–1918* [Art life in Estonian towns, 1900–1918]. Tallinn: Eesti TA Ajaloo Instituut, 1994.

1910, Estonian artist and art teacher Kristjan Raud wrote that the elements of ancient art had been preserved in the ethnographic handicraft tradition and that these elements must be researched by 'comparing them with similar foreign ones'. Historically, according to Raud, Estonian art was subjected to plenty of foreign influences, but the Estonian ancestors had managed to 'digest' those influences and had 'made them quite Estonian'.¹⁹ He considered Estonians' own art, which had first emerged here in the ancient territory of Estonia and has been determined by that origin, therefore – in contrast to Baltic art – both authentic and original. Still, not all Estonian intellectuals agreed with the historical construction based on folk art. For example, in 1911, sculptor Jaan Koort argued that Estonians still lacked their own national art and that 'belt patterns, coif strings, garters' did not really qualify as such because they were the same as those found in Finland, Norway and Sweden.²⁰

Of course, the manner in which Estonian intellectuals conceptualised art and its history did not arise spontaneously, but emerged from a need to delimit their 'own'; to identify something that would characterise the entire national movement in all spheres and in its different phases. On the other hand, such an approach may have found support from some of the developments in European art history writing at that time. In the early twentieth century, various works promoting the idea of national psychology were published. In 1907, August Schmarsow published his *Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie* in which he called for the entire heritage of historical handicraft production to be included in art history.²¹ At the same time, so-called primitive art was increasingly becoming an inspiration for new, modern art in Western Europe.

Baltic-Nordic artedominium

A new phase in the history of Estonian art historiography began with the founding of the Republic of Estonia in 1918. The reorganisation of the University of Tartu as a national institution of the new state included the establishment of new professorial chairs, including one in art history. The development of art history as an academic discipline in Estonia was shaped by the domination of foreign language throughout the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, both professors of art history at Tartu, Helge Kjellin and Sten Karling, came from Sweden, and both taught in German (in the late 1930s Karling began teaching in Estonian also). A considerable part of academic research was published in either German or Swedish language and the two professors relied largely, though not exclusively, on German-language specialist literature.²² On the other hand, during the inter-war period, the first professional studies on Estonian art were published in Estonian language as well: for example, the first volume of *History*

19 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiroja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist* 3, p. 221

20 J. Keevallik, R. Loodus, L. Viiroja, *Tekste kunstist ja arhitektuurist* 3, pp. 276–277.

21 U. Pfisterer, *Origins and Principles of World Art History: 1900 (and 2000)*. – *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*. Eds. K. Zijlmans, W. van Damme. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, p. 80. See A. Schmarsow, *Kunstwissenschaft und Völkerpsychologie. Ein Versuch zur Verständigung*. – *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 1907, Bd. 2, pp. 305–339.

22 See K. Kodres, 'Lüinka täites'. *Katse analüüsida Sten Karlingi kunstiteoreetilisi vaateid* [Filling the gap: an attempt to analyse Sten Karling's theoretical views on art]. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2008, vol. 17 (3), pp. 42–59.

of *Estonian Art* by Alfred Vaga in 1932, and *Estonian Art* by his brother Voldemar Vaga in 1940–1941.

It was Alfred Vaga's book that was instrumental in integrating the Baltic and Estonian versions of the history of local art. In this regard, his 300-page study presented a completely new vision, according to which the medieval art of the Baltic Germans came to be seen as part of the Estonian artistic heritage. The introduction to the book demonstrates that the author was fully aware of the radical nature of the step he had taken, and that his decision to abandon the previous understanding of art history was based on a narrow nationalism, followed the requirements of time. 'It is time to realise that the so-called Baltic art – as far as it is connected with our country – cannot be separated and left out from the general history of Estonian art; that everything born throughout time in the field of art in our homeland belongs first of all to Estonian art history, regardless of who the creators were.'²³ However, Vaga did not think the concept of 'Baltic art' should be abandoned completely, instead it could be used to categorise this particular period in the history of Estonian art – the era of Baltic art. He emphasised that the notion of Baltic art could be applied in a much broader sense than it had been so far, as demonstrated by the research of Swedish art historian Johnny Roosval.

According to Roosval, in the medieval period, a single homogenous artistic and architectural culture embraced a large territory that stretched from northern and north-western Germany to Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Latvia, and formed a united Baltic-Nordic art region. That region, the *baltisch-nordische Kunstgebiet* or *artedominium*, cannot be defined by the former notion of colonial art, but is based on common artistic forms, materials and motifs.²⁴ In the final part of his book, entitled 'The standing of Estonian medieval art in the development of Nordic art', Alfred Vaga drew the following conclusions: 'In all these countries of the Baltic-Nordic region, art had more or less the same character from the 12th to early 16th century, and developed in close unity, in the same direction and with mutual influence..., besides, the most powerful art centre of this ... huge art-geographical unit, from the 12th until the mid-14th century, was Gotland with its capital Visby, and partly Skåne; from there on, it was primarily Lübeck.' Vaga stressed that the development of arts in the Baltic-Nordic art-territorial unit progressed more or less independently and the inevitable impact of foreign influences was shaped by the region's creative spirit and according to its own manner.²⁵ From the Estonian perspective, local art did not always stand in the position of the recipient: Vaga pointed out the export of Tallinn's stonemasonry products to northern Germany and the activities of local masters in Finland, etc. The concept of a Baltic-Nordic art region was later repeated by Voldemar Vaga in his *Estonian Art*, in which the short first chapter, concerning the history of local art before the national

23 A. Waga, *Eesti kunsti ajalugu I. Keskaeg* [History of Estonian art. Vol. I, Middle Ages]. Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 1932, p. 5.

24 A. Waga, *Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, pp. 6–7. See also J. von Bonsdorff, *Global Aspects on Johnny Roosval's Concept of the Artedominium. – Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence. Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*. Ed. J. Anderson. Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2009, pp. 86–90.

25 A. Waga, *Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, p. 281.

awakening and emergence of the first Estonian professional artists in the mid-nineteenth century, is entitled 'Balti kunst' (Baltic art).²⁶

Sten Karling, the professor at the University of Tartu was the foremost expert on the history of Estonian art between the two world wars, and he, too, relied on Johnny Roosval's concept of the Baltic-Nordic art region.²⁷ Karling's research mostly dealt with post-medieval Estonian art history, and on the basis of regional comparative material he was able to prove the significance of the 'northern' dimension. His book *Holzschneiderei und Tischlerkunst* was exemplary in that respect, placing the history of Estonian woodcarving in spatio-temporal connection with Baltic-Nordic forms of ornamentation.²⁸

I should mention that Roosval's article 'Das baltisch-nordische Kunstgebiet' appeared in 1927 in the German-language magazine *Nordelbingen*, and that in 1933 Roosval presented his concept of Baltic-Nordic *artedominium* at the worldwide congress of art historians in Stockholm where Sten Karling was also present.²⁹ Roosval also lectured in Estonia, having been invited by Karling.

It should also be emphasised that, at the international congress of art historians in Stockholm, Johnny Roosval criticised attempts to connect notions such as 'nation' and 'race' to art-historical development.³⁰ Soon afterwards, there appeared efforts in Germany to rewrite Baltic art history as fully dependent on the history of art of the 'Great German' nation. Art historians in Estonia and Latvia were accused of forgetting the fully German 'character' of Baltic art, and of favouring the Swedish, Gotlandic and generally Nordic influences.³¹ During the 1930s, many German researchers, encouraged by *Ostforschung*, were engaged especially intensively and extensively with the history of Baltic art.³²

Johnny Roosval's art-geographical construction was inspired by earlier developments in the German-language European humanities.³³ Hugo Hassinger, inspired by the ideas of Friedrich Ratzel (*Lebensraum, Völkermerkmale*), had already introduced the

26 V. Vaga, *Eesti kunst. Kunstide ajalugu Eestis keskajast meie päevini* [Estonian art: the history of arts in Estonia from the Middle Ages to the present day]. Tartu, Tallinn: Loodus, 1940.

27 See also K. Markus, *Kultuuriregiooni probleem Eesti vanema kunsti uurimisel* [The problem of cultural region in the study of older art of Estonia]. – *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised. Humanitaar- ja Sotsiaalteadused* 1993, vol. 42 (3), pp. 301–305.

28 K. Kodres, 'Lüinka täites', p. 54. See S. Karling, *Holzschneiderei und Tischlerkunst der Renaissance und des Barocks in Estland. Verhandlungen der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft* 34. Dorpat, 1943.

29 For the first time, Roosval presented his concept already in 1921 at a conference in Lübeck (J. von Bonsdorff, *Hansekonst – finns den? – Gotlandia Irredenta: Festschrift für Gunnar Svahnström zu seinem 75. Geburtstag*, Ed. R. Bohn. Sigmaringen: J. Thorbecke, 1990, pp. 47–57). See also K. Markus, *Kultuuriregiooni probleem...*, p. 301; L. O. Larsson, *Johnny Roosval (1879–1965): eine Porträtskizze im Rückspiegel. – Buchkunst im Mittelalter und Kunst der Gegenwart – Scrinium Kilonense: Festschrift für Ulrich Kuder*. Eds. H.-W. Storck, B. Tewes, C. Waszak. Nordhausen: Bautz, 2008, p. 191.

30 L. O. Larsson, *Nationalstil und Nationalismus in der Kunstgeschichte der zwanziger und dreissiger Jahre. – Kategorien und Methoden der deutschen Kunstgeschichte 1900–1930*. Ed. L. Dittmann. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985, p. 172.

31 See, for example, N. von Holst, *Die deutsche Kunst des Baltenlandes – ein neues Forschungsgebiet der Kunstgeschichte. – Deutsche Kultur im Leben der Völker. Mitteilungen der Akademie zur wissenschaftlichen Erforschung und zur Pflege des Deutschtums* 1939, Jg. 14 (2), pp. 161–171; N. von Holst, *Die deutsche Kunst des Baltenlandes im Lichte neuer Forschung. Bericht über das gesamte Schrifttum seit dem Weltkrieg (1919–1939)*. München: Reinhardt, 1942.

32 According to the statistics of the studies on Baltic art presented by Niels von Holst, 203 publications by German and Baltic German, 39 by Estonian, 16 by Swedish, 15 by Latvian and 6 by Danish authors were published between 1919 and 1939 (N. von Holst, *Die deutsche Kunst des Baltenlandes im Lichte neuer Forschung*, p. 9).

33 Johnny Roosval studied art history in Berlin with Adolph Goldschmidt and Heinrich Wölfflin.

term 'geography of art' in 1910.³⁴ After World War I, the Viennese art historian Josef Strzygowski – another friend of Roosval – participated in debates about the origins of art and the dissemination, development and change of styles. In 1921, Strzygowski was elected the first professor of art history at the University of Tartu. He never actually took up the post³⁵, however, and instead lectured and travelled between Vienna, Stockholm and *Åbo Akademi* in Turku, Finland³⁶. In Finland, he planned to write a thesis on *Finnlands Stellung in der Kunstgeschichte* in which he would probably have utilised his new concept of *Kunstlandschaft*. Strzygowski was convinced that the essential foundation of artistic culture – that was most responsible for determining the nature of art – is its geographical location: it expresses fundamental local values (*Grundwerte*) and, unlike the history of style, enables one to deal with the specific nature of local art without being forced to raise the problem of its unity with that of other regions *Grundwerte*. According to Strzygowski, art history must use a comparative method to examine local objects and thus establish their 'real lines of development' (*tatsächliche Entwicklungsreihen*).³⁷

The Soviet geography of art in Estonian art history

The direction in which art history and its geography would develop in Soviet Estonia, became evident soon after the end of World War II. In 1947, Richard Kleis, the director of the Institute of History at the Estonian Academy of Sciences, presented his paper 'Research tasks in the field of the history of Estonian-Russian relations'.³⁸ In 1948, the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (*Hammer and Sickle*) published an article by Leo Soonpää, 'Reassessing the heritage of fine art', which demanded the differentiation between Baltic German – 'all those Neffs, Hippiuses, Hoffmanns, etc.' – and Estonian art. Soon afterwards, a 're-evaluation' workgroup was formed, including Estonian art historians Voldemar Vaga, Leo Soonpää and Boris Lukats.³⁹ The views of the workgroup were reflected in the historical survey *History of the Estonian SSR* (1952).

One of the main aims of that book appears to have been to un-harness Estonian history of art from the Baltic-Nordic region and create a new geography of art focused on Russia. Wherever there might have appeared to be an absence of Russian influence (e.g. in the treatment of medieval architecture, where the influence of Russian architecture would have been impossible to show), the problem was simply ignored

34 T. D. Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, pp. 59–62.

35 M. Eller, *Tartu Ülikooli osast Eesti kunstiteaduses 1920–1930-ndail aastail, I* [On the role of the University of Tartu in Estonian art history in 1920s and 1930s, I]. – *Kunstiteadus. Kunstikriitika* 5. Tallinn: Kunst, 1983, pp. 64–65.

36 L. Berggren, *Josef Strzygowsky – en främmande fågel i Finland*. – *Taidehistorillisia tutkimuksia / Konsthistoriska studier* 36. Helsinki, 2007, pp. 84–98.

37 G. Pochat, *Der Epochenbegriff und die Kunstgeschichte*. – *Kategorien und Methoden der deutschen Kunstgeschichte...*, pp. 157–159.

38 M. Nõmmela, *Voldemar Vaga (1899–1999) ja Eesti kunsti ajalugu* [Voldemar Vaga (1899–1999) and Estonian art history]. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus, 2008, p. 99. See R. Kleis, *Uurimistulesandeid Eesti-Vene suhete ajaloo alalt* [Research tasks in the field of the history of Estonian-Russian relations]. – *Teaduslik sessioon 23.–29. aprillini 1947* [Scientific session from 23rd to 29th April of the year 1947]. Tartu: Teaduslik Kirjandus, 1948, pp. 3–16.

39 L. Soonpää, *Kujutava kunsti minevikupärandi ümberhindamisest* [Reassessing the heritage of fine art]. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 15 May 1948.

and, instead, emphasis was given to class rhetoric – i.e. it was claimed that all built structures were a monument to the ‘people’s workmanship’.⁴⁰ The commentary was more extensive when dealing with the period following Estonia’s incorporation into the Russian Empire, and particularly the construction of the imperial Kadriorg palace in Tallinn (1720–1725). The selection of nineteenth-century objects and authors was restricted in order to emphasise the Russian cultural orientation. Such aims are most evident in the conception of the new history of Estonian architecture, introduced by Leo Gens in *Sirp ja Vasar* in 1953. Gens wrote about the mistakes of previous art-historical narratives that, according to him, had overestimated the influence of Baltic German and Swedish culture. He promised that in the future, more attention would be paid to the ‘actual and fruitful connections with Russian architecture’.⁴¹

History of Estonian Architecture was published in 1965, and most of its chapters were authored by Voldemar Vaga and Helmi Üprus. Again, the role of Russia in the development of local architecture was given special emphasis: ‘Whereas the colonisers came to our area mostly from Germany and the Scandinavian countries, the local architecture merged stylistic elements of the architectural traditions of several West-European nations. The influence of the architecture of Russian towns, especially Novgorod and Pskov [Estonian Pihkva], was added to that.’⁴² It was particularly stressed that after the territories of Estonia and Livonia were joined with Russia there appeared positive effects on the development of art and architecture, and the particular chapter was disproportionately long in relation to others in the book. This new history even went so far as to claim that the Russian influence gave rise to ‘a new stage in the development of Estonian baroque art’ and that, due to the proximity of St. Petersburg, ‘Estonia and Livonia from now on benefited from the powerful cultural impulses emanating from the bigger centres’.⁴³ The other conceptual claim that stands out in the narrative is in support of the idea of autochthonal development: ‘Urban construction during the period of feudal fragmentation was based on the local circumstances and shaped the towns ... for centuries.’⁴⁴

Still, except for the introduction to the general historical background and short introductions to each chapter, these new claims about the development of Estonian architecture rarely amount to more than a perfunctory rhetorical embellishment. The main texts use the already familiar comparative art-geographical and stylistic-historical methodology dating back to inter-war Estonian art history, although the Baltic-Nordic cultural region is never mentioned. Naturally, the interpretative models had changed: instead of *Zeitgeist*, architecture now reflected class relations and ideological struggle – the word ‘people’ certainly appears to have been a favourite.

It is not possible here to provide an in-depth analysis of what was probably the most important publication produced during the Soviet period, the three-volume

40 Eesti NSV ajalugu (kõige vanemast ajast tänapäevani) [History of the Estonian SSR (from the earliest times to the present)]. Ed. G. Naan. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1952, p. 71.

41 L. Gens, Arhitektuuripärandi uurimise puudustest [On the shortcomings in the research of architectural heritage]. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 12 June 1953.

42 Eesti arhitektuuri ajalugu [History of Estonian architecture]. Gen. ed. H. Arman. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1965, p. 30.

43 Eesti arhitektuuri ajalugu, p. 241.

44 Eesti arhitektuuri ajalugu, p. 33.

general *History of Estonian Art*, published during the 1970s, but in comparison with the 1950s' survey history of Estonian architecture, the structure of this new history had undergone significant changes.⁴⁵ Whereas the earlier book on architectural history had used the development of social formations (e.g. the feudal period) for dividing material into chapters, this later history of art divided the material into chapters according to periods of style.

As for the interpretation of the Baltic period, the first volume, focusing on earlier periods, largely follows the concept of the Baltic-Nordic art region, although without making explicit reference to it. Compared with Voldemar Vaga's work from 1940, the history of Estonian 'national' art from the mid-nineteenth century onwards has been considerably modified. Besides the compulsory inclusion of a revision of the development of capitalism, Voldemar Erm introduces the concept of 'cultural orientation' and states that during the nineteenth century this was a choice determined by nationality. It was allegedly for this reason that Köler and other first professional artists of Estonian descent had chosen St. Petersburg for their studies, while the Baltic Germans were naturally German-orientated and 'the essentially conservative Baltic-German art remained, as before, a provincial branch of German art'.⁴⁶ The project's general editor who was also one of its authors, Irina Solomõkova, wrote about the positive influences of the proletarian revolution in Russia, starting from 1917, before going on to discuss the 'art in bourgeois Estonia' which was characterised as a 'struggle between two cultures'.⁴⁷

During the 1970s and 1980s, the number of research publications on specific issues, topics and periods was quite high; and these generally followed the comparative Baltic-Nordic art-geographical concept of the 1930s. At the same time, these studies often used an expanded notion of the nineteenth-century cultural space, pointing to links with Russia (especially St. Petersburg) and, in the case of twentieth-century art, with France and especially Paris. Methodologically, these texts were still primarily concerned with the traditional issues of the history of style. Such an approach was common to most of the art histories written behind the Iron Curtain.⁴⁸

Art-historical narratives based on the history of style were critically examined in the works of Estonian art historian and theorist Boris Bernstein. His studies, which were written and first published in Russian during the 1980s, were translated into Estonian later.⁴⁹ However, his arguments received only little attention from Estonian art historians who were the main authors producing national histories of art. The first

45 See *Eesti kunsti ajalugu* [History of Estonian art]. Gen. ed. I. Solomõkova. Vol. 2, 1940–1965. Tallinn: Kunst, 1970; Vol. 1:1, *Kõige varasemast ajast kuni 19. saj. keskpaigani* [From the earliest times to mid-19th cen.]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1975; Vol. 1:2, 19. sajandi keskpaigast kuni 1940. aastani [From the mid-19th century to the year 1940]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1977.

46 *Eesti kunsti ajalugu* 1:2, p. 10.

47 *Eesti kunsti ajalugu* 1:2, p. 112.

48 See, for example, J. Białostocki, *The Baltic Area as an Artistic Region in Sixteenth Century*. – Hafnia: Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art 1976. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1977, pp. 11–23. On the problems of art history writing in Eastern Europe after World War II, see *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs*. Eds. R. Born, A. Janatková, A. S. Labuda. Berlin: Mann, 2004, pp. 411–470.

49 See B. Bernstein, *Kunstiteadus ja tüpoloogია* [Art history and typology]. – B. Bernstein, *Kunstiteadus ja kunsti-kultuur* [Art history and artistic culture]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1990, pp. 62–85.

post-Soviet survey history of Estonian art, written by Jaak Kangilaski and Sirje Helme, also discussed artistic developments predominantly from the perspective of style.⁵⁰

Ideological manipulation of Estonian geographies of art

Those who are well versed in Estonian art history, have to admit that none of the art-geographical concepts schematically presented above is entirely wrong. However, at the same time, they all share a common rhetorical strategy, characteristic of cultures affected by the conditions of colonisation: some historical realities seem to be forgotten and are discarded, whereas others are amplified, given special symbolic significance and political importance – this is also how art's historical location and relocation has been narrated.⁵¹

The reasons behind the emergence of different geographies of Estonian art and its history have been related to political and cultural changes, as well as to the personal interests and ideological positions of art historians. They aimed to create or confirm – through an art-historical narrative – a common cultural identity characteristic of a particular territory, although the ultimate aim was to give shape to the identity of the (national) culture for which the historians were writing. In this process, newly emerging cultures, such as that of Estonia during the early twentieth century, constructed their national identity through relations with international trends or, as in the present case, through an international cultural-geographical perspective. Thus, the cultural prestige of an older, more advanced culture was used to enhance the standing and value of the local, less known and peripheral cultural heritage.

I can engage here only briefly with the ideological and political interests involved in the process of art history writing. Behind the art-geographical constructions of the Baltic- German art historians were the simultaneous attempts of the Baltic German elite to shape their own (Baltic) identity in relation to *Mutterland*, and as a reaction against the politics of Russification that began in the late 1860s. Take, for example, Baltic German historian Carl Schirren's patriotic concept of *Landesgeschichte*. Schirren described the role of Baltic German culture as defending the frontier of the Western world (*Bollwerk der abendländischer Kultur*).⁵²

A whole generation of early twentieth-century Estonian intellectuals used the geographical image as part of the process of nation-building. In this process, the existence of national art was an integral part, necessary for the historical (and often mythological) self-representation of any nation aspiring to be considered cultured and civilised.

50 S. Helme, J. Kangilaski, Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu [Short history of Estonian art]. Tallinn: Kunst, 1999.

51 This feature of national history writing is emphasised by Homi K. Bhabha, quoting an article by Edward W. Said (E. Said, Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors. – *Critical Inquiry* 1989, vol. 15 (2), pp. 205–225), see H. K. Bhabha, *DisseminNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation*. – *Nation and Narration*. Ed. H. K. Bhabha. London, New York: Routledge, 1990, pp. 299–300.

52 See W. Lenz, 'Alt-Livland' in der deutschbaltischen Geschichtsschreibung 1870 bis 1918. – *Geschichte der deutschbaltischen Geschichtsschreibung*. Ed. G. von Rauch. Köln, Vienna: Böhlau, 1986, pp. 203–232; M. Garleff, *Deutschbalten als Träger eines nordosteuropäischen Identitätsgedankens? – Nordosteuropa als Geschichtsregion*. Eds. J. Hackmann, R. Schweitzer. Helsinki: Aue-Stiftung; Lübeck: Schmidt-Römhild, 2006, pp. 452–457; J. Hackmann, *Vom Objekt zum Subjekt. Kleine Nationen als konstituierender Faktor der Geschichte Nordosteuropas*. – *Nordosteuropa als Geschichtsregion*, pp. 467–486.

Academic attempts to integrate Baltic and Estonian national art histories emerged as the next logical step during the first Republic of Estonia. Other disciplines besides art history also operated within larger regional geographies: for example, in history, Edgar Kant's Balto-Scandinavian area (Baltoscandia), which embraced Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, and Latvia (fig. 1).⁵³ The Baltic-Nordic *arte-dominium* continued to prevail in art history, although the Nordic dimension perhaps received greater emphasis; and this reflected the political desire to neutralise the role of German and Russian culture in the narratives of Estonian art history.

The Stalinist art-geographical construction was initially based on open falsification of history and on the glorification of 'great' Russian culture. During that period of art history writing, Estonian scholars had no other choice than to adhere to those requirements. In the later stages of Soviet power, however, such views became reduced to mere rhetoric and Estonian art historians often attempted to demonstrate views which opposed the official Soviet doctrine – so that Estonian art history rather belonged with the Baltic-Nordic region, constructed as a non-Russian, Western cultural space.⁵⁴

All of the geographical constructions in Estonian art history that have been discussed here have exhibited certain ideological characteristics and they have often employed similar rhetorical strategies. On the other hand, none was the original product of a local imagination and all have relied upon imported art-historical conceptions that, in their turn, were also dominated by the idea of 'national constants'.⁵⁵ The local 'geographers' of art history writing selected from these imported ideas and geographical constructions those that suited best the purposes of their own project of writing history and asserting the interests of their own community.

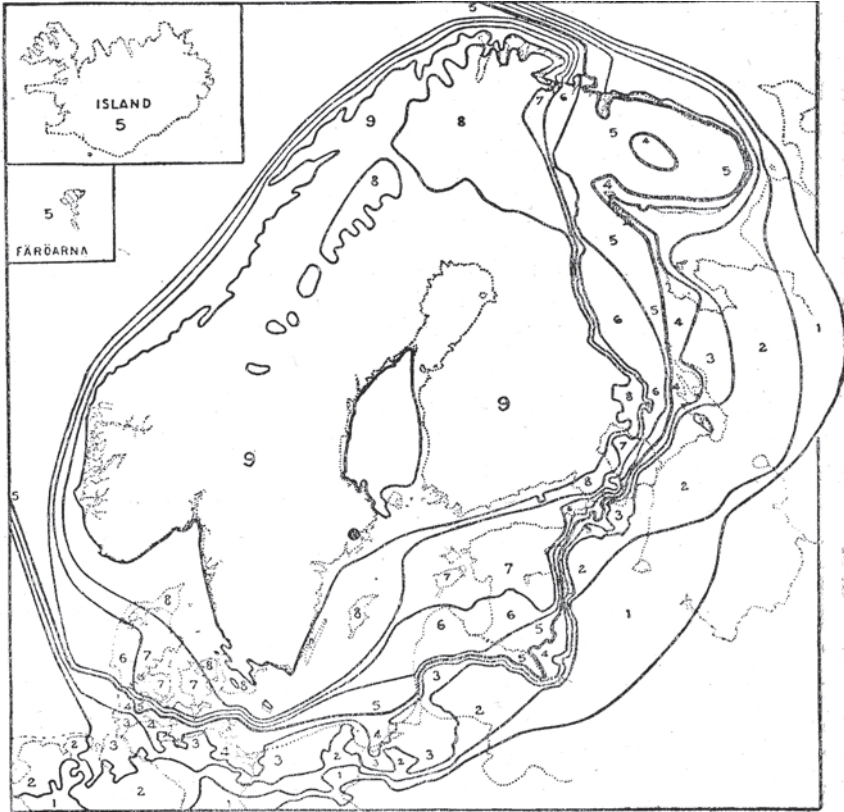
In my opinion, the art-geographical constructions used in Estonia have one further feature in common, which could be called a sense of 'absence' or 'insufficiency'.⁵⁶ Reading art histories written and published over past hundred and more years, it becomes evident that all these narratives rely on the conviction that local art has always suffered from imperfection. This is especially clear in the comparative studies carried out to demonstrate the common stylistic features within an art-geographical region. While expressing pleasure in finding common artistic and stylistic features, most scholars then focus attention on the low quality of execution of the local artworks. In these discussions about quality, the arguments alternate. Some refer to the distance from major centres of art production, or to the low standard of culture and education that was adequate only for producing imitators and not sufficient to train masters or highly skilled craftsmen. Others point out that Estonia is a relatively young nation

53 In 1937, the *Conventus primus historicorum Balticorum* took place in Riga, and there the concept of *Ostseeregion* was discussed. No Baltic German historians were invited to participate in the conference. See J. Hackmann, *Vom Objekt zum Subjekt*, pp. 471–473.

54 In 1977, in West Germany, 'Nordosteuropa' – a long-range historical concept – was introduced by Klaus Zernak. See J. Hackmann, R. Schweitzer, *Introduction: North Eastern Europe as a Historical Region*. – *Journal of Baltic Studies* 2002, vol. 33 (4), pp. 361–368.

55 See A. S. Labuda, *Einleitende Bemerkungen zur Rolle des nationalen Denkens in der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung*. – *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa...*, pp. 32–33.

56 This, too, is not specifically an Estonian feature. See D. Chakrabarti, *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?* – *Representations* 1992, no. 37, pp. 1–26; H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 63.



1.

Geographic Baltoscandia.

The concept and 'cartographic synthesis' of Baltoscandia were introduced by the Swedish geographer Sten de Geer during the 1920s. The lines on the map signify the aspects which de Geer took into account in his formulation of the region: 1) the ancient mountain range of the Fennoscandian shield; 2) Northern European peninsulas; 3) the typical 'moraine topography coast' of Fennoscandia; 4) the areas of land uplift in Northern Europe; 5) the main territories of a Northern race; 6) both linguistic areas of Fennoscandia; 7) the area of protestant Christianity; 8) the current borders of Northern nation-states; 9) the largest dimensions of Northern states during the last two thousand years. Edgar Kant, who worked as a professor of economic geography at Tartu University from 1936 to 1944, considered de Geer's to be the best definition of Northern Europe.

Illustration from E. Kant, *Bevölkerung und Lebensraum Estlands*. Tartu, 1935, pp. 5-7.

and emphasise distinct natural conditions or, in architecture, the lack of appropriate natural resources for building materials. This negative kind of evaluative argument is presented even in the most recent survey of Estonian art and architecture by Juhan Maiste, published in 2007.⁵⁷

Perhaps we should look into the origins of this dissatisfaction and sense of inferiority. It is likely that the root of the problem lies with the traditional models of Western art historiography that, as I have emphasised, have been utilised in the writing of Estonian art history.⁵⁸ One of the typical features of art-historical narratives until the end of the twentieth century has been their reliance on aesthetic evaluation of the work, thus creating a canon of 'great' works and masters. In addition, the narrative of modernism has emphasised the cult of progress and originality. If one is to follow this model, then the history of Estonian art has indeed little to boast. As I have also tried to show, it is precisely the geography of art that, since the 1920s, has helped to compensate for this apparent 'disability' – by transforming art (that has otherwise been peripheral to the main narratives) into a productive or positive national narrative.

Finally, we should ask whether the geography of art – for which it has been almost impossible to avoid becoming ideologically infected – has now reached the end of its natural life. I share the opinion of many scholars who have expressed their opinion regarding this issue early in the twenty-first century.⁵⁹ I agree that the geography of art, as a method of investigating the dissemination of ideas and works, and in mapping and comparing artistic contacts, may continue to be useful in the future if the aim is to establish the specific cultural-geographical relations of a specific period. However, at the same time, we should admit that the evaluative foundations (which could also be described as ideologies), on the basis of which the nature and weight of comparisons are formulated, have changed and continue to change. Here in Estonia, and elsewhere in the Baltic region, we are writing new art histories as democratic inhabitants of the 'global village', and hopefully we are now prepared to write 'post-national' art histories as well. This in turn means that contemporary Estonian art-historical narratives are beginning, or have already begun to 'change the past', i.e. to rewrite it. In a situation of new theoretical and methodological approaches – where issues of the aesthetic value of art have become historicised, and where the focus is on the investigation of the historically specific mechanisms and processes involved in creating meanings in art and culture – it is insufficient to rely on art-geographical methodology alone. And not only that: to treat an art-geographical region as the sole determinant of art, and as a carrier of some sort of geographically specific 'spirit', is in itself a misplaced idea.

57 J. Maiste, *Eesti kunsti lugu* [The story of Estonian art]. Tallinn: Varrak, 2007. See also the review L. Kaljundi, *Utoopiate ja unelmate (aja)lugu* [The (hi)story of utopias and dreams]. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2008, vol. 17 (3), pp. 127–136.

58 This is a common feature of art history writing in peripheral European and non-Western countries. Cf. J. Elkins, *Art History as a Global Discipline*. – *Is Art History Global?* Ed. J. Elkins. London, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 22.

59 See *Time and Place: The Geohistory of Art*. Eds. T. D. Kaufmann, E. Pilliod. Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate, 2005.