

# New Aims, Old Means: Rewriting Lithuanian Art History of the National Revival Period

JOLITA MULEVIČIŪTĖ

The article examines significant changes in the Lithuanian art history written at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the period when the local modernist art-historical discourse went into decline. From the mid-1980s, Lithuanian researchers turned to contextual studies and concentrated on art processes and their social and political milieu. However, the essence of the modernist methodology – the concept of style interpreted as a quality intrinsic to an artwork and detectable from its visual appearance – retained its ideological power. It continued to connect Lithuanian art history with the peremptory Western modernist patterns, thus imposing modernist standards on reconstructions of local artistic practice that are in conflict with the new contextual approach. The article underscores the need to deconstruct the concept of style and to open an artwork to the contextual analysis.

Shortly after the opening of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, several attempts were made to critically assess the exposition of the new museum. One review, entitled 'Lessons of history that were not learned', was especially negative. The author, a sixty-year-old painter, drew this crushing conclusion: 'Artist like any madman can express himself as he wishes. ...but what should be exhibited as national value [at the National Gallery] should be judged by sane people.'<sup>1</sup> The critic denied the possibility of a rational classificatory view and promoted the vision of an ideal exposition as a display of only 'good art pieces', that is to say, artworks of exceptional aesthetic or, to be more exact, formal quality created by talented individuals. His position, far from being new or unique, is based on the principles of modernist ideology against which Lithuanian art historians, at least some of them, have been struggling for almost two decades.

1 M. Skudutis, *Neišmokę istorijos pamokų. Nacionalinėje dailės galerijoje apsilankius* [Lessons of history that were not learned: after a visit to Lithuania's National Art Gallery]. – *Kultūros barai: kultūros ir meno mėnesinis žurnalas* 2009, no. 7/8, p. 35, 127.

## Towards an open art history

In the post-war period, Lithuanian art history as a discipline began to develop in the 1960s, reaching its apex in the 1980s. It coincided with the modernist breakthrough in Lithuanian culture and absorbed many of the attitudes that had grounded the contemporary art of the period. The concept of style as a definite autonomous formal structure and the idea of a nation became the two basic instruments for constructing the local historical narrative. Scholars concentrated on the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century – the period when the Lithuanian national movement began and during which modern nationalism, as the dominant official ideology, was subsequently consolidated.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it was a period when close relations with modern Western art were established. In that way, the development of Lithuanian art was unfolded in various writings as a teleological evolution towards a metaphysical national character (a kind of Hegelian *Volksgeist*) and progressive formal means.

This methodological approach was most consistently expressed in a foundational two-volume survey on art during the first half of the twentieth century, which was compiled by the Institute of History of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences<sup>3</sup>, and in a monograph about the problems of painting by Jonas Umbrasas, an associate professor of the Lithuanian SSR State Institute of Art in Vilnius<sup>4</sup>. Though the authors of these books used the obligatory rhetoric of Soviet Marxism, they in fact referred to the Western concept of the autonomy of art and the self-sufficiency of aesthetic values. The two publications were based on two different variants of the modernist canon: in the first case, art history as a collection of artists' biographies; and in the second case, art history as a sequence of universal stylistic trends. However, despite their different scholarly perspectives, the ultimate aim of all Lithuanian researchers was the same – the description of artworks that were considered notable for their distinct formal qualities.

The aforementioned publications were to be not only the most outstanding, but also the last significant authentic examples of modernist history writing in Lithuania, because it was at precisely that time that the attitudes of Lithuanian art historians began to take a new turn. This coincided chronologically with a shift in the contemporary artistic practice that encouraged greater conceptual and contextual experimentation. Hence, the socio-cultural context of art became the focus of scholarly attention, rather than individual artworks. In the various texts published during the first decade of the twenty-first century, this methodological change has usually been related

2 In the current paper, I am using the expression 'national revival period' in an extended informal sense, embracing the first half of the twentieth century. Originally the concept of national revival was coined in Lithuanian social and political history to indicate the initial stage of the national movement; it was supposed to cover the second half of the nineteenth century and the very beginning of the twentieth century. However, in art and, above all, art criticism, it was not before the turn of the century that Lithuanian national ideas became an important factor, and many of them remained vital (in one or another form) until World War II. On the other hand, all art-historical studies on the first half of the twentieth century deal with the problem of Lithuanian identity and are based on the same, or very similar, scholarly principles. Thus, in this case, it is useful to discuss the first half of the twentieth century as a distinct and relatively self-contained period from the viewpoint of both the development of Lithuanian art and the history of Lithuanian art historiography.

3 XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija [A history of the 20th-century Lithuanian art]. 2 vols. Gen. ed. I. Korsakaitė. Vilnius: Vaga, 1982, 1983.

4 J. Umbrasas, Lietuvių tapybos raida 1900–1940: srovės ir tendencijos [The development of Lithuanian painting, 1900–1940: trends and tendencies]. Vilnius: Mokslas, 1987.

to the changes in Lithuanian political life that occurred during 1989 and 1990. These changes created the conditions necessary for the restoration of Lithuania's political autonomy, for overcoming the cultural isolation that had been typical of the era of the Iron Curtain, and for building new international links.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the reorientation of the study of art has basically been interpreted as a direct consequence of local political events and the influx of Western influences. One has to admit, though, that such an explanation is an oversimplification and disregards the processes of the recent past. For example, already during the first half of the 1980s, the names of Arnold Hauser, György Lukács and Erwin Panofsky would appear with increasing frequency during lectures at the State Institute of Art (now Vilnius Academy of Arts), with the aim of encouraging future specialists to turn towards the new ideas and try to modify the principles of formal analysis. So it is not surprising that in surveying the work of the academy's students, Giedrė Mickūnaitė, the head of the Department of Art History and Theory at Vilnius Academy of Arts, pointed to 1985 as a critical turning point in methodology.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is perhaps more plausible to assert that changes in Lithuanian art history were, above all, determined by complex local factors in the humanities and the socio-cultural situation, while at the same time recognising that the political breakthrough created the conditions necessary for these paradigmatic shifts to be fully manifested.

Apart from the numerous conferences and articles published since the beginning of the 1990s, interest in contextual studies has resulted in three books by Laima Laučkaitė, Giedrė Jankevičiūtė and myself (figs. 1, 2, 3).<sup>7</sup> The authors of these monographs have made decisive efforts to change the mode of art-historical research. They have tried to move away from the model of the history of prominent artists and outstanding artworks and concentrated, instead, on the processes of the art scene and its social and political milieu. Museums, schools, art societies, exhibitions, art criticism, relations between artists and their clients (whether a private person or the state) were chosen as the central subjects of research. New information about marginal artists and secondary artworks was also included. The traditional division between primary and secondary aesthetic objects, between 'high' and 'low' art, was abandoned; artefacts of mass culture and craftworks gained equal importance alongside fine art, painting and sculpture. Moreover, non-modernist and anti-modernist artistic phenomena (for example, the inter-war neo-traditionalist movement) have also become objects of scholarly analysis. At the same time, the mono-ethnic view of Lithuanian art has

5 'It is the situation that formed under the conditions of a major cultural shift that took place in Lithuania beginning with late 1980s as it broke away from Soviet domination and re-entered cultural 'gravitational field' of the West.' (G. Jankevičiūtė, *Art Critic as an Art Historian and Sociologist: Lithuanian Experience. – Forms of Freedom: Lithuanian Culture and Europe after 1990*. Ed. A. Samalavičius. Vilnius: Kultūros barai, 2005, p. 161).

6 G. Mickūnaitė, *Art Historical Research in Lithuania: Making Local Global and the Other Way Around. – Acta Historiae Artium Balticae* 2005, no. 1, p. 17. The mid-1980s should be regarded as a turning point in Lithuanian art as well. It was at that time that a group of graduates of the State Institute of Art began an ambiguous and ironic interpretation of the traditions of Lithuanian modernism of the 1930s. This tendency became particularly distinct in painting, which was immediately compared with the art of German neo-expressionists – *Neue Wilde* – by local critics.

7 L. Laučkaitė, *Vilniaus dailė XX amžiaus pradžioje [Art of Vilnius in early 20th century]*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002; G. Jankevičiūtė, *Dailė ir valstybė: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940 [Art and state: the art scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918–1940]*. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2003; J. Mulevičiūtė, *Modernizmo link: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940 [Towards modernism: the art scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918–1940]*. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2001.

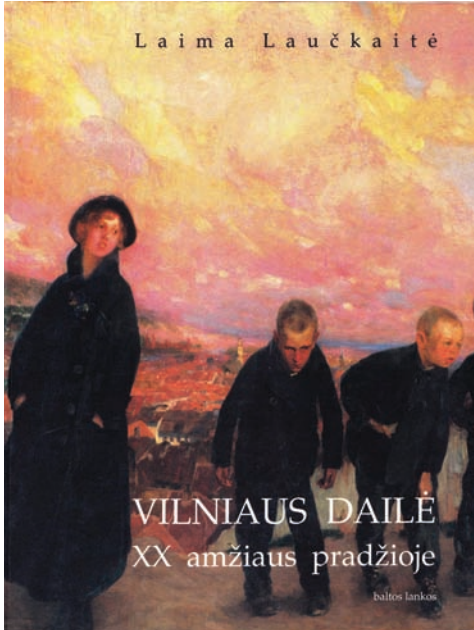
been opened up to recognise the country's multinational culture. This is especially evident in Laima Laučkaitė's research. Laučkaitė was the first to distinguish Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Jewish elements as constituent parts of the artistic panorama of Vilnius at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is important to emphasise that she has rejected the old concept of national identity as a timeless national character and promoted the idea of identity as a historical, and therefore mutable, formation.

For several years, studies dedicated to the artistic production of the first half of the twentieth century have represented one of the most progressive trends among the new fields of Lithuanian humanities and have influenced research in other branches of scholarship (cultural history and literary studies). However, soon after the publication of these monographs, there appeared a number of unofficial critical responses. Sceptics insisted that these Lithuanian art historians were moving away from aesthetic issues and thereby blurring the specificity of the discipline. These critics considered the context of art to be an excessive and unreliable aspect, unsuitable for scholarly research, and preferred it to be left outside the limits of art history. At that time, six or seven years ago, such views appeared to be little more than outmoded positions, or perhaps the consequence of a simple misunderstanding; but by now this issue has acquired an urgent significance.

### **The limits of openness**

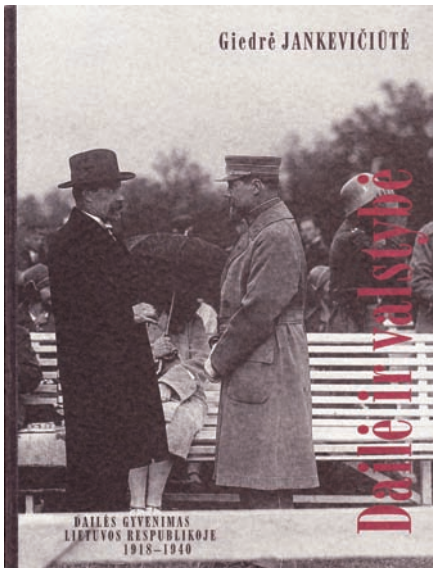
Despite apparent signs of renewal, the art-historical model manifested in the aforementioned monographs (as well as in many other publications on the early twentieth century) remains problematic. Inevitably, as the scholars abandoned purely aesthetic research and entered the sphere of cultural, social and political inquiry, they began to deal with the domain of social ideologies, and consequently with the realm of 'false consciousness'. However, the authors of those monographs continued to believe in the objectivity and directness of historical knowledge, and remained apart from the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that had been constructed by postcolonialism, feminism, neo-Marxism and other contemporary methodologies. In other words, they did not abandon the conviction that the facts of the past might speak for themselves. If one points to the 'right' facts and accumulates the 'critical' amount of data, then the truth will be revealed. Thus, the old passive-descriptive model of Lithuanian art history was partially preserved, and the traditional positivistic reliance on historical fact as authentic evidence was maintained. In my opinion, what happened was a conversion of the traditional history of objects and events into a history of events and objects, whereby the emphasis had shifted from object to event in the dual analysis. Starting with the idea of socio-cultural circumstances as an indispensable condition for the interpretation of artworks, the researchers ended with inquiries in which an artwork was given only a subsidiary function illustrating the context.

Indeed, in all three books, their common avoidance of the analysis of artworks was obvious (incidentally, several years ago the head of the Department of Art History and Theory at the Vilnius Academy of Arts claimed that students and young art historians



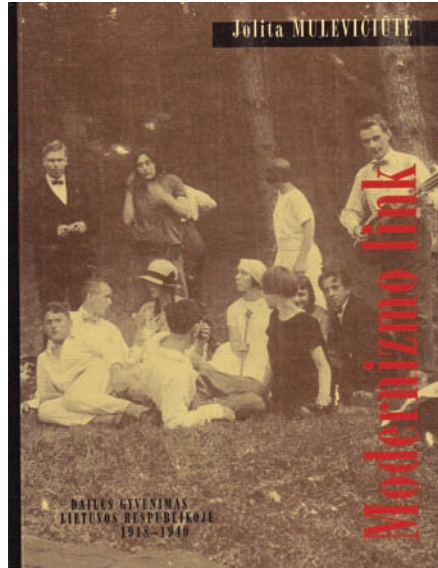
1.

Bookcover of *Art of Vilnius in Early 20th Century* by Laima Laučkaitė. Vilnius, 2002.



2.

Bookcover of *Art and State: The Art Scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918-1940* by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė. Kaunas, 2003.



3.

Bookcover of *Towards Modernism: The Art Scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918-1940* by Jolita Mulevičiūtė. Kaunas, 2001.



4.

Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz, *Untitled* (c. 1903). Ink.  
 Photo: *Rysunki piórem Stanisława Bohusza-Sięstrzeńciewicza. Wilno*  
 (Indian ink drawings by Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz: Vilnius).



5.

Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńciewicz, *In a Small Town* (1898). Oil painting.  
 Illustration from the weekly magazine *Kraj* 1900, no. 13.

also eschew close readings of artworks). On rare occasions when efforts were made to scrutinise particular pieces, traditional iconographic and stylistic analyses predominated; but the essence of the modernist canon – the concept of style interpreted as a quality intrinsic to the object itself and detectable from its visual appearance – often arose only as a stereotype. For example, realism was usually identified with mimetic directness and a lack of creativity; neo-romanticism – with enigmatic and evocative visions; expressionism – with psychological outbursts of energy and free deformation of the visual world; modern neo-classicism – with formal balance and official monumentality. In fact, the exercises in stylistic analysis were based on the tautological thinking, such as realism is realist, neo-romanticism is romantic, expressionism is expressive, neo-classicism is classical, and so on. In other words, scholarly statements were immersed in the visual language of the art being studied, and the responsibilities of the researcher were reduced to the functions of a translator.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes it was enough just to tag an artwork and attach a stylistic label that would automatically explain the object and place it into a historical perspective. There is reason to think that in the aforementioned books the authority of style characteristic of traditional art history achieved its extreme by being transformed into a sort of handy, albeit dogmatic, abstraction. As a result of oversimplification, the concept of style completely lost its investigative efficiency, though it did retain its ideological power. It still connected (possibly more than ever) Lithuanian art history with the peremptory Western modernist patterns that imposed modernist ideological standards on the reconstructions of local artistic practice. For example, it was still considered (though probably not consciously) that the more abstract an artwork was, the stronger must have been the impact of progressive Western ideas on its producer. And in contrast, realism always tended to be seen as an unsophisticated mode of representation and was thus related to the native country and vernacular culture. This situation may be illustrated with reference to the case of the recently rediscovered painter and draughtsman Stanisław Bohusz-Sięstrzeńcewicz.

8 Erika Grigoravičienė claimed in her report 'Inter-iconicity and intertextuality. Methods of interpretation of contemporary art', which was delivered at a session of the international workshop for young art critics 'Three Uses of the Knife' on 20 November 2009 in Vilnius (see <http://www.3-uses-of-the-knife.lt/en/november-20>; accessed 9 June 2010), that there were no grounds for speaking of the function of an art critic being that of a translator. According to theory, if it is possible to translate a text, i.e. convey it in other informational means, then it should also be possible to 're-translate' it, or return it to the original system of signs. However, once an artwork has been described, its former state cannot be reconstructed according to this verbal 'portrait' – it is impossible to make the same picture or sculpture once again. Thus, in Grigoravičienė's opinion, an artwork is in principle untranslatable. I do not agree with this position, as the same obstacles may arise while translating works of literature as well (a text by Shakespeare 're-translated' from foreign languages back into English will never be identical to the original). A translation is not a simple and neutral replacement of signs – it is always related with certain irreversible semantic changes and a loss of part of authentic information. Therefore, it is not only possible, but also necessary, to speak about translation as a means of interpretation of an artwork, especially, if one bears in mind the urgent methodological issues of modernist art history based on stylistic analysis.

## Paradoxes of the local

Stanisław Bohusz-Siesterzeńcewicz (1869–1927) is best known for a collection of his realist ink drawings that were compiled in Vilnius and published in a luxury album in Warsaw in 1913.<sup>9</sup> Lithuanian and Polish art historians have always been convinced that what he depicted in these drawings was precisely the everyday life in Lithuania as seen by an acutely observant patriot. For example, Laučkaitė regards Siesterzeńcewicz's drawings as authentic documents of daily life in Vilnius. In the chapter 'Was there a Belle Époque in Vilnius?' of her monograph (a revised and extended version that is available in English translation), the author asserts: 'In Vilnius, a new style of life was mixing with the old one, with religious feasts that had been celebrated since the Middle Ages, especially with Catholic pilgrimages, processions and fairs. [...] Impressive multicoloured feasts were the most favourite entertainment, but ordinary markets, where the country mixed with the city, drew people as well. The painter Stanisław Bohusz-Siesterzeńcewicz ... revealed masterfully this aspect of life. Scenes from the life of the period are recorded in witty drawings in Indian ink, abounding with movement and action: genre scenes of the markets, the trade in game, a short hour of respite in an unbridled cart, accidental flirting, the humming of a crowd. Their characters are peasants from the nearby villages, bearded coachmen, city-dwellers and housemaids. Their relations and types are conveyed aptly and with warmth.'<sup>10</sup>

Such a view follows an understanding of realism as a stylistic mode based on the direct representation of visual forms. Similarly, a drawing (especially a sketch) was always considered to be an authentic record of reality, produced for professional training or as a preparatory design for a final large-scale composition. However, if we can undermine that assumption and argue for a conception of realist art as having a highly mediated and ideologically engaged character, we will be able to offer quite a different interpretation of these drawings.

The reason why one ought to question the established view on Siesterzeńcewicz as an artist sincerely attached to nature, is the appearance of multiple and combined visual elements – visual matrices – in his works. It is easy to see that he repeatedly applied the same preparatory sketches and photographs as an aid to visual memory. The manipulation of graphic and photographic media had given birth to a specific de-localised image represented with high degree of verisimilitude. Siesterzeńcewicz combined visual fragments from Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Polish origin in order to construct a kind of simulacrum – a synthetic vision of a non-existent land. Geographical authenticity was not the aim of his quasi-realist fantasies. For example, in the album we find a drawing that was published (undoubtedly, on the author's personal instruction) first in 1905 as a market episode in a Ukrainian provincial town<sup>11</sup>, and then again, in 1912, as a trading scene in Vilnius<sup>12</sup>.

9 Rysunki piórem Stanisława Bohusza-Siesterzeńcewicza. Wilno [Indian ink drawings by Stanisław Bohusz-Siesterzeńcewicz: Vilnius]. Warszawa: Zakłady graficzne p. f. 'B. Wierzbicki i S-ka', 1913.

10 L. Laučkaitė, *Art in Vilnius, 1900–1915*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2008, pp. 171–172.

11 *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1905, no. 12, p. 211. An explanation to the illustration that appeared in the same issue of *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (*Weekly Illustrated*; p. 217) stated: 'Festive Market transfers us momentarily ... to the life of the small town of Podol, moving by its simplicity. [...] The artist captured 'a particle of nature' by eye and recreated it with extraordinary sensitivity and truthfulness.'

12 *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1912, no. 51, p. 1073.



Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Siestrzeńcewicz lived and studied in Munich and became involved in the Munich cultural milieu and art market, which was dominated by German, Austrian, North-American and Polish buyers who admired the images of the provincial lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795). His technique was based on a common practice of the period, which was to use photographs as models in order to make the process easier, cheaper and more productive. Siestrzeńcewicz perceived his artworks not only as aesthetic objects, but also as commodities – marketable pieces picturing the traditional patriarchal life on the periphery of the vanished Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. In that respect, the drawings may be considered modern substitutes for mythological and historical painting. Indeed, after the uprising of 1863, when strict censorship was introduced in the territory of Lithuania and the representation of the nation's political past became impossible, the historical function had been taken over by the 'inferior' art forms – genre scenes and landscapes; and one of the main suppliers of this kind of production was the so-called Munich school. The large colony of Polish artists that were concentrated at the cultural centre of the Bavarian region constructed a type of image of the daily life in small towns, which was permeated with crude romanticism and represented the values of the landowning class. Although superficially apolitical, this type actually promoted the retrospective, paternalist and patriarchal ideology of the local gentry, and the pictures were disseminated throughout the autonomous Kingdom of Poland and Russian-ruled Lithuania.

There is another significant circumstance concerning the publication of Siestrzeńcewicz's album. Actually, the aforementioned drawings are graphic reproductions of paintings (figs. 4, 5). The artist produced his pictures (some in a series of several replicas) with the intention of selling them or having them published in illustrated magazines. These drawings were not plain copies in the pejorative sense, however. They should rather be considered from the perspective of nineteenth-century culture – that is to say, the early period of the mass reproduction of images – as another form of the original, which extended the possibilities for existence of the artwork and created the conditions for its wider use and public appreciation. And it appears that this is how the artist himself regarded his drawings, having decided to publish them in a separate luxury edition. In this way the artist continued in the nineteenth-century tradition of reproducing an artwork as a translation, and he promoted the conception of 'the copy as integral, rather than accessory, to the original'.<sup>13</sup>

13 S. Bann, *Reassessing Repetition in Nineteenth-Century Academic Painting: Delaroche, Gérôme, Ingres. – The Repeating Image: Multiples in French Painting from David to Matisse*. Ex. cat. Ed. E. Kahng. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 29.

## The regional, the global and the Western

Thus, if we discard the customary stylistic and iconographic analysis and turn to the principles of visual studies, we may discern in Siestrzeńcewicz's realistic drawings the complex conjunctions of ideological, commercial and technological factors, which contradict any idea of the supposedly documentary and local nature of these compositions. The example we have discussed is merely one among many similar cases. How can general scholarly methods, approaches and terminology be applied to the analysis of the phenomena of national art? How can one describe not only the common traits of the cultural development of the Western countries and Lithuania, but also the regional differences? And, in general, what is universal and what is local in Lithuanian art? Such questions constantly appear in the scope of art historians, but answers to them are more often sought in the analysed object (previously, in an artwork; currently, in its cultural context) rather than in the means of research themselves. Such an approach was demonstrated once again by the international exhibition *Longing for Nature: European Landscapes*, which was one of the most significant events on the local art scene following the return to independence.

This large-scale project was realised as a part of the program for Vilnius as the European Capital of Culture 2009, and was the result of collaboration between the Lithuanian Art Museum and the State Museums of Upper Austria. The co-curator of the exhibition Laima Bialopetravičienė described the complex goal of this ambitious event: 'The concept of the exhibition's layout was based on a more universal attitude rather than on geopolitical principles in order to emphasize the diversity of European landscapes in terms of typical cultural traditions of countries belonging to the major regions of the Old Continent, such as Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western and Central Europe, together with the unique traits of mentality, variations of landscapes, chronological and stylistic evolution of this genre, creative individuality of painters and their role within the context of European art history.'<sup>14</sup>

From a position of connoisseurship, whereby aesthetic quality is the primary criterion, the exhibition organisers selected landscapes by artists of various nationalities from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century from the collections of Lithuanian, Austrian, Latvian, Estonian and Russian museums. The landscapes were then grouped into five sections, according to visual motifs, corresponding to the five geo-cultural regions of Europe. Thus, works by painters representing different periods, nations and states, were united by a single common denominator – geographical iconography – and exhibited accordingly. However, the curators' approach led to unexpected consequences. Rather than presenting a meta-landscape of the old continent as a totality of landscapes of different nations, the exhibition became a map of the universal styles and movements of Western European art. It illustrated the evolution of artistic forms from baroque to classicism, realism, and the modernist trends of the early twentieth century. The museum halls saw a triumph of the self-reflective abstract schemes of art history, which overlooked any of the particular natural and

14 L. Bialopetravičienė, *Reflections of Nature and Soul in European Painting. – Gamtos ilgesys. Europos peizažai / Longing for Nature: European Landscapes. Ex. cat. Ed. L. Bialopetravičienė. Vilnius: Lithuanian Art Museum, 2009, p. 29.*

social features of the various localities, manifestations of national ideas, and the peculiarities of the historically established local art schools.<sup>15</sup>

Methodological difficulties such as these are not peculiar to Lithuanian and foreign researchers trying to identify the various features of local art. At a time when issues of national and regional traditions are still being discussed intensively in Lithuania, in the West, for example, a new field of research – world art studies – is under development. This has been prompted by various factors, including the globalisation processes, the ideology of postcolonialism, the worldwide use of art production, and centres of research in art history being established in countries having non-European culture. This approach emphasises the panhuman nature of art production and seeks to find common features, rather than specific differences, among the various cultures and art schools. However, despite the attractions of this humanism without boundaries, the new trend has also been the subjective of much criticism. In the opinion of the sceptical James Elkins, studies in world art are not feasible simply because art history is a construct typical of Western culture or, more precisely, of West European and North American scholarship in the twentieth century. While speaking of developments in art, we necessarily make use of Western interpretative models and terms; and simply by asking the question ‘Is art history global?’ we presuppose a Western formula that already implies Western modes of thinking and renders any possible answer dubious.<sup>16</sup>

Bearing in mind Elkins’ statements and the observations made earlier in the current article, one may conclude that art history (or the form of art history that has been in circulation until now) is essentially neither regional nor global. It always remains Western. Moreover, in many cases, modernist art history and the Western modernist canon that is its basis, regardless of the period under research or the specific features of the country, has become an imperative that structures scholarly knowledge.

Of course, I do not imply that one day we could simply stop using Western art-historical modes and fundamental stylistic terms. However, we can desist from regarding the discipline of art history as a natural, objective, transparent, and overall scientific framework. Only then will we be able to deconstruct the concept of style in order to neutralise its ideological power. Traditional stylistic analysis, as an examination of ‘visual appearances’, is unable to explain either the socio-cultural origin or the meaning of an artwork. Without a comprehensive and critical explication (not a description or a translation), an artwork remains a potential instrument of ideological manipulations, suitable for constructing imaginary social contexts. Thus contextual studies should begin not from the outside – i.e. from the discussion of context as a setting – but instead from the inside, from the analysis of an artwork. It is necessary to realise that the work itself is open, existing in constant interaction, concentrating contexts, creating and conveying ideological meanings, and establishing new ideological links. Only in this way can the chronic tendency of the illustrative treatment of the relation

15 An unintended effect that resulted from the exhibition curators’ insufficient attention to the means of interpreting the ‘material’ is clearly evident in the section ‘The Skyline over Plains: Western Europe’. Contrary to the title of the section, motifs of mountains and rocks were predominant, not so much as objectively captured elements of natural terrain, but rather as rhetorical figures characteristic of classical art based on the Italian tradition.

16 J. Elkins, *Can We Invent a World Art Studies? – World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*. Eds. K. Zijlmans, W. van Damme. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, pp. 107–118.

between art and its socio-cultural milieu be avoided. The superficial contextualisation of art research has also been criticised by Griselda Pollock, who insisted: 'we have to abandon all the formulations such as 'art *and* society' or 'art *and* its social context', 'art *and* its historical background', 'art *and* class formation', 'art *and* gender relations'. All the real difficulty which is *not* being confronted resides in those 'ands'.<sup>17</sup>

The 'ands' indicated by Pollock most often mark a formal and thus inoperative relation of different sets of knowledge. However, due to their passivity and amorphousness, these 'ands' are at risk of transforming themselves into a 'grey zone' into which one can easily smuggle opinions and interests that are not related with critical analysis. It would certainly be naive to assert that the humanities can ever be completely disinterested. The experience of several recent decades that has been amassed by the New Art History, shows that for a researcher it is more important to publicly define his or her position and thus make it open to scholarly polemic, rather than to attempt an imitation of impeccable objectivity. Thus a self-conscious and self-reflective discipline of art is more urgent now than ever before.

In order to achieve the aim of overcoming the modernist canon, both the scientific 'technologies' and the outlook of science must be changed. It thus becomes necessary to rethink many of the old topics of art history, above all, the issue of modernism. A change of approach to modernism will, in turn, inevitably be related to the reinterpretation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture, and particularly realism. Though the relations of modernism and realism in Western art theory have been undergoing revision since the 1980s at least, in this respect the Lithuanian art historiography that is exploring the first half of the twentieth century remains unshakably conservative.

Incidentally, its indecisiveness and inconsistency has sometimes led to awkward results. Rasa Andriūšytė-Žukienė's book on the art of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis gives an example of the contradictory situations that can arise when research combines new goals with old means.<sup>18</sup> In certain respects, this monograph may be regarded as the most radical Lithuanian study of art in recent times, and it sends a challenge to the usual models for writing a modernist art history. Its author discarded the biographical approach prevalent in Lithuanian art studies which had nurtured the stereotypical image of Čiurlionis as a lonely genius, and instead discussed the artist's work in the wider context of the aesthetic ideas and artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, Andriūšytė-Žukienė attributes Čiurlionis's visual works – iconic of Lithuanian modernism – to a kind of pre-modernist art. While acknowledging the courage of this verdict, one should doubt its validity. Apparently, Andriūšytė-Žukienė's claim was determined by a stylistic analysis, typical of modernist art history, unambiguously emphasising the importance of abstract visual forms, regarding modernism as anti-realism, and seeing the evolution of twentieth-century art from the paradigmatic perspective of avant-garde ideology.

17 G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London, New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 30.

18 R. Andriūšytė-Žukienė, M. K. Čiurlionis: tarp simbolizmo ir modernizmo [M. K. Čiurlionis: between symbolism and modernism]. Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2004.

Therefore, Lithuanian art historians exploring the first half of the twentieth century, having successfully begun to change their methods, failed to complete the renewal of their scientific instrumentation. It seems that studies in the history of art of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as that of the late Soviet period, are more advanced at the moment – they are more inclined to refer to the views of the New Art History and treat art as a socio-cultural practice. This is probably not surprising, since the so-called national revival period was always the principle domain of modernist Lithuanian art-historical ideas; and, in part, it still is, though, hopefully not for long. It is for these reasons that I prefer to regard the studies discussed earlier as landmarks of Lithuanian art history, which have ended a transitional stage in methodology and opened new possibilities for scholarly research.