Writing the Art History of the City: From Nationalism to Multiculturalism

LAIMA LAUČKAITĖ

This article is focused on the changes in Lithuanian art history during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Specifically, it deals with a new disciplinary discourse that is based on the transition from the national canon to a multinational history of art. The article presents a kind of sequel to the ideas raised by the author in her study *Art in Vilnius, 1900–1915* (2008). The research is focused on the artistic life in Vilnius (exhibitions, collections, art societies, art schools, art ideologies, leaders, art criticism, etc.) and reveals a controversial and dynamic multinational art scene comprised of four main ethnic groups – Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, and Russian. The narrative involves a reconstruction of pluralistic cultural diversity and shows the logic of the various national perspectives.

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed fundamental changes in the concept of nationalism and the rise of a new attitude toward nations as a relatively recent, social phenomenon of modern society originating in the nineteenth century.[1] This concept has also influenced recent research on the development of the Lithuanian nation.[2] It should be noted that, in the modern world, multinational society, which is often seen as a cause of numerous conflicts and wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continues to be an important issue in the relations of many nations. The idea of multiculturalism thus poses a challenge, requiring not only a theoretical re-evaluation of the problem but also a search for practical social, political and cultural solutions that would enable violent clashes to be avoided in the future. At the same time, the idea also evokes the positive historical experiences of peaceful coexistence of different national and ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe.

In this context, my article is focused on some of the changes that have occurred in Lithuanian art history during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Specifically, it

1 B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London, New York: Verso, 1991 [1983]; E. Gellner, The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: The Myths of Nation and Class. – Mapping the Nation. Ed. G. Balakrishnan. London, New York: Verso, 1996, pp. 98–145; E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
2 T. Balkelis, The Making of Modern Lithuania. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

deals with a new discourse about the discipline that is based on the transition from the national canon to a multinational history of art. The article reflects on ideas touched upon in my book *Art in Vilnius, 1900–1915* (fig. 1).[3] The situation in Vilnius was similar to that of many other cities in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe at that time; therefore, research on Vilnius may also be useful for the study of other cities. This investigation is oriented towards interdisciplinary research based on studies of urban history and the concept of multiculturalism in Western historiography.[4]

Nation and Lithuanian art history

One should begin with a brief excursus into the writing of Lithuanian art history. The main discourse of Lithuanian twentieth-century research has been the national one.[5] At the beginning of the rebirth of the Lithuanian nation during the late nineteenth century, Lithuanian identity was defined by Lithuanian intellectuals Jonas Basanavičius, Vincas Kudirka and others, as follows. A Lithuanian was a person who: 1) spoke Lithuanian (not Polish); 2) was born into a peasant family (not a landowning family); and 3) was born within the boundaries of 'ethnographic Lithuania' (i.e. not in the broader realm of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which also included the territories of Belarus and Ukraine). The territory of this ethnographic Lithuania (in which the Lithuanian language and old rural customs were preserved) coincides approximately with that of the modern state of Lithuania, and it was in this territory that art historians investigated the art of ethnic Lithuanian artists.

In the texts written on the history of Lithuanian art in the early twentieth century, folk art was treated as 'truly' Lithuanian art, whereas the professional art of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was attributed to the predominantly Polish tradition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795; also known as Commonwealth of the Two Nations) and was considered an area of interest specifically for Polish researchers. This tradition continued during the inter-war period, although during that time there also began the so-called recovery of one's own heritage from the Poles. This 'Lithuanianisation' of art history is an ongoing process even today. The process includes endless debates about whether to present the surnames of the artists in their original, old Polish form, or in the modern Lithuanian one. This problem has proved quite complicated for the editors of the multivolume dictionary of Lithuanian artists – a current project at the Art History Department of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute.[6]

Neither was the national discourse ignored during the Soviet period. The academic history of twentieth-century art that was published during 1982 to 1983 was entitled 'a

3 L. Laučkaitė, Art in Vilnius, 1900–1915. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2008. See also the Lithuanian edition: L. Laučkaitė, Vilniaus dailė XX amžiaus pradžioje. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002.
4 A classic example of this kind of study is: C. E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1980.
5 In greater detail, see L. Lauckaite, Writing Lithuanian Art History in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: Strategies of National Identity. – centropa 2008, vol. 8 (3), pp. 272–280.
6 The first volume was published as: Lietuvos dailininkų žodynas I. XVI–XVII a. [Dictionary of Lithuanian artists. Vol. I, 16th–18th cen.] Ed. A. Paliušytė. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2005.

history of Lithuanian art' for not merely incidental reasons.[7] The first volume of that history was devoted to Lithuanian art prior to World War I – to the first Lithuanian art exhibitions in Vilnius and to the work of artists engaged with the idea of the nation. Such research was possible during the Soviet era because Soviet ideology propagated the study of ethnographic heritage and the myth of the flourishing of the Soviet nations. At the same time, Soviet authorities attempted to prevent the study of those cultural phenomena that related to the sovereignty of nations, their historical statehood and religious traditions. Consequently, it is not surprising that, during perestroika and especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian art historians turned their attention to those aspects of national art that had been suppressed during the Soviet era. For instance, the third conference of Baltic art historians held in 1990 in Vilnius was entitled 'Искусство и нация' (Art and nation).[8] Investigations of national issues were especially characteristic of the first decade of post-Soviet independence.

At the time of the general political and cultural liberalisation in the Eastern bloc during the late 1980s, two intellectuals had an outstanding impact on Lithuanian thought. As if resurrecting the mentality of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, two world famous Polish émigré writers born in Lithuania – Nobel Prize-winning poet Czesław Miłosz, and Jerzy Giedroyc – discouraged national isolation, and began to promote a search for common points of reference between Lithuania and Poland. Their ideas became an essential impetus for change in Lithuanian–Polish relations, and new phenomena appeared – Polish art historians became actively engaged in the study of the history of Lithuanian art. Their publications[9], joint Lithuanian–Polish art exhibitions[10] and conferences[11] in both countries, revealed a little-known local heritage of Polish-speaking artists. It should also be mentioned that these studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lithuanian society, multi-ethnicity, and national identity that have been carried out during the last two decades by Lithuanian historians have also had a significant impact on developing multinational art history.[12]

7 XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija [A history of the 20th-century Lithuanian art]. Vol. 1, 1900–1940. Gen. ed. I. Korsakaitė. Vilnius: Vaga, 1982.
8 Искусство и нация. Третья конференция искусствоведов балтийских республик. Тезисы. [Art and nation: the third conference of the Baltic art historians. Abstracts]. Vilnius, 1990.
9 J. Poklewski, Polskie życie artystyczne w międzywojennym Wilnie [Polish art life in Vilnius during the inter-war period]. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 1994; A. Romanowski, Młoda Polska wileńska [Young Poland of Vilnius]. Kraków: Universitas, 1999.
10 For the exhibition in Olsztyn, see Wileńskie środowisko artystyczne 1915–1945: malarstwo, grafika, rzeźba, rysunek, fotografia [Vilnius artistic milieu, 1915–1945: painting, printmaking, sculpture, drawing, photography].
Ex. cat. Ed. K. Brakoniecki. Olsztyn: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej, 1989. For the joint exhibition of the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, Toruń Regional Museum and Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, see Kształcenie artystyczne w Wilnie i jego tradycje / Vilniaus meno mokykla ir jos tradicijos [Artistic education in Vilnius and its traditions].
Ex. cat. Eds. J. Malinowski, M. Woźniak, R. Janonienė. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 1996.
11 The Polish–Lithuanian conference of art historians held in Warsaw in 1988 was entitled 'Sztuka Wileńska od konca XIX wieku do 1945 roku' (Vilnius art from the end of the 19th century until 1945). For the Lithuanian–Polish conference of art historians in Vilnius in 2003, see the bilingual edition of conference papers: XX amžiaus pradžios Vilnius: modernėjančios kultūros židinys / Wilno początku XX wieku: ognisko modernizującej się kultury [Vilnius at the start of the 20th century: a centre of cultural renewal]. Ed. L. Laučkaitė. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2004.
12 Inquiries into the multi-ethnic history include the volumes of the series *Lietuvių atgimimo istorijos studijos* (*Studies in the history of the Lithuanian National Revival*), as well as the publications by the Lithuanian Institute of History. The following study also deserves attention: E. Aleksandravičius, A. Kulakauskas, Carų valdžioje: XIX amžiaus Lietuva [In the power of tsars: Lithuania in the 19th century]. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996.

As a result, a new field of art-historical research – the study of the artistic culture of Vilnius – was created. Studies about Polish artists in Vilnius were soon followed by studies on Jewish and Russian artists. However, these studies conformed to a narrow, ethnically fragmented approach, since each nationality was interested in investigating its 'own' Vilnius, and perceived the local artistic culture accordingly.

For Lithuanians, Vilnius was and continues to be a symbol of Lithuanian statehood: the city of the grand dukes, their lost and promised capital. For Poles, it is the cradle of one of their most brilliant cultural epochs – of Polish romanticism. For Jews, it is the 'Lithuanian Jerusalem'. Everyone who steps into the past of Vilnius, trespasses (perhaps unwillingly) into ethnically alien territories, and in such lands a researcher does not feel secure. Hence, each researcher chooses the safest strategy, researching his or her own national part of Vilnius, while at the same time being unaware, or unwilling to be aware, of their participation in the greater whole.

This was normal behaviour also for art historians, to whom their discipline obligingly offered the notion of national art. The notion of national art that had been brought about by romanticism has survived in European art and art history for almost two centuries. It has been widely used by art historians throughout the entire twentieth century, and attempts to rethink the idea only emerged at the end of that century. 'Actually the issue of 'national art' is related not so much to the issue of the national aspect of art as such, as to the way art is interpreted, appreciated and popularised', said Polish art historian Marta Leśniakowska, at the international conference of art historians in Warsaw in 1998.[13] Thus, the problem of the national character of art is related less to art's objective qualities than to the artistic self-awareness of a period that attributes certain traits to the manifestation of national art. In Western art history, many now avoid using the term 'national art', and similar processes are taking place in the art history of Eastern and Central Europe. According to the Slovak art historian Ján Bákoš, 'the time has passed when the main objective of art history was to support the myth of nations'.[14] There has been a pervasive shift from art history as the history of the art of a nation (or a nation-state) to art history that accentuates artistic creation as an intersection of diverse cultural influences.

13 M. Leśniakowska, Polska historia sztuki i nacjonalizm [Polish art history and nationalism]. – Nacjonalizm w sztuce i historii sztuki 1789–1950 [Nationalism in art and art history, 1789–1950]. Eds. D. Konstantynow, R. Pasieczny, P. Paszkiewicz. Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1998, p. 33.
14 J. Bákoš, Sciences and the Humanities in a Postcommunist Society (With Particular Regard to Art History in Slovakia). – Kunstchronik 1992, Bd. 45 (April), p. 130.

Multicultural Vilnius

This shift has encouraged me to engage in the reconstruction of the multi-ethnic art scene of Vilnius in its entirety, instead of researching the artistic heritage of one or another particular national or ethnic group. Vilnius is an old multicultural town, in which Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, Jews, Germans, Tatars, and Karaite Jews lived side by side for centuries. According to the 1897 census, the population of the city was about 150,000, comprising forty per cent Jews, thirty per cent Poles, twenty per cent Russians, four per cent Belarusians, and two per cent Lithuanians.

At that time, the majority of ethnic Lithuanians were peasants living in the countryside. This social origin of the nation led many Lithuanian scholars to maintain that 'true' Lithuanian culture is rural and agrarian, whereas urban culture was 'alien' and 'not ours'. Consequently, the following question arises: should the art of Vilnius be studied and interpreted in the framework of an urban or rural identity? After all, at the turn of the twentieth century, Vilnius was a rapidly growing city and was the centre of the region's artistic life; it was the focal point for the dissemination of new ideas and had a lively professional art scene. The artistic life of Vilnius has led to a question that Lithuanian scholars might find uncomfortable: what form should the narrative of national Lithuanian art take, given that, historically, the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants (including the artists) of its central city were from nations other than Lithuanian? Moreover, was the capital of Lithuania itself 'non-Lithuanian'? On the other hand, by recognising this city as 'our own', despite it being apparently 'non-Lithuanian', Lithuanian national history may add an important component to its narrative: the manifestation of modern urban culture in Lithuania.

The development of capitalist economic and social modernisation in Lithuania occurred during the last decades of the nineteenth century, while developments in cultural life were still impeded. During the nineteenth century, Lithuania suffered repression following the failed uprisings against tsarist rule. In 1832, the only Lithuanian institution of higher education, the Vilnius University, which also had a department of art, was closed. The result of another uprising in 1864 was the ban on Lithuanian-language publications as well as on Lithuanian national societies, schools and artistic activities. In Vilnius, the revival of culture and art began only in the aftermath of tsar Nicholas II's 1905 liberalising manifesto.[15] It becomes possible to speak of the development of Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish cultures in the city only following that date.

Although the subject matter of my study was the multi-ethnic art of Vilnius during the early twentieth century, the main object of the research was the social aspect of art – the functioning of art in society, rather than the production of art itself. The study of the artistic life of Vilnius (exhibitions, collections, art societies, art schools, art ideologies, leaders, art criticism, etc.) has revealed a complicated, controversial and dynamic multinational art scene, comprised of four main ethnic groups – Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish and Russian. Due to the prevailing nationalist ideologies, each group was a

15   After the Russian war with Japan and the revolutionary movement throughout the Russian empire in 1905, tsar Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto. For the national movement in Lithuania, the most important point was that the manifesto granted basic civil liberties to the population, including personal inviolability, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association. Legal national organisations – cultural, political, scientific and educational – were all founded following the declaration of this manifesto.

closed community with its own art life. At the same time, each had complex interrelations with the others.

Vilnius is also the birthplace of professional Lithuanian art, originating with the so-called 'new Lithuanians' – young artists engaged in the movement of national rebirth. Paradoxically, these artists of ethnic Lithuanian origin did not reside in Vilnius and sent their works from the art academies of the various European cities where they were studying: Kraków, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Paris and Munich. The year 1906, when the first Lithuanian art exhibition was held and the Lithuanian Art Society was founded, became the cornerstone for professional Lithuanian art. Before World War I, the Society organised annual exhibitions of national art in Vilnius, Kaunas and Riga (fig. 2). It was also engaged in publishing, collecting folk art, sponsoring artists, etc. Active members of the board included the artists Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, and Petras Rimša. The most distinguished among them was certainly Čiurlionis, an alumnus of the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw (the later Warsaw Academy of Art) – a prominent composer and symbolist painter.

Relations between the 'old' and 'new' Lithuanians were complicated. The former – the gentry and landowners – adhered to the traditional concept of national identity, based on the historical formula *gente lituanus, natione polonus* that identified Lithuanian-ness with Polish-ness. They spoke Polish, maintained close ties with Polish culture, but considered Lithuania their homeland nonetheless. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Lithuanian society divided into two camps according to their understanding of Lithuanian identity: adherents of the Lithuanian national movement rejected the Lithuanian–Polish double identity, whereas the Polish-speaking community increasingly identified itself as part of the modern Polish nation. Art and artistic life during this period was a reflection of the struggle between the two camps. At that time, Polish-speaking artists predominated in Vilnius, and sometimes entire families (e.g. those of Bałzukiewicz, Römer) were engaged in art life. Their artistic views were conditioned by their identification with the historical glory of Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the rise of anti-imperial nationalism during the nineteenth century creating its own martyrology.[16] For them, art was a treasury of historical values and the incarnation of the independent state – the Commonwealth with all its history and culture; and this accounts for the retrospection evident in their artworks and the glorification of monuments of the past. These artists maintained close connections with art centres in Poland. In 1903, they organised an exhibition of the Society of Polish Artists Sztuka ('art' in Polish); this was the first exhibition of new art in Vilnius. Ferdinand Ruszczyc, who first became well known in Poland, settled in Vilnius in 1908. There he stopped painting and dedicated himself to the cultural advancement of the city: setting new trends in the theatre, organising exhibitions of folk art (fig. 3), publishing books and editing the exclusive illustrated cultural magazine *Tygodnik Wileński* (*The Vilnius Weekly*). Another active artist was Stanisław Jarocki, the head teacher of a

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16 The two uprisings in Lithuania and Poland against Russia, in 1831–1832 and 1863, were brutally beaten down and followed by repressions, including death sentences, Siberian exile, etc. This experience formed a collective attitude of the population toward those events as martyrology, whereby the rebels were glorified as martyrs fallen in the fight against Russian imperial oppression.

private drawing school funded by Józef Montwiłł. The school functioned as a centre of Polish art in Vilnius.

The Jewish population made up nearly half of the total population of Vilnius at that time, and their cultural situation was complicated. Although the Jewish community was especially conservative and deeply religious, it could not avoid change and modernisation. Traditionally, Judaism had banned the depiction of the human figure in art; in contrast, new Western art was based on such depiction. Consequently, young Jews who wanted to study art and become artists had to compromise their orthodox religious principles. One of the first to do this was Mark Antokolski: he ignored the attitudes of his family and entered the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, and soon became one of the most famous sculptors in Russia. Antokolski had set an example for others to follow. Following his death in 1904, the industrial art and drawing classes, intended to educate young Jews, were established in his name in Vilnius. The classes became a centre of Jewish artistic life, organising exhibitions in which Jewish iconography and religious motifs predominated (fig. 4). As Vilnius could offer only the basics of art education, many Jews continued their studies in Paris where some became central figures in modern art. The famous inter-war School of Paris included many émigré artists from Central and Eastern Europe, and a number of its celebrated members (Chaïm Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Michel Kikoïne, etc.) were alumni of the industrial art and drawing classes in Vilnius.

Russian artists resident in Vilnius also made a substantial contribution to the local artistic life. In state schools, the art teachers were Russians and they influenced the young generation accordingly (the laws prohibited persons of local nationalities to be employed in state schools in Lithuania).[17] The best-known Russian artist in Vilnius was Ivan Trutnev. In 1864, Trutnev set up his drawing school, and taught there until his death in 1910. Trutnev was an academic painter, while some younger teachers, i.e. Ivan Rybakov, Sergei Yuzhanin and Nikolai Sergeev-Korobov – all alumni of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts – were oriented more towards pictorial realism and impressionism (fig. 5).

Multi-ethnicity had a strong impact on the development of art in Vilnius and provoked competition among artists of different nations. Thus, the emergence of the Lithuanian Art Society and its exhibitions was followed by similar activities in other ethnic communities. The competition was especially evident between Lithuanian and Polish artists: the Lithuanians as relative newcomers were trying to establish themselves in the artistic milieu previously dominated by the Poles. Both circles were struggling to make visible their own artistic and national identity, to become the leading force of the local art scene and to gain public recognition. The tensions also existed between Russian and Jewish artists. The latter were trained in Russian art schools and thus their education was based on Russian artistic traditions. As a consequence, they felt challenged to assert their difference and to search for their own identity in art.

17   After the uprising of 1863 there was a decree forbidding Catholics (Lithuanians and Poles were mostly Catholics) to be employed in the state institutions (including state schools at all levels) in Vilnius and Kaunas *gubernias*, and only priests and doctors were exempt. This legal discrimination continued until 1905.

These tensions produced conflicts and competition that brought dynamic changes to the art life of Vilnius.

While relations between the artists of various nations were complicated, an institution was established that reached beyond the differentiations by nationality – the Vilnius Art Society, founded in 1908. The Society managed to unite artists from different ethnic communities and organised annual spring exhibitions of their works as well as other events. For these multi-ethnic exhibitions, the catalogues and posters were printed in five local languages. It should be noted that neither the imperial Russian authorities nor the national communities supported the Society. Nevertheless, it made significant advances in the local art scene: it encouraged new trends in art, and the works of young artists studying in Paris (Bencion Zukerman, Samuil Danishevsky, Bolesław Buyko et al.) were exhibited. The Society also held exhibitions of Russian and German artists: during 1909 to 1910, an exhibition of the St. Petersburg avant-garde group *Треугольник* (*Triangle*): Nikolai Kulbin, brothers David and Vladimir Burliuk and others; and during 1914 to 1915, an exhibition of German expressionist painters Alexei Jawlensky and Marianne Werefkin from the Munich group *Der Blaue Reiter*.

In addition to discussing the complexities of multinational and multi-ethnic art life in Vilnius, the second part of the monograph is devoted to the analysis of the works of the most prominent artists of the period. It should be stressed that their work, although related to local national and cultural context, identified strongly with the international art movements of early modernism, symbolism, impressionism and art nouveau. One could say that commitment to these international movements united artists of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in early twentieth-century Vilnius.

Thus, the case study of Vilnius at the beginning of the twentieth century shows that the concept of multi-ethnicity may prove useful in studying the art of the city. It is often a necessary tool also in understanding and analysing artistic identity. I personally have found it useful in my research on the painter Marianne Werefkin (1860–1938)[18] – a study following the traditions of feminist art history and based on Werefkin's correspondence that is kept at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in Vilnius. Werefkin was born into a Russian family, grew up in Lithuania, and studied painting in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1896 she went to Germany and settled in Munich, where she promulgated the new French painting, initiated the founding of the *Neue Künstlervereinigung München* in 1909, and later became a member of *Der Blaue Reiter* and joined the international avant-garde movement. Werefkin occasionally returned to Lithuania to visit Kaunas and Vilnius, where she painted expressionist visions of the city (fig. 6). After World War I she lived in Ascona, Switzerland. In both her personality and her work, Werefkin brought together various different ethnic, cultural and artistic traditions.

18 L. Laučkaitė, Ekspresionizmo raitelė Mariana Veriovkina [Expressionist rider Marianne Werefkin]. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2007.

How to write the art history of the city

In present-day Lithuania multi-ethnicity is conceived as a historical phenomenon that enriches culture, and as a political formula for reconciling the nation, i.e. the Lithuanians and ethnic minorities who have lived in the territory of Lithuania for centuries and contributed to the common culture. Nevertheless, such a model does not apply to every particular place or context, as we have seen in research of the professional art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the time when ethnic Lithuanians themselves had only a marginal presence in the cities and were beginning to take their first steps toward full participation in professional art practises, a different understanding of multi-ethnicity emerged. This, in turn, may have contributed towards the substitution of a more exclusive idea of national identity for a narrowly defined (ethnic) Lithuanian-ness.

Thus, writing a history of the art of just one city, Vilnius, as opposed to the history of national art, gives a different, non-ethnocentric perspective for research. The art history of the city, even of a capital city, does not necessarily coincide with the main (ideological) focus of the general history of art in a given state, since that state may have changed historically in terms of its sovereignty, political system or territory. Any answer to the question of whether a city functions as the centre of a particular territory depends on the concrete historical circumstances and, in this respect, Vilnius is an especially complicated case.

For a long time, the art history of Vilnius was written with the territorial framework of present-day Lithuania in mind, despite the fact that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, with its capital in Vilnius, had occupied a much larger area than Lithuania from the thirteenth century until 1795, including Belarus and parts of present-day Ukrainian territory. The artistic heritage of these areas is only now being taken into account. This belated step is especially important for the studies of nineteenth-century art, because, according to the administrative division of tsarist Russia, Vilnius was the economic and cultural centre of the north-western *krai*: a territory that comprised the *gubernias* (i.e. governorates) of Vilna (Vilnius), Kovno (Kaunas), Grodno (Hrodna), Minsk, Mogilev and Vitebsk, and greatly exceeded the area of modern Lithuania. Unfortunately, our studies have usually disregarded this fact.

In the twentieth century, Vilnius belonged to several successive states and experienced different political regimes: its political status changed seven times. Aside from the periods of war and occupation, there remain certain specific problems: in the inter-war period, Vilnius belonged to Poland. At that time, the provisional capital of Lithuania was Kaunas and the status of Vilnius was an issue of conflict between states. It is only during the last decade that our art historians have turned their attention to the Polish art of inter-war Vilnius; it had long been a taboo – a cultural heritage from a hostile state.

It may be that research into the art of the city will provide a link in the chain of continuing artistic – rather than political – traditions. However, the twentieth-century history of Vilnius caused a rupture in artistic traditions and the loss of cultural memory among its inhabitants. Two world wars and the accompanying transformations have changed the city's population and the corresponding conception of its artistic

traditions several times in a single century. This raises a fundamental question: in writing a history of the art of the city, how are researchers to reconcile the various different – and often conflicting – narratives of the national communities that inhabit that city? Practical questions aside, one thing is certain: such a history can only be written by reconstructing the pluralism and cultural variety of the place, and by taking into account the various cultural perspectives.
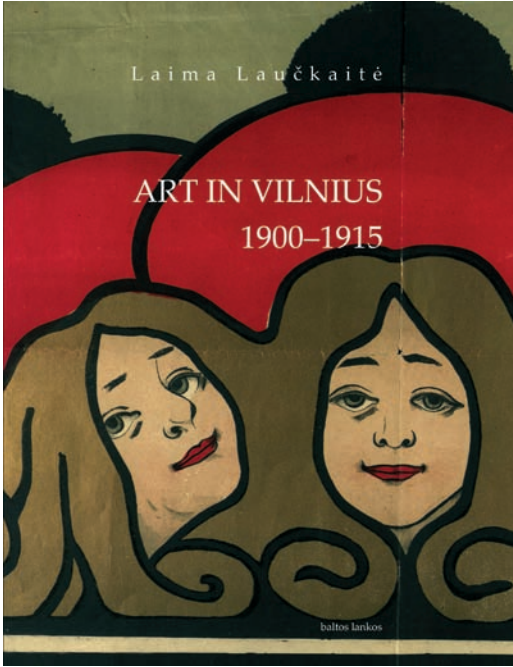
1.

Bookcover of *Art in Vilnius, 1900–1915* by Laima Laučkaitė. Vilnius, 2008.

2.

Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, a poster for the Lithuanian art exhibition in Riga (1910). Photo: M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas.
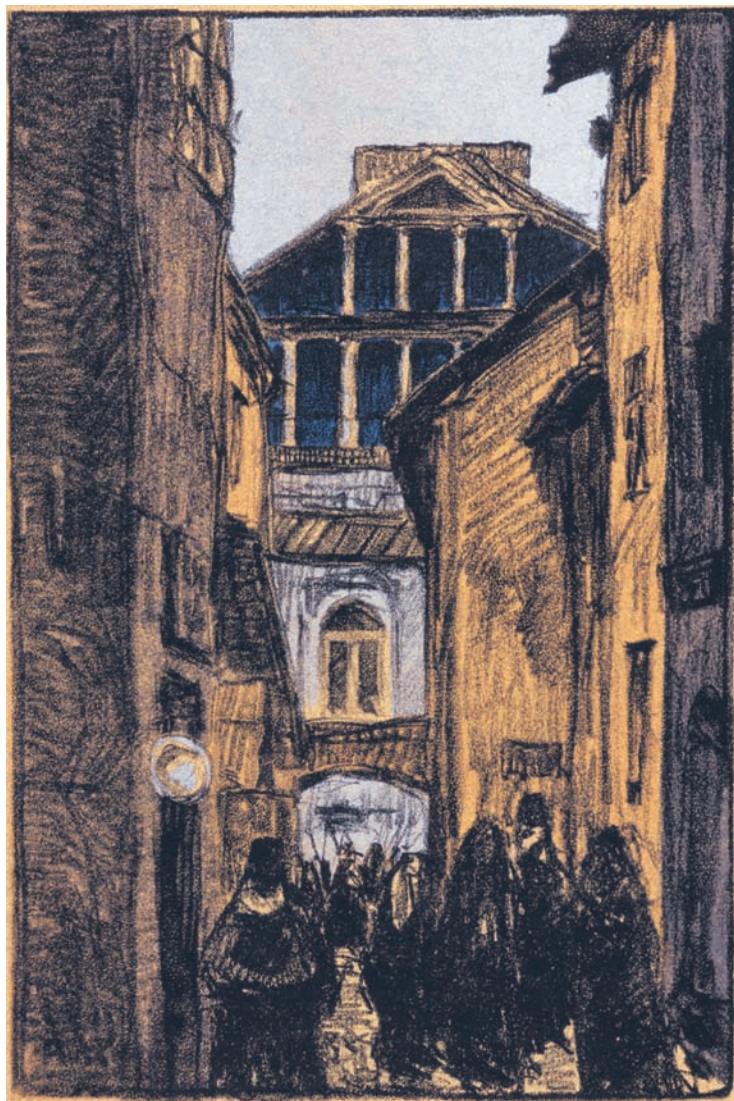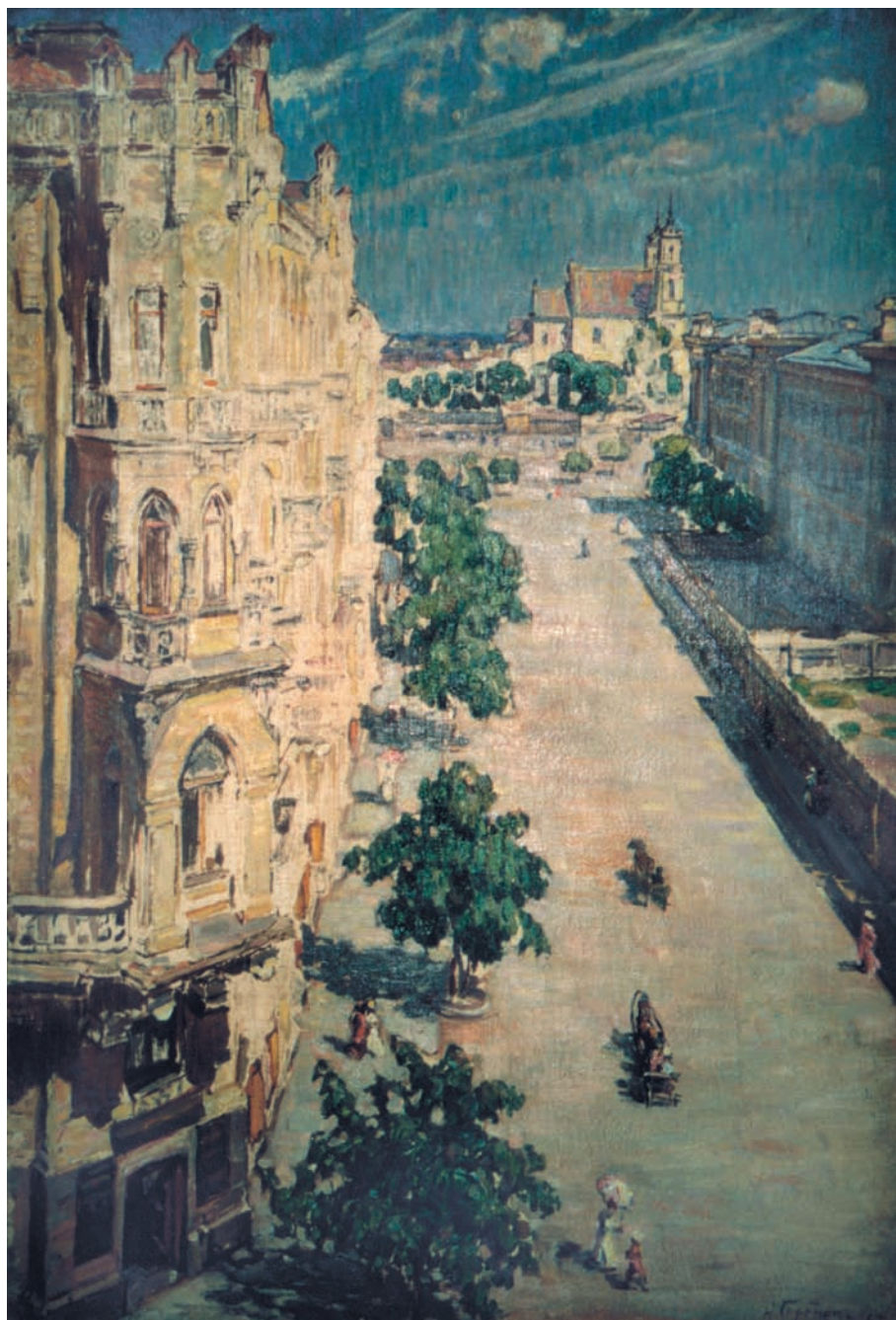
3.
Ferdinand Ruszczyc, a poster for the exhibition of folk art and handicrafts (1913). Text in Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian.
Photo: National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius.

4.

Iakov Sher, *The Great Synagogue in Vilnius* (early 20th century). Lithograph.
Photo: National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius.

5.
Nikolai Sergeev-Korobov, *The Church of St. Philip and St. James in Vilnius* (1918). Oil.
Photo: National Museum of Lithuania, Vilnius.

6.
Marianne Werefkin, *A Police Sentinel in Vilnius* (1914). Tempera.
Photo: Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna Ascona, Switzerland.