

# Art Déco and Neoclassicism in 1900-1930 Architecture. Examples from Latvia, Poland and Czechoslovakia

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The 19th- and 20th-century history of the Latvian, Czech, Polish and Slovak peoples intertwines and reflects Europe's common historical roots. In the 1850s and 1860s, when these nations were ruled by neighbouring powers, civil societies began to emerge. The middle class that begins to appear – the intelligentsia – provides foundations for rapid cultural and civilisational development. This resulted in new construction and more architectural activity, particularly in large cities. The artistic framework for these activities was eclecticism, deeply rooted in the 19th-century aesthetics. Most stately urban structures built at the time – theatres and museums<sup>1</sup> followed this convention, as did department stores, banks, railway stations and other municipal projects. These buildings show much architectural resemblance, as they reflect the prevailing trends in European culture and architecture. The Romantic eclecticism and historicism, so common in the late 19th century, are later equally commonly replaced by Modern Architecture. This appeared in the early 20th century in Europe, demonstrating the readiness of European societies for modern and creative change, later disrupted in 1939.

The outbreak of World War I caused major geopolitical changes in Europe, which also affected its economy and culture. The first

new independent state to appear on the map of Europe was Latvia. As the Austro-Hungarian empire crumbled, the Czechs and the Slovaks regained independence, building new statehood in 1918 – Czechoslovakia. That year Poland freed itself from Russian, Prussian and Austrian occupation and started a new historical period – the 2nd Republic. The new countries embarked on rapid economic growth, based on private entrepreneurship and a supportive banking system, which was important for what happened in the building sector.

## **Art Déco – towards new synthesis**

Art Déco architecture combined and transformed many aesthetic themes. It had its roots mainly in Art Nouveau and Cubism, but also worked with classical motifs, drew on Expressionism and national-romantic affirmation of folklore. All these elements are present in the examples I want to show.

Early 20th-century architecture, both in Latvia and Bohemia, is connected with the German and Austrian tradition, especially the architectural school of the Austrian Otto Wagner (1841-1918). His own work varied from a conspicuously Art Nouveau station of the underground at *Karlsplatz* in Vienna (1898-1899) to a clearly classicist *Postsparkasse* in Vienna (1904-1907). Unobtrusive decorativeness of this project combined with classicist design pattern of the façade marks a new period in European architecture.

One of Otto Wagner's disciples was Jan Kotěra (1871-1923). It is in his work that we

1. Like the National Theatre in Prague (1868-1883), the First City Theatre of Riga (German) (1860-1863), the National Theatre in Cracow (1890-1893), the Second City Theatre of Riga (Russian) (1900-1902), the City Theatre of Moravska Ostrava (1906-1907), the National Gallery in Prague (1885-1890) and the City Museum of Arts in Riga (1903-1905).



1. Latvian Society House in Riga (*Rīgas Latviešu biedrības nams*) 1909, architect Ernests Pole and Elzens Laube. Photo by the author

can find one of the earliest and most visible synthesis of Neoclassicism and Art Déco. In 1907-1908 Kotěra designed the Czech Trade and Industry Pavilion for the Prague Exhibition. The composition is reminiscent of Ernst Ludwig House in Darmstadt, designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich, yet the architect introduced the ziggurat motif in designing the front, the layout of windows is clearly affected by Cubism – the new trend, popular with young Czech architects. The design drawings show that the interior was decorated with the zigzag ornament – trendy at the time.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 20th century an outstanding example of early Modern Architecture is built in Latvia. It is the Latvian Society House in Riga (*Rīgas Latviešu biedrības nams*), designed in 1909 by Ernest Pole (1872-1914) and Eižen Laube (1880-1967) (Fig. 1). As is the case with Kotěra's building in Prague, it is reminiscent of the work of J. M. Olbrich, especially the *Secessionsgebäude* in Vienna (1897). The Latvian Society House in Riga is considered to be the first building in which Modern Architecture

combines the tradition of Classicism, the *Wiener Sezession*, and the national Romanticism. The figures in the *panneau* crowning the façade, made by Janis Rozentāls (1866-1917), result from the symbiosis of Art Nouveau and symbolic romanticism with Latvian elements, while the volume of the building maintains classical convention. The main element at the front is the portal with granite columns and Ionic-like capitals. The predominant feature, however, is the modern geometry of the forms. Laube and Pole gave up the earlier design in the spirit of Art Nouveau, as it was around 1909 that the return of the opposing classicist trend began. In this process, one can see the emergence and the first symptoms of Art Déco in Europe as a synthesis of geometrically transformed Classicist, Cubist and Historicist forms.

In 1912, construction started in Warsaw of one of the most significant specimens of early Modern Architecture in Poland – the Cooperative Societies Bank "Pod Orłami", designed by Jan Heurich, Jr. It is, in a way, similar to the Latvian Society House in Riga. The Warsaw building represents Classicism moderne in how the façade is designed, combining classicist elements with the German *Jugendstil*,<sup>3</sup> while the building as

2. Tołłoczko Zdzisława, *Architektura perennis. Szkice z historii nieawangardowej architektury nowoczesnej pierwszej połowy XX wieku (Ekspresjonizm – Art Déco – Neoklasycyzm)*, – Cracow 1999, p. 53.; Ślapeta Vladimir, *Kubismus v architektuře* [in:] Český kubismus. Architektura a design, 1910-1925 (red. Alexander von Vegesack), Prague 1991, pp. 34-35.

3. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Nowa forma w architekturze Polskiej 1900-1925. Teoria i praktyka*, Wrocław, Warsaw, Cracow 1967,



2. A tenement house at 21a, Elizabetes in Riga, 1910, architect Martins Nuksa. Photo by the author

a whole evolves towards geometrical simplicity, lightness and refined monumentality.

Both Latvian and Polish architecture of the 1920s is clearly influenced by the St. Petersburg classicist school. Architects working within this convention combined tradition with early Modern Architecture. Of the numerous examples from Poland, let me mention two: the Bank Polski in Siedlce, designed by Marian Lalewicz (1876-1944) and the postal savings bank in Cracow (*Pocztowa Kasa Oszczędności*) (1922-1925), designed by Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz (1883-1948). An even earlier, similar synthesis of Classicism and Modern Architecture can be found in Riga, where in 1910, a tenement was built to the design of Mārtiņš Nukš (1878-1942) at 21a, Elizabetes street (Fig. 2). In the Czech architecture, there is a clear analogy, too – the building of a savings bank in Ostrava (*Moravskoostravská spořitelna*), built in 1927-1930 to the design of Jan Kotěra's disciple Karel Kotas (1894-1973). The first version of the design was much more avant-garde in style, but the architect had to accommodate the requirements and the taste of the client. The building consists of a few wings. The elevation of the main part is divided into three levels and

is clearly decorative, with only the middle level paying tribute to more classical forms.<sup>4</sup>

The combination of Classicist forms with late Art Nouveau and early Modern Architecture can be found in many European buildings of the time. It is seen in the shape of the 1910 tenement house by Ernest Pole at 10, Smilšu street in Riga (Fig. 3) and in the building of Feniks Insurance in Cracow (1918-1932) by A. Szyszko-Bohusz (Fig. 4). It can also be traced in a much earlier building designed by August Perret at 25 rue Franklin in Paris (1902-1904). Even though the renowned floral motif in Perret's façade is rooted in Art Nouveau, the way it is used by the designer is one of the first highlights of Art Déco.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the Ernest Pole building in Smilšu street, with its modest decoration and classical layout of the elevation is closer to Art Déco tradition of the mid 1930s than the mid 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

The coexistence of geometrical classical forms with Modernist decoration can also be observed in Czech architecture, as demonstrated in the stately building of the Ministry of Agriculture (*Ministerstvo zemědělství*) in Prague, designed by František Roith and completed in 1928-1932.

4. Vybíral Jindřich, *Zrození velkoměsta. Architektura v obraze Moravské Ostravy*, Ostrava 2003, pp. 129.-136.

5. Čaupale Renáta, Tołoczko Zdzisława, *Secesja i modernizm w Rydze. Pół wieku Architektury Łotewskiej perłą europejskiego dziedzictwa kulturalnego. Część I. U progu uzyskanej suwerenności*, [in:] *Czasopismo Techniczne*, 2005 z. 13-A/2005, Cracow, p. 21.

6. *Ibidem* – pp. 20-21.

3. A tenement house at 10, Smilšu in Riga, 1910, architect Ernests Pole. Photo by the author



Modern decoration based on classical canons is also conspicuous in the designs of Jaroslav Stockar-Bernkopf (1890-?), particularly in the design of the metallurgical association building (*Ředitelství báňské a hutní společnosti*; 1921) in Ostrava, in which the façade is decorated with cubist-heroic sculptures by Josef Kubiček. The whole composition is Art-Déco-styled and is a major compromise between tradition and modernity.

European art and architecture of the early decades of the 20th century made Romantic and ethnic references. The Latvian ethnic and Romantic architecture of 1910-1920 was inspired by the Finnish tradition, as it was then that architects like Aleksandrs Vanags (1873-1919), Eižens Laube and Konstantīns Pēkšēns (1859-1928) worked. Later, the search

for such motifs was directed towards Latvian mythology. This was done particularly by Pauls Kundziņš (1888-1983), an outstanding architect and monument conservator. The pavilion of the Latvian Building Committee (*Nacionālā celtniecības komiteja*), which he designed for the Jelgava 1937 Exposition has certainly Art Déco features, like the round, porthole-type windows or the *zigzag moderne* pattern inside the projection. Vernacular elements interweave with modern ones, and the decoration of the "1925 Style" meets with Classicism.

#### **Towards Monumental Classicism of the 1930s**

The development of Art Déco, in Riga, Warsaw and Prague alike, is accompanied by a search for a style which would include elements

4. Feniks Insurance building in Cracow, 1928-1932, architect Adolf Szyszko-Bohusz. Photo by the author



of stateliness, publicity and monumentality in architecture. Once again, the classical and neoclassical forms proved useful. becoming something like an "official style" in all the three republics and their capitals.

Prestigious architecture appraisal committees working in Prague showed a favourable attitude towards neoclassicists, especially those connected with Otto Wagner's school: Antonin Engel (1879-1958), Bohumil Hübschmann (1884-1914), Jan Kotěra (1871-1923), František Roith (1876-1942) and Pavel Janák (1882-1956). They were recognised as a generation of talented architects, capable of combining Classicism with Modern Architecture and vigorously seeking a national style.

As a result, in 1920s and 1930s many grand buildings were erected in Prague – for ministries and banks,<sup>7</sup> which are the city's asset today. These were the ministry of the railway (*Ministerstvo železnic*, 1927-1931; designed by A. Engel), postal savings bank (*Poštovní spořitelna*, 1928-1931; designed by F. Roith), a major commercial bank (*Živnostenská banka*, 1928-1938; designed by F. Roith), the ministry of trade (*Ministerstvo obchodu*, 1932-1933; designed by Josef Fanta) and others.

The attitude of the Czech president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) to the grand style was important, too. The choice of the design of Jože Plečnik (1872-1957) for the reconstruction of the royal palace in Prague defined the role of Classicism in shaping the "political" image of the 1930s.

The history of architecture had seen something similar nearly a hundred years earlier, when Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed his great building in Berlin - *Schauspielhaus* (1818-1821), providing a new image for Prussian political and cultural ambitions. Half a century later in Riga, the construction of the First Theatre (*Pilsētas Pirmā teātris*) (...) largely united for the project the otherwise diversified German community of Riga.<sup>8</sup> An attempt to artificially create "the national style" can be seen during the reign of emperor Nicholas I in the form of the so-called Russian Byzantine style. Around 1800, Neogothic came to be considered a national style in Germany,<sup>9</sup> while Bohemian Neorenaissance

was consistently supported by Czech architect Antonin Wiehl (1846-1910)<sup>10</sup>.

As the search for a national style continues throughout the 1930s, Classicism is strongly supported by the authoritarian leaders of three other nations; Germany, Italy and the Soviet Russia. A trend to combine classical forms with the image of the state is reinforced by Latvian publications of the 1930s, which at the same time praise the activities of president of the republic Kārlis Ulmanis (1877-1942)<sup>11</sup> and commend "the Latvian style in architecture"<sup>12</sup>.

It should be noted that the face of the Classicism of the 1930s was very different from any other of its previous versions. It was definitely modernistic, as it was difficult to ignore everything that, not long ago, the Modernist

*katedry w Kolonii. Przyczynek do romantyzmu i historyzmu w europejskiej kulturze architektonicznej XIX wieku*, Teka Komisji Urbanistyki i Architektury O/PAN in Cracow, Vol. XXXIII, 2001.; Tołoczko Z. "Sen architekta" czyli o historii i historyzmie architektury XIX i XX wieku. – Cracow, 2002 – p. 42.

10. Šváha Rostislav, *The Architecture... op.cit*, p. 28.

11. Laube Eišens, *Kupls celtju vainags pāri visai Latvijai* [in:] Latvijas Kareivis. – 4.09.1937. – p.3.

12. Dreimanis Pāvils, *Jauns laikmets galvaspilsētas celtniecībā* // Latvijas Arhitektūra. – 1938 – No 1. – p. 3.

5. Ministry of Finance at the corner of Smilšu and Zirgu in Riga, 1937-1939, Aleksandrs Klinklavs. Photo by the author



7. Šváha Rostislav, *The Architecture of New Prague, 1895-1945*. Cambridge, Mass, 1995, p. 186.

8. Spārītis Ojārs, *Ludviga Bonšteta un Reinholda Šmēlinga projekti* // *Latvijas Nacionālā opera* / texts by: B.Alsne ... i. i. – Rīga 2000, p. 24.

9. Tołoczko Zdzisława i Tomasz, *Z dziejów rozbudowy i restauracji*



6. The army stores at 16, Audēju in Riga (*Armijas ekonomiskais veikals*) 1936-1938; architect Arturs Galindoms. Photo by the author

avant-garde flew on their banners. The changes in architecture at the time were, too a great extent, moderately modernistic, and the outcome can be treated as non-avant-gard modern, semi-modern, or as Andrzej K. Olszewski suggests, the "1937 Style"<sup>13</sup>.

13. Olszewski Andrzej K., *Styl 1937 w świetle krytyki i historii* [in:] *Myśl o sztuce*, Warsaw, 1976. The term "The 1937 style" was coined in connection with *Exposition Internationale Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne Paris 1937* in a similar way as the

The late 1930s saw many stately public buildings erected in Riga, which can match the best examples of non-avant-garde or Classicism Moderne in Europe. These include the Ministry of Finance in Smilšu & Zirgu street (*Finansu Ministrija*, 1937-1939, designed by Aleksandrs Klinklāvs) (Fig. 5), the army stores at 16, Audēju (*Armijas ekonomiskais veikals*, 1936-1938; designed by Artūrs Galindoms) (Fig. 6), the health management organisation at 5, Skolas (*Slimokases nams*, 1937; designed by Aleksandrs Klinklāvs) and the Palace of Justice at 36, Brīvības bulvāris (*Tiesu pils*, 1936-1938; designed by Fridrihs Skujiņš) (Fig. 7).

The output of one of the most prolific architects in Latvia, Indriķis Blankenburgs (1887-1944) contains both modern classicist forms as well as historicist solutions. The buildings of Latvian banks he designed in the 1930s in Aluksne, Cesis, Kuldīga and in Jekabpils, are formally close to the historicism of the 1930s<sup>14</sup>.

However, the reconstruction Blankenburgs conducted in 1938 of the Lomonosov girls' grammar school designed by Jānis Fridrihs Baumanis (1834-1891) and built in 1868-1871 at 29, *Raiņa bulv*, is an example of Classicism Moderne (Fig. 8). The proportions and composition of the original building were maintained, but the reconstruction produced modern, austere,

name "1925 Style" (Art Déco) after the 1925 Paris exhibition.

14. Krastiņš Jānis, *Latvijas Republikas būvmāksla*, Rīga 1992, p. 116.

7. Palace of Justice at 36, Brīvības bulvāris in Riga, 1936-1938, architect Fridrihs Skujins. Photo by the author





8. Lomonosov girls' grammar school reconstructed in 1938, architect Indrikis Blankenburgs. Photo by the author

nearly cubist forms. And although the central projection is reminiscent of an ancient portico, it is far from Greek Classicism. The layout of the façade refers to contemporary artistic trends not only in Latvia and the whole of Europe, but also in the United States. If we compare the rector's offices of the University of Rome (*Città Universitaria*, 1933-1935), designed by Marcello Piacentini, the Federal Reserve Board Building in Washington, designed by Paul Philippe Cret and

built in 1935-1937, or the building of the Czech National Bank (*Česká národní banka*) in Prague (1935-1939) designed by František Roith (Fig. 9), we can see the similarity of the composition outline. The same classical inspiration, albeit with much modernised aesthetics, is seen in the central projection of the regional court building in Plac Konstytucji in Gdynia. The building was designed by a team of Warsaw architects: Tadeusz Siczkowski, Zbigniew Karpiński and

9. Czech National Bank in Prague, 1935-1939, architect František Roith. Photo by the author



Roman Sołtyński and is also an illustration of the above-mentioned trends in the architecture of the 1930s<sup>15</sup>.

In Latvia, the shift towards the "official" Classicism spread outside Riga. In Daugavpils, a city in the former Polish Livonia, a monumental Unity House (*Vienības nams*) is built in 1936, designed by Verners Vitands (1903-1982). As Vitands writes himself, it was "the largest and most sophisticated construction in Latvia of the day,"<sup>16</sup> meant to house a cultural and sports centre, a hotel, a restaurant and a department store. Another Latvian architect Alfrēds Laukirbe (1901-1993), while a hotel to his design was built in Jelgava (Fig. 10), formerly Mitau - the capital of the Duchy of Courland, combined in a nearly eclectic way neoclassical, expressionist and decorationist elements<sup>17</sup>, also achieving a monumental visual effect.

### In lieu of conclusion

In summarising the above one has to say that trends in European architecture of the early 20th century are multifaceted. This makes it dif-

15. Sołtysik Maria, *Gdynia - miasto dwudziestolecia międzywojennego. Urbanistyka i architektura*, Warsaw 1993, s. 332.

16. Vitands Verners, *Daugavpils Vienības nams* [in:] *Latvijas Arhitektūra. - 1939. - No. 12 - p. 365.*

17. Krastiņš Jānis, *Latvijas ... ,op.cit., p. 132.*

ficult to devise uniform terminology to use by historians in various countries and accounts for the pluralism in attributing a building to a specific style. What remains to be done is to accept, after the eminent Czech historian and theorist of architecture Karel Teige, that every instance of modern architecture is by nature international and universal<sup>18</sup>.

18. Teige Karel, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia*. Prague 1947, s. 9.

**10.** A hotel in Jelgava, 1939, architect Alfreds Laukirbe. Photo by the author



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