

## **Under the Soviet Shadows: Lithuania's Art under the Iron Curtain**

### **Abstract**

This research paper will explore the unheard voices of Lithuanian artists behind the iron curtain of the Soviet Union. With Lithuania under occupation in 1940, they were heavily oppressed, with many of their arts destroyed. There were few artists who remained, with many of them either executed or fleeing the country for America. The few who remained would become Fine Art teachers and would avoid voicing their opinions of the Soviets, conforming to official directives. Occupied from 1940-1990, artists had to navigate a delicate balance between creative freedom and the state imposed socialist realism. Some artists found ways to critique and evade censorship by developing subtle visual language. An innovative artist who stayed loyal to Lithuania was Antanas Zmuidzinavicius who played a vital role to Lithuania's Art History. Another significant figure to Lithuania's history of art was Antanas Gudaitis. The Research objectives of this paper are: to explore paintings, sculpture and other arts and crafts that contributed to Lithuania's cultural identity before the Soviet Union. My second aim is to examine the art created at the height of the occupation. My third aim is to explore the impact of Lithuania's art within the Soviet Union. By analysing different artistic works, this paper will shed some light on a new perspective of creativity of Lithuania under authoritarian rule as their work adapted with a little rebellion. The point of the research is to bring light Lithuania's art that is often overlooked due to limited global recognition, it's important to find out about other artists to gain a new perspective of art under oppression.

## **The Paper**

This research paper will explore the unheard voices of Lithuania's artists behind the iron curtain of the Soviet Union. With Lithuania under occupation in 1940, they were heavily oppressed, with many of their arts destroyed. The few artists who remained, had to conform to social realism if they didn't, they would be either executed or put in jail. Many artists chose to flee to other countries such as the US and France. Most of the artists who remained would teach at Fine Art schools. This paper will explore the arts that contributed to Lithuania's cultural identity before the occupation. Art that was created during the Soviet Union and the impact it had on the arts and culture.

Before the Soviet Union, Lithuania enjoyed a vibrant art scene following its independence in 1918, seeing an emergence of diverse art forms, influenced by Western European art including Expressionism, Symbolism and Cubism. In this section I will examine key Lithuania's Art history that form its cultural artistic identity, until 1940. The Traditional arts and Crafts of Lithuania are abundant in variety. This came about during a time when many people lived on small farms and villages. Some of these crafts include weaving, paper cutting, painting of Easter eggs, metalwork, woodcarving and crosses. In this section I will be focusing on crosses and woodcarving as they are relevant in this paper.

Woodcarving is something that has been a part of traditional craftsmanship that many people would carve practical things for everyday life such as spoons, bowls, towel racks and decorated chests. Figurines that were popular to carve were of statuettes of Christ and depictions of pagan gods, and other symbolisms including snakes. Another craft that is important to Lithuania are crosses and metal work, that can be seen all over the country particularly on Churches and county houses rooftops. Iron crosses would also be used to decorate cemeteries. Many of the motifs used in metal work would use symbolism that date back to pagan routes including representations of gods, the sun and moon. Ornamental crosses like metal work are everywhere that is part of the cultural identity for hundreds of

years with many varying styles. The people who would carve these crosses are called 'Kryzdirbys', meaning wood carvers is recognised by UNESCO Immaterial World Heritage art in 2001. A well-known example of crosses is a place called the Hill of Crosses in Siauliai. This is not only an important pilgrimage site for hundreds of years with over 200,000 crosses. It's become a symbol of strength and resistance due to the Soviet soldiers burning it down several times, and each time it would be re-built overnight showing resilience.

Use of symbolism would be seen in paintings in the early 1900s. The most notable artist and composer famous for symbolism was Mikalojus, Konstantinas Ciurlionis. The artist is also considered to be a pioneer of abstract art. The artist used a mixture of mythology and folklore in his paintings chose to dedicate all his art to Lithuania. With many of his works routed in nature depicting landscapes, animals and the sun. Thus, laying the foundations of Lithuanian modernism. Many of his paintings have a dreamlike quality showing movement which reflected his interest as a composer having a melodic Rythm and harmonies in colour. This can be seen in his paintings *Rex* (1909) and *Fairytales of the Kings* (1909) they also explore the ideas of the creation of the earth and the relationship between man and the universe. Unfortunately, after his death in 1911 he was largely forgotten and didn't have any of his works exhibited until the 1950s. During the Soviet Union there was a renewed interest in his work, but his modernist styles of his works were largely ignored.

Kaunas, a temporary capital after Vilnius was occupied by Poland, was transformed as the cultural scene for many artists. 1920s was a transformative period starting with a new art school opening in 1922, a national theatre was established and the M.K.Ciurlionis museum was opened in 1925 named after the artist. The arts in the city were flourishing leading to the creation of the ARS Group in 1932 by a group of young avant-garde artists who published a manifesto. This was about creative freedom and rejecting artistic trends of the time and strict dogma. The most notable founders were Antanas Gudaitis, Adomas Galdikas,

Antanas Samuolis and Juozas Mikenas. Most of these artists will have graduated from Kaunas Art School.

The Ars group began their manifesto thusly: “We appear in a bare, painful, desolate soil. We can see a grand art culture through the ages. Pensive Christ, fairy tales, songs. Small remains of art already hidden in the walls of museums, almost picked clean by an ordinary wind of our dusk, that have accumulated such great examples for us”. Hence, the young painters recognised the reality – the complicated fine arts situation of that time and emphasised an important source for them – Lithuanian folk art of old.

Kauno Modernaus Meno Fondas. 2025

This group together created modern re-interpretations of Lithuanian folk art incorporating Parisian influence from artist who studied there. The artist united together to challenge older generation artists of stagnant styles, rejecting abstract art. Their first exhibition was not well received by the critiques of the day for being provocative. Partly due to the artists depicting the poor in the hard labours of the countryside. Samuolis an expressionist artist who had a limited output of art would primarily depict the people living in poverty. Despite its brief existence, they made a lasting impression, having created paintings, sculptures and graphic art, determining the development of Lithuania’s art for decades after they had disbanded.

Then in 1940, Lithuania was once again occupied by Russia under the Soviet Union. Artists had to conform to social realism that depicted class struggles, hard manual labour, and communist values. Any deviation of censorship would mean punishment. It's not surprising that many artists fled Soviet Lithuania for the USA and Western countries for freedom. With a highly organised USSR it was hard for artists to be creative whilst painting within the social realism genre. Those who remained would avoid speaking out against the new regime. One of the ways to earn money and staying safe was for artists to teach at art schools, as there were no underground artists union. What little existed of expressions of

non-conformity was subtle and would often not have public access. Instead, their art would be shared between friends or hosted by underground writers' union, for those who didn't have access to public exhibitions. It was not necessarily as a form of resistance but a form of survival.

For artists who conformed to social realism like Antanas Zmuidzinavicius, usually don't speak out publicly of their opinions. He was an artist who started off with painting in symbolism and impressionism at the beginning of his career, it evolved to painting mostly distant lands from his travels. He retained a vivid colour palette and painting from life. His painting *An Artist in the Dune* (1943) is a perfect example of his painterly style. It's depicting of an artist from pre-war times Ceslovas Janusas who was a seaside painter. For most of his career he would only paint varied landscapes. Believing that education is extremely important, he taught in high schools and the Kaunas School of Art. He was even interested in different teaching methods and even published children's books. Zmuidzinavicius would remain absolutely loyal to his nation in all circumstances, including whilst under the Soviet Union.

Social Realism was seen as rigid, formulaic and absent of individual expression by the mid 1960s compared to Western Art. The USSR Artists' Union had to quickly find a solution for reversing the declining popularity of ideological communism. They recognised that avant-garde art could be used as a propaganda tool and influence. To take Soviet art to a new direction Lithuania was chosen for experimental art as a special zone for artistic expression as it's a small country, should anything go out of control, it can be contained. Using Lithuania SSR as a tool for diverse new art the USSR artists' union to risks of expression of ideas that challenged the state ideology. This deviated from the norm of centralised control of the artistic scene. During the 1960's many of the Lithuanian art was divided into two categories of official and unofficial work, however rulers in Lithuania

continued to persist to legitimise the works of less obedient artists inevitable expanding the permissible limits of official culture.

With newfound freedom Lithuanian artists were finally allowed to explore new artistic trends, transforming the art scene. This was the beginning of a new chapter in cultural history and identity. Although artists had new opportunity of deviating from the shackles of social realism, it was a challenge to navigate while still conforming to the overarching political frameworks of Soviet Union. Understanding the danger, the Lithuanian artist's union encouraged artists to work anonymously with pseudonyms and often with groups, protecting themselves from any trouble should the politics change. So, it was the 1970s Lithuania SSR exploded in experimental art.

From 1970-1976 there were themed annual exhibitions. 1970 the first of the seven exhibitions was called *Object* inspired by Andy Warhol's *Brill Boxes*. This exhibition critiqued the process of production, consumption and over accumulation in capitalistic society. Exhibition halls were filled with empty stacks of different large boxes. However, it was popular with artists, the public urged caution in the future for daring ideas. The last of these annual experimental exhibitions was held in 1976 titled *Ghosts*. This was an abstract exhibition with fabric trim and translucent panels suspended in the halls, 'paintings' made of oxidised steel gave a ghostly effect. Unfortunately, the Soviet experiment was largely forgotten due to not being spoken of again in public by the government. It wasn't until Lithuania's independence in the 1990s that conceptual art was considered again giving rise to new generation of radical artists.

To conclude this research paper has shown that Lithuania has a rich cultural history that that always persisted even through oppression. From symbolism to flourishing art scene of the 1920s and the traditional crafts showing resilience reflected in the hill of

crosses. Lithuania's artists always found ways to adapt and resist even in the face of the Soviets social realism, preserving nation's spirit through creativity and teaching. Even becoming an experimental hub in the 1970s as restrictions loosened. We learn how Lithuanian artistic creativity survived under authoritarian rule.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fauchereau, S. *Art of the Baltic States*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn. (Thames&Hudson, 2022)

Grigoraviciene, E (2025) 'A Short introduction to the history of Lithuanian Painting' *MMCentras.lt*. Available at: <https://www.mmcentras.lt/cultural-history/cultural-history/fine-arts/painting/a-short-introduction-to-the-history-of-lithuanian-painting/76031?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3> Accessed Date (18<sup>th</sup> March 2025)

KaunoModernaMenoFondas (2025) 'The Ars students of the art school of Kaunas' *KaunoModernaMenoFondas*, Available at: <https://artkaunas.com/en/kaunas2022/kauno-meno-mokykla-ir-jos-aukletiniai/> Accessed Date (16<sup>th</sup> March 2025)

Kazys 2023) 'On an art experiment in Soviet Lithuania' *Varnelis.net* Available at: <https://varnelis.net/on-an-art-experiment-in-soviet-lithuania/> Accessed Date (18<sup>th</sup> March, 2025)

LTFAI (2025) 'Lithuanian folk art' *Lithuanian folk art institute*. Available at: <https://ltfai.org/lithuanian-folk-art/> Accessed date (17<sup>th</sup> March 2025)

The Lithuanian tribune (2016) 'Was there an artistic underground in Soviet Lithuania' *The Lithuania Tribune*. Available at: <https://lithuaniantribune.com/was-there-an-artistic-underground-in-soviet-lithuania/> Accessed date (18<sup>th</sup> March 2025)