

## **Absolute Textile: From the Sources Into the 21st Century**

*Absolute Textile* follows the complex path of Lithuanian textile craft and art over the course of history, offering, as it does, compelling images of history rendered in textile pieces. The intent of the exhibition is to give an appraisal of the Lithuanian textile art in the light of social, economic and cultural transformations experienced by the country with the passage of centuries. Lithuania's fate has always been an ardent pursuit of its statehood, complicated by the ambitious neighbours. Art along that road was always perceived as a significant form of expression of the national and individual identity. The artworks in the collection of *Absolute Textile*, straightforwardly or by association, evoke the setting and the spirit that influenced vast historical and cultural metamorphoses of Lithuania.

Back in the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (LDK), historic, heroic, military, heraldic, verdure tapestry panels were much sought-after for decorating castles and mansions as best reflection of rulers' aspirations and prestige. This encouraged a rapid growth of weavers across the entire territory. After the Third Partition of the Republic of Two Nations, with the result of which Lithuania was engulfed by the Russian Empire, almost all weaver manufactures that used to operate at the courts were destroyed.

Modern history of the country has again brought textile art and the creators of it play a role of importance far beyond the realm of arts. The political, economic, cultural changes and the national revival of Lithuania inspired textile artists to use their artwork in the expression of the national spirit. As Lithuania's independence matured, textile art to a large degree represented Lithuanian art and culture in international events and served as an aesthetic form for the ideology of the way of life, bringing the national identity to the fore.

The concept of 'applied textile art', in circulation over the Soviet occupation decades, lends itself to two readings. First, the artists managed 'to apply' themselves by depicting the attributes of Soviet ideology, yet retaining the spirit of the Lithuanian folk art and reminding of their national roots. Later on, textile art, under the guise of its inherent decorative nature, distanced itself from canons of Soviet Realism, and developed Modern modes of expression.

Textile artists were among the first who promptly took the challenges of the new economic order that emerged after Lithuania regained its political independence. They did not hesitate in breaking the hardened Soviet stereotypes of textile art, were prompt to embrace international creative and organizational activities. Currently the art of textile evolves as a living, changing organism, which responds change promptly, yet also takes time to reflect on its ages-long history.

The compilation of a collection along the lines set by the aim of the exhibition, and the development of a scholarly study mapping out its course, would not have been possible without project contributors, leading researchers into Lithuanian textile art and art critics – curators of textile exhibitions prof., dr. Ieva Kuiziniienė, dr. Lijana Natalevičienė, dr. Virginija Vitkienė and art licentiate student, assoc. prof. Monika Žaltauskaitė-Grašienė. The inclusion of the artwork from the funds of the Lithuania Art Museum was facilitated by museum staff, Nijolė Žilinskienė and Eglė Pinkutė.

The exhibition aspires to give a cohesive entirety – versus individual fragments, a contextual retrospective of professional textile art with distinctly identified main periods in its development from the 17th through the 21st century. These phases were either the result of a coherent, consistent evolution of existing tradition or gave expression to its critical reconsideration.

The retrospective reveals the complexity of the potential of textile art: its aesthetic, ideological and semantic parameters. The viewer is reminded of a variety of its manifestations. Figurative and abstract, polychromic or monochromic, soft and rough, smooth and textural, light-hearted or difficult textile pieces can also be carriers of different message types: historical, religious, philosophical, patriotic, critical or propagandistic.

The accompanying illustrated publication is a collection of articles, which introduce phases in the development of Lithuanian textile art, bringing into closer focus the work of the leading exponents. At the same time, a broader picture of Lithuanian textile art is given, with its uniqueness as well as connections to international context.

The popularity of Kaunas Biennial stands in strong proof of Lithuanian textile art as one of art industries with the highest potential in the country. This unique in its kind exhibition of such a scale, organized on a regular basis, attracts large numbers of international participants, and gets broad coverage by local and international press. The Small Scale Textile Art Biennial that has been running in Vilnius for over 20 years also has its audience and acclaim. The success of these two projects has attracted art researchers' interest to the medium, mostly, to new opportunities of textile and the development of new forms.

Soviet textile art heritage is one segment that lacks critical and research attention. The legacy of many an artist who in the 20th century laid the foundations of professional textile art has not been appreciated or properly investigated. It is also deplorable that the entire collection of 17th-20th century-textile artwork is practically inaccessible to public and researchers. It especially applies to the retrospective portion of the collection. It has to be noted that over the period of independence, Lithuanian museums have acquired only several pieces of contemporary textile, while these work manifest the newly shaped approach and transformations in textile art. The development of this branch of art during the couple of recent decades has not been recorded or analysed. It has not been properly presented to public. The information on the development of professional textile art in the 1990s and in early 21st century threatens to be lost.

This exhibition has been conceived as an opportunity to fill in these gaps by presenting to public and art professionals this varied, complex, and all-embracing picture of Lithuanian textile art.

Curator Prof. Eglė Ganda Bogdaniene