

Design in Latvia

Published: 12.02.2020.

If you have become interested in Latvian design, you have two options, as do all researchers. The first option is to research the historic development of artefacts, symbols and function; the second is to trace the way creative people have solved and continue to solve problems in the design of diverse products as manufacturing, technology and public opinion have evolved under the influence of the environment and advances in communications.

Latvia and its culture, and consequently, Latvian design, have been influenced by the fact that, since the late 13th century, the Baltic Germans who had conquered the territory dominated both economic and social life. A later influence, from the early 18th century, was Imperial Russia. Until the mid-19th century, native Latvians were serfs, bound to their German or Russian feudal lord, hence the opportunities for them to buy household goods at markets were extremely rare. Paradoxically, this difficult situation leads to some positive results. The ancient matriarchal and spiritual culture continued to exist, was passed down from generation to generation, and evolved further. The Latvian geometric ornament is alive and cherished in the national consciousness both as a language of symbols and as a constructive foundation. Latvian taste in colours and materials is rooted in the historic necessity to use home-grown fabrics and dyes, harvested from nature. Because people were obliged to build and furnish their homes, as well as make clothes and tools, they developed a functional and aesthetically harmonious perception of their surroundings, imagination, craft skills and respect for work that is well done. The skills of Latvian craftspeople were held in very high esteem by foreign experts such as Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), who supervised building work in Riga in 1910. Historic barriers to communication between people living in different regions resulted in some twenty different variations of the national costume with diverse combinations of colours and ornamental patterns. This abundance of colour and ornament was shown to the world by the more talented representatives of the craft whose products were awarded medals at international exhibitions as early as the beginning of the 20th century. Folk art traditions were used in creative ways both by artists working in the *milieux of Art Nouveau* and *Art Deco* (Jūlijs Madernieks, 1870-1955 – ornamental patterns for textiles; Ansis Cīrulis, 1883-1942 – furniture; Romāns Suta, 1896-1944, and Aleksandra Beļcova, 1892-1981 – painting of *Baltars* porcelain) and by one of the most interesting constructivists, Gustavs Klucis (1895-1938).

Systematic research into the content-related, structural and fundamental values of folk art, crafts and building is also one of the cornerstones of contemporary Latvian education in handicrafts and design.

Until 1914, Russian and foreign specialists dominated large-scale, industrial manufacturing. Latvian entrepreneurs could only consider taking up largescale production after World War I, when the newly founded Latvian state began to industrialise its economy. Although education in design did not then exist, and the word itself was unknown to the general population, designers could gain recognition and success, much as now, if the paths of creative personalities and interested manufacturers crossed. A number of Latvian artists joined to create the *Baltazars* porcelain factory, specialising in unique hand-painted porcelain. On a global level, the most widely known Latvian success story is the Latvian State Electro-technical Plant, VEF (*Valsts Elektrotehniskā Fabrika*) renowned for its aircraft designed by aeronautical engineer Kārlis Irbīte (1904-1997), radio sets designed by his brother Ādolfs Irbīte (1910-1983) which were awarded Grand Prix at the world exhibitions of 1936, 1937 and 1938, and the *Minox* camera designed by Walter Zapp (1905-2003). Specialists consider the *Pandera* motorcycle, with an electrical starter, designed in 1937 by Arnolds Panders and constructed by Panders in collaboration with Kārlis Irbīte, to be unique for its time. To put that into perspective, Harley-Davidson patented the electrical starter as late as the early 1960s. The design of packaging and advertising posters also evolved in line with global fashion trends and the demands of public taste. The reconstruction of war-destroyed cities and the building of new homes facilitated the creation of interior, furniture and household articles. These developments, so successfully initiated, were interrupted by World War II. Latvia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union whose centralised, planned economy was not directed towards satisfying the needs of consumers or at competition, a natural vehicle to improve product quality and design. However, the desire to make beautiful things and to create structured, orderly surroundings prevailed and continued to evolve in spite of the incongruous circumstances. In the mid-20th century, design (art design) departments were again established in Latvian industrial enterprises. In 1961, alongside courses in fine art, textile art, ceramics and metal-work, the National Academy of Art instigated professional design curricula. During the Soviet period, designers became one of the most active groups within Latvian creative circles. They organised exhibitions, promoted research, popularised the ideas of

contemporary product design and environmental structure within the community, and founded professional organisations. The most prominent groups of designers were in radio equipment (VEF; *Radiotehnika*), sports motorcycles and mopeds (*Sarkanā Zvaigzne*), furniture (*Gaujā*), porcelain (*Rīgas porcelāna rūpnīca*), textiles, fashion and jewellery. Designers created decoratively expressive environmental objects, interior furnishings and information systems. As the official ideology of the USSR did not acknowledge the latest trends in contemporary art that were appearing in the rest of the world, the word 'design' was sometimes also used as a disguise for the works of Latvian artists that did not fall within the style of officially approved social realism.

The extensive network of children's art schools and handicraft studios for adults, supervised by educated professionals, also helped to maintain the public understanding of what a creative approach to work and product quality mean. Within this network, projects did not have to be approved by central USSR bureaucracy, one did not have to fear that a good idea, once it had gone into production, would suffer from poor methods and attitude, resulting in low quality goods that could undermine a designer's reputation. Latvian craftspeople re-formed the Latvian Chamber of Crafts, the professional organisation which confers the internationally acknowledged title of master craftsman. Although there are occasional attempts to draw, at least in theory, a line of demarcation between crafts and design, many examples of successful co-operation also exist. Young people with secondary education in one of the crafts gladly continue their studies in the area of design.

In the 21 years since Latvia regained independence, the design market has been rejuvenated and increasingly design, manufacturing and entrepreneurship work hand-in-hand. The advantages of Latvian design are its unique historic background, its capacity to combine history and tradition with contemporary challenges and its long-term industrial background.

Advances in design are closely tied to developments in those economic sectors in which design is applied. This is particularly true for Latvian textile and light industry, the food industry, furniture industry, printing and publishing industry, the advertising business and, partly, for certain unique initiatives such as ecological cosmetics, art wallpaper production and jazz microphones.

For Latvian design, historic enterprises such as the *Laima* chocolate factory, *Latvijas Balzams* and *Dzintars* cosmetics have been significantly influential. However, in the new open economy, they have been obliged to find new ways to attract customers and maintain their appeal. The renaissance of such historic manufacturers promises strong, tradition-based competition in the future, with a key role for typical Latvian design.

As Latvian products prepare for international competition both inside and outside Latvia, new challenges arise. A relatively new, but well-inhabited niche is products designed as ecologically friendly. National art and craft traditions continue to be rich sources of inspiration, as shown by *Madara* eco-cosmetics, *Ars-Tela*, *Studio Naturals* linen articles, etc. Nevertheless, Latvia is still at the start of its journey in looking for and finding its special design niche.

In recognition of its continuing key role, design was included in the State Cultural Guidelines for 2014-2020 as one of the creative industries. The Design Council operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Economics.

Additional information

[Latvian companies in industry](#)

Latvian Designers' Society: www.design.lv

The Design Information Centre: www.dic.lv

Patent Office of the Republic of Latvia: www.lrpv.lv

<https://www.liaa.gov.lv/en/trade/industries/design>