

Introduction for Special Issue “Visual Culture Exchange across the Baltic Sea Region during the Long 19th Century”

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The goal of this Special Issue is to promote a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the Baltic Sea Region as a nexus of artistic exchange during the long nineteenth century, and to inspire further research on this understudied and ideologically isolated subject. Despite being one of the world’s most vibrant cultural crossroads, the Baltic Sea has often been overlooked by scholars as a site of cultural exchange, in favor of exploring its diverse national and regional identities. Since the 1990s, the concept of a Baltic Sea Region encompassing the sea and its surrounding land has fostered transnational thinking about the region, transcending Cold War binaries of ‘East’ and ‘West’ in an effort to view the area more holistically. Nonetheless, common terminology such as ‘Scandinavia’ and ‘the Baltic States’ suggests these cultures are mutually exclusive, or, as is the case with ‘Central and Eastern Europe’, ambiguously monolithic.

In redressing this misperception, which in turn leads to erroneous interpretations of events and conditions in the Baltic Sea Region, this issue explores a broad and interdisciplinary range of topics: patterns of economic commerce, travel and the international exchange of ideas and artistic influence, transnational migration of visual motifs, the presentation and understanding of ethnic and national identity both locally and regionally, changing perceptions due to travel and globalization, the impact of international exhibitions, and the publication of journals in an increasingly literate society. An equally significant aspect of this project is ideological; former Soviet states are assumed to be (and to have been) backwaters of European civilization, where poorly educated yokels either imitated or remained ignorant of broader European trends. This was clearly not the reality during the long nineteenth century. Even contemporary scholarship often intimates an erroneous and patronizing assumption of the inferiority of this region; this is the result of ignorance and preconceptions, a situation this Special Issue is eager to remedy.

The aspect of European history under investigation here has been obscured by three factors: a modern history of considering this region as fragmented; the inaccessibility of historical documents, and the problem of scholarly exchange prior to 1990; and the relative inaccessibility, for linguistic and political reasons, of relevant archival materials to foreign scholars. The legacy of an exclusively Marxist interpretation of history in the Eastern Baltic area has further hampered both scholarly investigation and an informed and more pluralistic interpretation of historical events and artistic production during this period.

While historians have long examined the Baltic Sea Region—present-day Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden—as an important center of cross-cultural interaction, the area’s art, one of the most important articles of exchange, is often reduced to illustrative examples of historical phenomena. Art historical narratives continue to be tethered to national and ethnocentric approaches, a bias this project challenges.

Our volume emerges from the twin desires to study the Baltic Sea Region as a cultural crossroads, and to depart from isolated, national/regional narratives in order to promote



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a deeper understanding of this relatively unfamiliar part of the world. By foregrounding artistic *exchanges* and the ideological or pragmatic factors that motivated them, we seek to establish common ground for viewing the Baltic Sea as a nexus of intertwined cultures always in conversation. Our international roster of authors, from promising graduate students to respected senior scholars, utilize visual culture as a conceptual lens through which to reevaluate the history, meaning, and significance of the Baltic Sea Region.

This issue explores several research questions of timely scholarly interest. For instance, to what extent did the Baltic Sea Region function as a cohesive entity in terms of its engagement with transnational motifs, themes, and art movements? Might the cultural production of the Baltic Sea nations (actual, as well as imagined) be understood as having a kind of regional cultural cohesion, or did they develop variably in relation to the rest of Europe, in a manner that distinguished them from Western Europe in terms of the intellectual life of its cultural actors? To what extent did the Baltic Sea Region suffer or thrive from its perception as peripheral to mainstream European cultural production? Once complete, our project will represent a major new addition to scholarship on Baltic Sea Region studies.

This issue intervenes in critical ideas about regional connectedness that have stagnated since an initial upswing of interest in the 1990s. In particular, the volume will emerge at a critical point of interest in the cultures of the Baltic Sea Region, when some continue to frame Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as 'wild' and unknown, despite the area's full integration into the European Union almost twenty years ago. Partly at fault for these enduring misconceptions are the geopolitical fault lines of the twentieth century. The Soviet Occupation of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (1941/1944–1991) dissipated the political sovereignty of these countries, isolating South Baltic cultures to a more severe extent than other Communist countries behind the Iron Curtain. During the Soviet period, it was painfully clear to Baltic scholars that the art and visual culture of the region were in dialogue with its geographical neighbors, but geopolitical realities made any kind of regional collaboration impossible. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of Baltic independence, Baltic scholars were keen to reintegrate the histories of their cultural heritage into a broader European framework. A pivotal development in this process occurred in 1997, when the historical city center of Riga, the capital of Latvia, became a UNESCO-certified World Heritage site in 1997. UNESCO's special mention of the distinctive prominence of early twentieth-century Art Nouveau architecture in Riga created a new impetus for scholars in the humanities to re-evaluate the city's importance in the history of art and architecture. Taking advantage of the city's new validation, Latvian scholars embarked on the first transnational understanding of artistic exchanges across the Baltic Sea Region. Their efforts culminated in Silvija Grosa's 1999 edited volume *Art Nouveau. Time and Space in the Countries of the Baltic Sea Region at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. Featuring scholars from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and the United Kingdom, the volume was at the cutting edge of what incipient international research networks could achieve in the humanities in the new world order. Far from a collection of token examples from neighboring countries, the essays revealed, for instance, how Riga's Art Nouveau architecture only attained its prominence through a dense international network of designers, architects, and artists from Helsinki, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg that had once congregated in the city. Despite this landmark international collaboration, the texts were all published in the Latvian language, with brief English summaries; this represented an important achievement for Latvian academia, but one that limited the work's international potential.

If the Iron Curtain had fomented intellectual separation between the region's scholars for much of the twentieth century, the 1990s witnessed a new era of parallelism between the art histories of the Baltic Sea Region. As scholars in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (and later Russia) strove to reintegrate themselves into European narratives, it became popular in Scandinavia and Poland to assert the distinction of individual nation's traditions from mainstream Europe (especially France). One cluster of scholars increasingly looked

inwards, while the other was eager to look outwards; thus, these groups missed one another. These tendencies slowly crystallized into disciplinary dogma, codified through museum displays, art exhibitions, and academic scholarship. In making these choices, scholars and curators across the region prioritized outside validation, seeking to establish value and prominence by displaying artworks in prestigious art museums in Paris, London, Vienna, and New York. Throughout the 2000s, museum curators from Russia, Scandinavia, and Poland could boast an impressive roster of elite Western European museums that featured large-scale exhibitions of nineteenth-century art from these areas. By contrast, it was not before 2018 that the first large survey of Baltic art to take place in Western Europe opened, in Paris. Under the title of “Wild Souls,” French curators explicitly described the Baltic countries as an art historical Terra Incognita awaiting discovery. In doing so, they framed their decision to feature Baltic art in France as a civilizing mission, harking back to centuries-old colonial stereotypes of backwardness, as well as an enduring discriminatory discourse about Eastern European immigrants, which dates back to the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. For so many of our esteemed colleagues in the Baltic States, this 2018 exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were bittersweet. The project granted long-desired and unprecedented international exposure, yet under the lens of an ephemeral exotic curiosity, rather than as an independent intellectual endeavor ripe for continued collaboration.

Within this historiographical milieu, we also understand our volume in political terms. Working towards restoring the region’s own cultural interactions, we see our collaboration as an opportunity to revive the lively debates and possibilities that once glimmered on the horizon in the 1990s. By revealing the realities of transnational exchanges across the Baltic Sea Region through art and visual culture—media that play a direct role in the negotiation of “soft power” in the form of travelling art exhibitions—we aim to provide explicit evidence that dispels the enduring stereotypes and discrimination that still inform lived experience across the region.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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