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## THE SILENT PROTEST OF PROPAGANDA ART: CASE STUDY OF LATVIAN ARTIST JĒKABS BĪNE FROM 1945–1951

**Abstract**

*The basis for this article is a monographic study of the Latvian artist, educator and Dievturis (a name derived from Dievturība – the Latvian national religion) Jēkabs Bīne's (1895–1955) life and creative work in the first half 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of historical, political, and social events. The Bīne case study shows the conditions under which the artist's creative activity was forced to submit to continue to work in their profession. Through this research, I reveal the living and working conditions of the artist in the first five years of the Soviet occupation. At this time, the activities of artists were strictly dependent on the organization of the Artists' Union of the Latvian SSR. After the war, the restriction, upbringing and regulation of creative activity rapidly became stricter and more critical. At the beginning of 1950, the first meeting was held to determine the compliance of each artist's activity with their status as members of the Artists Union. It was assessed whether each artist would remain a member of the organization or whether this status would be revoked or transferred to other candidates. The most important criteria were artistic achievement and activity, as well as political merit, and any mistakes that could be treated as an offence against Soviet rule.*

**Keywords:** Latvian art history, artist Jēkabs Bīne, Soviet Art, censorship and art

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**INTRODUCTION**

The life and creative activity of the artist Jēkabs Bīne (1895–1955) are closely connected with the artistic, social, and political events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bīne devoted his life and work to exploring the identity of the Latvian people, remaining convinced of the originality and independence of Latvian history and nation. The circumstances and conditions of the time played an important role in the events of the artist's life. Therefore in describing Latvian society, politics, and art in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the analysis of historical facts and events using available archival documents and explanations from history professionals, as well as memories from contemporaries, is crucial.

At all times and in every country, the relationship between art and power has been topical and unresolved. Art critic and theorist Boris Groys has acknowledged that "Art and politics originally have been connected in one basic aspect: they both are fields where struggle for recognition occurs."<sup>1</sup> Political regime changes often entail contradictory and unpredictable relations between power and art. Such situations raise the question of the impact of the artist's

1 Boris Groys, *The Power of Art* (Riga: The Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2015), 22.

creative activity on the world and *vice versa*, as well as how the environment impacts the artist's ability to create and express their creative explorations. The world of art is often forced to abide by power's guidelines and objectives. In this context, an important and topical question is what it means for an artist to live and work under a changing political regime. Each political transformation entails a different model of society. During the era of Latvian independence, people were characterized by hope and faith and their outlook was oriented towards the future. However, a couple of decades later, during the era of Soviet power, the majority of the same society was confronted with fear: the fear of losing their lives and work, as well as the fear of taking action and expressing their views.

The basis for this article is a monographic study of the Latvian artist, educator and *Dievturis* (a name derived from *Dievturība* – the Latvian national religion) Jēkabs Bīne. The artist's extensive interests, active public works, long teaching practice and eclectic creative legacy are one example of how individual understanding and belief in the Latvian State took shape at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bīne devoted his life and work to studies of Latvian national identity, remaining faithful and committed to the individual nature, identity and existence of Latvia's history and that of its people. This faith manifested itself in the content of his artistic ideas, in his quests for and execution of them, and in talking, painting and thinking about this, sometimes loudly, at other times less so. The artist's creative work began and flourished during a period when the cultural space of Latvian art was distinguished by a *crescendo* of classical modernism. However, by the 1920s Bīne had already adopted the idea that a work of art definitely required content. In his works, Bīne tried to express the people's national identity and strength through realistic form. An important role in his works was apportioned to the depiction of Latvian identity, which he endeavoured to find in a synthesis of folk mythology, history and ancient ornamentation. The continued search for this content confused and broke the artist during the Soviet era. As he was unable to execute his ideas of content or to find new ones suitable to Soviet beliefs and principles, quantity eclipsed quality in his works. Bīne painted a lot, experimented and searched, but was unable to achieve a result that satisfied him. He produced countless still lifes and landscapes, as well as domestic genre works and commissioned portraits. Quietly and covertly, the artist repeatedly painted versions of works he had created in years past.

A major role in the development of Bīne's personality and artistic output was played by historical events during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period Bīne not only articulated his beliefs and personal conviction in works of art, but also actively published his theories and research, and publically stated his views, working and leading the *Dievturi* movement. It should be noted that during the interwar period, the mythological genre in art was often posited as

Fig. 1. Jēkabs Bīne, *God, Māra, Laima*, 1931, oil on canvas, Latvian National Museum of Art. Photograph by Normunds Braslins.



Latvian, which ideologically propelled and conformed to the desired narrative about national art. Bīne was one of the most active proponents and prominent exemplars of these beliefs. The interaction between vivid visual depictions of mythological themes and widely published writings, enhanced by the everyday image cultivated by the artist himself gave rise to Bīne's symbolic significance as an artist and *Dievturis*. His contribution to creating the visual image of *Dievturi* and promoting this neo-mythology can be considered to be the most significant legacy of Bīne's oeuvre. One example of this is Bīne's painting *God, Māra, Laima*, which was used as the symbolic *Dievturi* identity not only by *Dievturi* organisations in exile during the Soviet period, but is still used by the contemporary *Dievturi* congregation today. The presence of the context of folklore or the allusion to it is an important component of Bīne's works in the mythological genre (fig. 1).

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## THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE ARTIST'S LIFE: THE SOVIET REGIME'S PERIOD OF OCCUPATION

During the first period of Soviet occupation, the dominant art institution, with whose operating principles Jēkabs Bīne was familiar through his work in Riga, and in which he actively participated, was the Latvian Artists' Union (LAU). Preparations for the process of elevating the LAU date back to October 9, 1944, when the Latvian SSR Council of People's Commissars adopted Decision No. 171 "Regarding the Founding of the Latvian Soviet Artists'

Union Organisation.” The actual initiation of the founding of the organisation originated through a decision made by the LC(b)P Central Committee Bureau at a meeting held on February 15, 1941. However, due to the war, it subsequently proved necessary to revive the organisation.

The first meeting of the Artists' Union's organisation committee took place immediately after the restoration of Soviet power on November 15, 1944. Right from its very first days of operation, the Union posited its main task as being the restoration of national culture, which had to take place in close collaboration with the other Soviet republics, “because USSR artists will set us an example and the heads of arts institutions will very gladly help in this work.”<sup>2</sup>

A lot of artists wanted to join the Artists' Union in the belief that this would pave the way to extensive work opportunities in the form of local and pan-Union contracts, State commissions, grants and loans, and working trips abroad. The first members were admitted in 1945. Moreover, alongside local artists the Union also admitted new arrivals from other cities and republics in the Soviet Union. Jēkabs Bīne also became a member of the Latvian SSR Artists' Union in 1945. The LAU's environment and trends were characterised by the composition of its members. Thus, for example, in order to continue their artistic education and creative work, demobilised soldiers and budding or current artists from other cities in the USSR arrived in Riga. Few among them learned to speak Latvian or tried to appreciate the local culture. Nor did they exhibit any desire to discover the environment or the country in which they had arrived to live and work. These new arrivals were not interested in the opportunity to create works of art that would depict something new and idiosyncratic, enriching local culture. Nor, logically, did they form friendly relationships with local artists based on mutual understanding. Moreover, decrees from the higher powers dictated that precedence should be given to demobilised soldiers and new arrivals.

Prior to admission to the LAU, every application and each artist's biography were carefully assessed and analysed. There was no shortage of artists who were condemned for their work in pre-war Latvia or for their statements during the war. Another reason why it was important for artists to join the Artists' Union was that it enabled them to obtain the materials they needed for their creative work, and this was only possible for LAU members and candidates. They could also aspire to additional living space (in the form of a studio), receive commissions, and apply for working trips to institutions hosting artistic residencies, where they could enhance their experience. Artists who found themselves outside the newly-established system had next to no chance of exhibiting their works or receiving commissions with which they could earn a living solely by means of their creative work. Only LAU members

2 Ilze Konstante, *Stalīna garā ēna Latvijas tēlotāja mākslā 1940–1956* [Stalin's Long Shadow in Latvian Fine Arts, 1941–1956] (Rīga: Neputns, 2017), 233. All translations are by the author.

were guaranteed a future pension and could look forward to the support promised by their trade union.

During its formative working years, artists were admitted to the Union as soon as their application to join had been evaluated. In later years, several stages of admission were introduced – initially the artist could become an LAU membership candidate and would only attain membership status after a certain period of time. Gradually, the evaluation of new membership applications and criteria related to prior artistic activity and the biographies of the artists concerned became more arduous and complicated. First, an application would be studied at a meeting of the relevant section. Next it would be passed to the section's bureau before being considered by the Party's bureau. However, the final decision was made by the LAU organisation committee or the board. Legally, admission to the LAU was only considered to have been ratified after it had been approved by the USSR Artists' Union. While holding the status of an LAU membership candidate, the artists had to demonstrate active creative work, and participation in exhibitions was obligatory. Moreover, before becoming a bona fide LAU member, the artist had to organise a reporting exhibition, thus confirming his or her credentials to join the organisation.

Instructions, prices, commissions and so-called professionalism calculations were received from the USSR Committee on the Arts. Depending on the size of the work, the price of a portrait of Politburo functionary in civilian dress could fetch between 284 and 1,187 roubles, while portraits of these same workers in uniform with medals could net between 314 and 1,300 roubles, while portraits of scientists and artists were more expensive, costing between 344 and 1,412 roubles. Cost estimates for framing works were provided, as were works “manufactured” in larger quantities, in addition to which the selling price of one unit was also specified. The Fine Arts Department of the Latvian SSR Committee on the Arts would subsequently introduce artists to these recommendations, specifying the list of desired subjects for works of art, and adding recommendations as to how these should be executed. Among the subjects increasingly in demand were the Red Army's heroic battles against occupiers, domestic life and the new post-war life in the countryside, and society's joy in the aftermath of victory. Other officially approved subjects were landscapes depicting one's native land, still lifes and any historical subjects, as well as the struggles of the working class in Latvia. Portraits of leaders had to be undertaken with special care. When portraying Lenin, Stalin and other leaders, artists had to strictly adhere to photographs approved by the SC(b)P Central Committee, otherwise an artist was even subject to the threat of criminal liability. In works depicting the group of revolutionary leaders, “Marx – Engels – Lenin – Stalin”, it was of utmost importance to observe their correct positioning, where the historical order required by the political censors was paramount, i.e., from left to right.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 239–241.

The most popular genres in Latvian painting overall were landscape, portrait and still life, while thematically rural work and everyday events were dominant. This explains the large number of landscape and still life works in Latvian art during the post-war years. Thus it was possible to avoid subjects that did not correspond to the artist's sense of life and creative work. However, soon enough, as a result of various decrees and educational edicts, these genres began to be considered as of secondary importance, with much greater significance being attached to the ability to depict tendentious political narratives, a skill that artists were expected to acquire. In order to control their creative activity, LAU members' reporting exhibitions, which were held every other week, became obligatory. These took place on the LAU premises and were closed to the general public.

In regard to their work, artists found themselves being restricted, (re) educated and regulated in a manner that quickly became increasingly stringent and critical. An order was received to review the ranks of LAU members and membership candidates, and at the start of 1950 the first meeting was held to "cleanse the ranks", which decided on the compatibility of each artist's work to LAU membership status. Evaluations were conducted which resulted in the artist remaining an LAU member, having his or her status revoked, or being demoted to candidate status. The key criteria were artistic output, activities and political accomplishments, and any missteps could be deemed to be a crime against the Soviet establishment. In the long résumé of the meeting with authorities from the Artists Union, Jēkabs Bīne appears among the group of artists who were allowed to remain members of the Artists' Union. Overall, 52 members were expelled, while 21 were demoted to candidate status, thus handing them a warning about their impending non-conformity to the status of a Soviet artist. Prior to the re-election of members, the Artists' Union had 224 members and eight candidates, but after the reform it was left with 177 members, including 22 who were newly admitted, while four were admitted having previously been candidates.

1949 was notable for the special attention and animated activity devoted to Joseph Stalin's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. That year, all Soviet republics had to organise extensive exhibitions and events to mark the leader's anniversary. Throughout the year, events were held lauding Stalin, but in the build-up to his birthday on December 21 presents prepared by the people and sent to the leader were displayed in exhibitions and special showcases. This tradition was later introduced in honour of other Soviet state celebrations and important political figures. A particularly important role in the preparation of these presents was played by applied arts specialists – masters in metal art, woodwork, textile art and other fields. That year, the Latvian people sent a "a richly ornamented object to Moscow in the form of a hope chest, forged in silver, and crowned with images of Marx, Engels and Stalin."<sup>4</sup> In 1950, Bīne visited Moscow, and in his notes we find this entry: "The next tour was to the Pushkin Museum,

4 Ibid., 304.

where some of the presents dedicated to Comrade Stalin were on display. However, the large museum premises were unable to accommodate all the presents, and in many cases the presents were stacked up in a pile. Therefore, in all probability, the eyes of the birthday boy, 'our dear friend, did not even catch sight of his present from the Latvian people."<sup>5</sup>

## JĒKABS BĪNE'S FIRST YEARS OF SOVIET OCCUPATION (1945–1951): KULDIGA

Jēkabs Bīne spent the first five years after the consolidation of the Soviet regime within Latvian territory in Kuldīga. Honestly, but unobtrusively, he tried to fulfil his direct teaching duties in school, while quietly continuing his research and telling the story of Latvian history, ornaments, the ancient past and its meaning. In 1951, when the artist's activities during the era of Latvian independence came to light, he was forced to leave his position at the Kuldīga School of Applied Arts.

On November 24, 1947, the first post-war art exhibition in Kuldīga opened, with the participation of 13 Kuldīga-based artists, who exhibited 83 works. It was a major event for the whole town and attracted a lot of visitors, including representatives of the district party committee and executive committee, and heads of institutions and enterprises. After the exhibition, a review appeared on the front page of the Kuldīga newspaper *Padomju Kuldīga*, which acknowledged Jēkabs Bīne to be "one of the most notable and routine-blessed artists in our republic, who exhibited the most works: portraits, genre works and landscapes. The best works in the exhibition were considered to be his *The Cart Loading*, *In Ancient Times* and *Portrait of Teacher P*" (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The article concluded with the observation:

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Fig. 2. Jēkabs Bīne, *The Cart Loading*, 1948, oil on canvas, private collection. Photograph by Normunds Braslins.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alise Volanska, *Mākslinieku citadeles stāsti: Kuldīgas Daiļamatniecības skola (1945–1952)* [Stories from the Artists' Citadel: the Kuldīga Secondary School of Applied Arts (1945–1952)] (Rīga: Jumava, 2016), 85.

Many artists can learn by opening their eyes to the enormous work to be done every day in the work of Socialist competition, discovering the process of work, with the very best people – Stakhanovites and shock workers. This path will multiply the artistic and cultural values, which are intended for every citizen in our native land. Let us hope that in the next exhibition we will see more monumental works, which reverently depict the great building work to be done during Great Stalin’s fourth five year period.<sup>7</sup>

After the exhibition, artists tried to fulfil their “Stakhanovites” quotas, portraying front-rowers and agricultural workers. Bīne also endeavoured to fulfil his quota by seeking something captivating in the tired daily lives of Kuldīga’s workers. While many used photographs for this purpose, he remained faithful to his pencil, drawing portraits for celebratory plaques, but he did not produce any works of high artistic quality during this period.

The Song Festival took place from July 10 to 18, 1948. In honour of this event, an exhibition was organised at the Kuldīga School of Applied Arts in which ten artists from the town of Kuldīga and its surrounding area took part with 60 works. In its analysis of the exhibition, the first painting mentioned by the district newspaper was Jēkabs Bīne’s painting *The Kauguri Uprising*. While in

this work he addressed a historical subject with reverence, Bīne’s other paintings, *Spring*, *A Fisherman* and *Kuldīga’s Roofs in the Snow*, brought the artist praise for his ability to depict the beauty of winter (fig. 3). Bīne had started to work on the first version of *The Kauguri Uprising* in the spring of 1946 in preparation for the art exhibition, which was organised in honour of the Kuldīga Song Festival. The exhibition was postponed several times before it finally took place from November 24 to December 8, 1946. In the foreground of the work, a farmer on a horse is depicted, with farmers on the right.<sup>8</sup> After the Kuldīga exhibition, in comments on this work by Bīne at the Latvian Soviet artists’ conference in 1947, the artist’s work in previous years was also mentioned:

This ‘holy’ farmyard and its contents had to be linked to the distant romanticised and mystified ancient history and ethnographic nationalism. This turn of events, setting to one side a whole host of other artists, reached its most vivid manifestation in the ancient religious mysticism of Jēkabs Bīne and Ernests Brastiņš,



Fig. 3. Jēkabs Bīne, *Kuldīga’s Roofs in the Snow*, 1949, oil on canvas, private collection. Photograph by Normunds Braslins.

7 Ibid.

8 Jēkabs Bīne, “Mans darbs” [My Work], in *Doma*, ed. Zigurds Konstants (Riga: Latvijas Mākslas muzeju apvienība, 2000), 51.



and in the paintings and graphic works of the decorative folk stylists Ansis Cīrulis and Niklāvs Strunke, who stood on the same foundations of content.<sup>9</sup>

After being repeatedly submitted for approval, the painting *The Kauguri Uprising* was completed in August 1947 and exhibited for the first time at the Latvian art exhibition in Riga dedicated to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. At the centre of the composition, surrounded by farmers, is a young man dressed in folk attire on a prancing horse, who has symbolically raised his arm above the crowd. This hand gesture unequivocally alludes to God's gesture of blessing in Bīne's painting *God, Māra, Laima*. In an article on Soviet Latvian painting, the work was described in the following way: "... as interpreted by Bīne, this subject resonates not so much as a real event, but more as a distant, romanticised (composition, lighting, colours) historical legend."<sup>10</sup>

During the 1950s Bīne painted several commissioned narratives, which extolled people's occupations, such as *Tractor Driver Freibergs* (fig. 4), *Tractor Driver*, *Collective Farmer*, etc. Only sketches and drafts of these works remain. In his commissioned works done during the Soviet period, he met the requirements of Socialist Realism, which was then dominant: the viewer was greeted with a smile and workers were monumentalized. Bīne's painting style corresponded to the so-called method of Socialist Realism, because realism was in vogue. All he had to do was to change the content and ideological understanding of

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**Fig. 4.** Jēkabs Bīne, *Tractor Driver Freibergs*, 1950, paper, pencil, water color, State Archive of Latvia. Photograph by Agita Gritāne.

9 Artūrs Lapiņš, *Latvijas lietišķās mākslas attīstības ceļi* [The Developmental Paths of Latvian Fine Arts], *Žurnāls Karogs*, no. 5 (1948): 543.

10 Artūrs Lapiņš, *Latvijas padomju glezniecība* [Latvian Soviet Painting] (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1961), 20.

his works. Although the artist's creative oeuvre proves that he often painted the type of painting supported by the Soviet powers, as well as domestic and portrait genres, Bīne did not take advantage of these opportunities, and did not actively devote himself to commissions during the Soviet period.

Jēkabs Bīne's occasionally fearless attitude was exemplified by an event soon after the capitulation of the German Army, when the Soviet authorities brought books to Kuldīga that had been collected from local libraries and were marked for destruction. These books were tipped onto piles in the school courtyard, and pupils had to tear off the covers of all books that did not burn well. Afterwards the books were taken to be burned on a great pyre on the edge of the river Venta, downstream of the town. To everyone's surprise, the intelligent Bīne offered to help carry out this act of destruction. He was wearing a coat with large pockets, which at opportune moments provided refuge not only for wonderful art albums, but also volumes of Alfreds Brems' encyclopaedia *The Animal Kingdom* and much else besides, which were later furnished with replacements for lost covers at the Kuldīga School of Applied Arts' Bookbinding Department.<sup>11</sup> Among the books to be destroyed were works by Latvian authors, as well as everything published in German prior to 1940, even including old cookbooks. Museums also received lists of artworks to be "withdrawn" and destroyed. Thirteen paintings by Jēkabs Bīne were mentioned among the ideologically harmful works. For some unknown reason, the list of works also included Bīne's painting *Mare with Colt*, but the artist succeeded in saving this work, as well as a painting entitled *Ūsiņš* (in Latvian mythology, Ūsiņš was a deity, the god of light and spring). He carefully hid both works in his sofa chest.<sup>12</sup>

## RETURN TO RIGA AND THE CULMINATION OF HIS LIFE (1951–1955)

Living in a small town, decrees, events and understanding of developments nationally resonated more slowly, peacefully and quietly. Meanwhile, the climate in Riga was epitomised by the main tasks published a year earlier in August 1950, which had been proposed by Latvian C(b)P Central Committee Secretary Arvīds Peļše, and were to serve as the leitmotifs for any activity and in the attainment of goals in the Latvian SSR. Peļše stressed that "the struggle against slanting toward nationalism, and in particular against slanting toward local nationalism, is extremely relevant in Soviet Latvia."<sup>13</sup> Reflecting their awareness of the influence of culture and art on people's opinions, matters related to artists' creative work and its related ideology were evaluated by the authorities at various levels.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>13</sup> Augusts Peļše, "The Struggle against Bourgeois Nationalism – The Battle Assignment of the Republic Party," *Journal of Soviet Latvian Bolsheviks*, no. 16 (1952): 5–6.

Upon his return to Riga in 1951, Jēkabs Bīne started work at the applied arts complex Māksla (Art). Bīne was helped in his search for a job by Ernests Veilands, then head of the Māksla complex's portrait workshop, who proceeded to hire him. At the time, this was a quite a courageous gesture on Veilands' part, because on more than one occasion Bīne's past had provoked suspicions and objections on the part of the Soviet governmental institutions. Bīne worked in the Māksla complex's stained glass workshop almost right up to his dying day, parallel to which he tried to find the time to paint and study subjects close to his heart.

Work in the stained glass workshop was not only emotionally and psychologically depressing, because of the complete absence of any freedom of creative or artistic expression, but also physically demanding. Together with his colleagues in the stained glass workshop, he fulfilled official Soviet commissions. Work on stained glass was both technically and thematically complicated. From Bīne's notes, one can conclude that no creative freedom was permitted in this work. Every detail of a composition had to be examined and approved. In essence, it was the artist's task to become an outstanding technical executant of drawings and compositions. There was no shortage of orders, and the workshop's artists designed and made stained glass for Moscow metro stations and the Latvian SSR Pavilion at the Pan-Union Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow, etc. The works produced brought these artists fame and increasing opportunities for new commissions throughout the Soviet Union. During the subsequent years of Soviet power, when the name of Jēkabs Bīne cropped up, his creative oeuvre was most often connected with applied art and his achievements in stained glass art: "Jēkabs Bīne is renowned for establishing and developing Latvian Soviet stained glass art."<sup>14</sup> Stained glass panels created by Bīne adorned the Latvian SSR Supreme Council Hall, the Latvian SSR Pavilion and Ukrainian SSR Pavilion at the Pan-Union Agricultural Exhibition, Novoslobodskaya Metro Station in Moscow and the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant Builders' Cultural Palace.

One of the first tasks entrusted to Bīne as an artist in the Māksla complex's stained glass workshop was to join his colleagues in preparing stained glass panels for the Latvian SSR Pavilion at the Exhibition of the Achievements of National Economy in Moscow. Preparations for the exhibition took place in all the Soviet republics. This was an important assignment to which countless competitions were devoted, involving artists and architects in every field. Each republic was tasked with constructing its own building in the form of a pavilion, which would depict national character and fit into the overall ensemble. The main goal of the exhibition was to highlight the blossoming and abundance of the republic. In April 1950, the Soviet Council of Ministers' State Committee on the Arts issued directions as to how each republic's pavilion should look,

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14 Vija Cekule, *Jēkabs Bīne: 1895–1955* (Riga: Latvian SSR State Art Museum, 1969), 8.

adhering to the uniform concept of the exhibition. At the entrance to the pavilion, two sculptures were to be erected on the subject of the Latvian collective farm depicting the flourishing life of the Latvian people. At the heart of the pavilion, a monumental figure of Stalin had to be erected, while the central wall was to be adorned with a large bas-relief with the figure of Lenin and an inscription referring to the decree regarding the proclamation of the independent republic of Soviet Latvia on December 22, 1918.<sup>15</sup> It was stipulated that letters of a certain size and colour should be used, while patterns characteristic of the applied arts of the Latvian people should be used around the inscription. The main hall had to be decorated with at least two monumental paintings on the subject of “Latvia’s admission to the Soviet Union” and “Latvia as a flourishing republic”.

Painstaking and time-consuming work resulted in the creation of several stained glass panels for the Latvian SSR Pavilion. On April 11, 1954, readers of the periodical *Literature and Art* were informed that

Above the door is a stained glass panel, at the centre of which is a five-pointed star. Also adorned with stained glass panels in their entirety were four eight metre high windows, two on either side of the door, (and) 16 medallions – four in each window – were dedicated to various subjects: agriculture, industry, culture, as well as landscapes depicting a few cities. Upon entering, the visitor was greeted by a great panel. Above the panel were two lines from the Latvian SSR hymn: ‘On Lenin’s road to happiness and fame / With Stalin in our hearts, we will march forever.’<sup>16</sup> (fig. 5)

The artist dictated neither his time nor his working regime – everything was subject to constant commissions and the wishes of his masters. Although on May 17 Bine wrote that he hoped to fly home at the end of the week, ten days later on May 27 he was still waiting for his departure permit: “Today, hopefully, my departure will be clarified. The pavilion’s director will not hear of my wish to leave. He is going to telegraph to Riga to extend my working trip. I told him that this would not do me much good, because nobody was going to increase my working trip remuneration. No matter how frugally one lives – to subsist here (hotel included), one still needs 25 roubles a day.”<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 5. Jēkabs Bīne, *Sketches for stained glass compositions*, 1953, State Archive of Latvia. Photograph by Agita Gritāne.

15 Konstante, *Staļina garā ēna Latvijas tēlotājā mākslā 1940–1956*, 380.

16 Ibid.

17 Jēkabs Bīne’s letter to Olga Vijuma (Apermane), May 27, 1952, Author’s archive.

A year later, Jēkabs Bīne spent a long time on a working trip to Moscow, where he worked in the Latvian SSR pavilion: “I have now been labouring for six weeks on the pavilion’s design jobs, but I still have no idea how much I will actually be paid for this, and when we will be able to return home. We forecast that it could be at the end of the month.”<sup>18</sup> Arduous work, uncertainty, frequent working trips and continual stress took their toll, and Bīne’s health, already ravaged in his youth, grew ever more fragile.

## A PAINTER WITH “TWO EASELS”

After his return to Riga in 1951, Bīne’s focus on painting gradually diminished. During working hours, the artist worked in the Māksla complex’s stained glass workshop and designed the aforementioned commissioned Soviet propaganda works, which depicted the utopian future of the life promised by Communism and portrayed Stalin, Lenin and other heroes of the era. However, during his free time he continued to paint and study the subjects that he cared about and which mattered to him. For example, in 1952 the artist returned to the subject of *Dievturība*, which had been so important to him back in the 1930s, and painted a new version of the painting *God, Māra, Laima*.

The fact that Bīne was definitely not the only artist who, in order to survive, kept two easels in his studio – one for projects of the heart, and the other for projects of duty – was verified by the general anxiety of the functionaries of the arts organisations of the day. Consequently, new attributes and stricter edicts were quickly introduced. At the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of the Latvian Soviet Artists’ Union, which took place in September 1950, it was emphasised that formalism had gone on for far too long and henceforth would no longer be permissible, “whereby one work is painted fulfilling a State commission, seemingly adhering to the requirement for Socialist Realism, another work is done in the formalist direction, with other methods, old ones, which artists used in their work 20 years ago. Oftentimes, artists say that this is ‘art’s kitchen’, but I am afraid that this is linked to people’s beliefs, and that thus, ‘tomorrow formalism will be art.’”<sup>19</sup>

After years of studying the development of Latvian art during the complex period, art historian Ilze Konstante concluded “it was the fact, that many artists really did work at ‘two easels’, which saved Latvian fine art from destruction. It is hard to imagine what Latvian art would have looked like during the period from 1944 to 1956 if there had not been artists who should have been ‘sent to the psychiatric hospital’, and if emerging artists had only painted according to the recipe decreed by the Government’s diktat.”<sup>20</sup>

The conditions in which works were created during the Soviet era are characterised by the history of Bīne’s painting *17<sup>th</sup> Century Riga*. In order to

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18 Jēkabs Bīne’s postcard to Iza Bīne (Grevina), April 15, 1953, Author’s archive.

19 Konstante, *Staļina garā ēna Latvijas tēlotājā mākslā 1940–1956*, 338.

20 *Ibid.*, 380.

augment and organise a chronological exhibition on Latvian history from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Director of the Latvian SSR Central State History Museum wanted to invite artists who would paint a narrative depiction of this period based on research into historical materials. Initially, the Cultural Education Authority did not consider the Director's idea to be appropriate. Moreover, the LC(b)P Central Committee was reluctant to approve the subject matter for the paintings, rejecting it as irrelevant and incompatible with the list of paintings to be ordered from artists, which had been drawn up and approved at the time, the majority of which was filled with depictions of events from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as "The Great Fatherland War" and "Socialist construction". After making the excuse of a lack of materials with which to create an exhibition of the period in question, the Director received permission to commission a few paintings. At the time, LSU History Faculty student Heinrihs Strods had started work as an academic co-worker at the museum. The historian recalled collecting the required materials in the form of books, engravings, excerpts from chronicles and historians' descriptions, which he presented to Bīne during the period that the painting was being prepared. Jēkabs Bīne's first sketch was rejected by the commission as being politically immature. The biggest objections were due to the fact that the artist had painted a bright sky above Riga, which was deemed an impossibility during the sombre Swedish era, and because the work did not depict class warfare in 17<sup>th</sup> century Riga. The next time, Bīne repainted dark clouds above Riga and drew a two horse chariot next to the Red Guards' tower in Pardaugava, whose occupants were assailed by beggars beseeching them for alms, while others were arrested. This version was approved by the commission, which allowed the artist to paint the large version of the painting.<sup>21</sup>

From day to day, Bīne received and fulfilled works commissioned by the State, bowing to externally dictated conditions and instructions, because in order to work and survive he had no alternative. At the same time, individual works previously painted by Bīne were withdrawn from museum collections and destroyed.

In later years too, the attitude of the Soviet authorities towards Bīne's earlier works was quite negative. "His name belonged among those artists whose works were placed in special repositories."<sup>22</sup> During post-war years, the installation of special repositories, or more commonly special collections, in museums became commonplace. Special instructions were issued that stipulated which works of art should be stored in these special collections. In the special instructions regarding special collections approved by the Latvian SSR Council of Ministers' State Committee on the Arts on March 2, 1953,

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21 Heinrihs Strods' Letter to Janis Bīne, May 23, 2010. Author's archive.

22 Zigurds Konstants, "Rīgas mākslas muzeji okupācijas gados: 1940–1990" [Riga's Museums during the Occupation Years: 1940–1990], *Journal of Doma: Collection of Articles*, no. 5 (2000): 159.

it was stated that all art exhibits that are harmful due to their conceptual direction or formalistic execution, as well as works by émigré artists, should be removed from joint repositories overseen by the State Committee on the Arts and placed in a special repository that will be organised at the State Museum of Latvian and Russian Art, in accordance with the USSR Council of Ministers' State Committee on the Arts Chairman's Decree No. SP-1256/32.<sup>23</sup> Lists of exhibits to be delivered were confirmed by museum heads, in accordance with the verdict of the Latvian SSR Council of Ministers' State Committee of the Arts' special commission. Art historians, researchers and museums' academic co-workers could only inspect the works included in these collections after receiving written permission from the Chairman of the State Committee on the Arts, and only in the special repository's premises, in the presence of the repository's responsible official and after registering in a special journal. Not only the works of art themselves, but also photographic negatives and copies ended up in the special repository.<sup>24</sup>

In the summer of 1955, Jēkabs Bīne was awarded the honourable title of a Distinguished Latvian SSR Art Worker for his accomplishments in stained glass art. Of this event, the artist merely wrote, "On July 21 I read in the newspaper that I have been awarded [...the title of...] 'distinguished art worker'."<sup>25</sup> The artist was increasingly offended and bemused by the prevailing system and organisation of work. After a visit to the Artists' Union, Bīne commented, "A Union, whose criterion is the 'appearance of one's nose' seems increasingly strange."<sup>26</sup> Anxiety, uncertainty and emotional tension broke the artist, compounding his existing health problems with weakness and exhaustion. Bīne continued to embark on working trips, to fulfil commissioned works and to design stained glass panels, but at home in the evening he would seek succour by drawing and studying various ornaments.

Jēkabs Bīne died suddenly on October 24, 1955. He was accompanied on his final journey from the Artists' Union, with the procession passing the Art Academy *en route* to Rainis's Cemetery. In front of the car, girls in folk costumes carried colourful garlands. Seeing this, people stopped at the side of the street and said, "A Latvian is being buried..."<sup>27</sup> Of the artist's final journey, Māris Brancis wrote, "The funeral turned into a quiet, wordless protest against the powers-that-be, but most importantly – it was an attestation to an Artist and Latvian."<sup>28</sup>

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Jēkabs Bīne, "Mans darbs" [My Work], in *Doma*, ed. Zigurds Konstants, 51.

26 Ibid.

27 Anita Volanska, "Mākslinieks un pedagogs Jēkabs Bīne – 100" [Artist and Teacher Jēkabs Bīne – 100], *Kurzemnieks*, April 11, 1995, 3.

28 Māris Brancis, *Jēkabs Bīne* (Riga: Preses nams, 1995), 12.

## CONCLUSION

Bīne's artistic subjects and beliefs were strongly influenced not only by his interests, but also by the time in which he lived and worked. Blessed with outstanding working abilities, a wide range of interests and artistic talent, Bīne's artistic career sheds light on 40 contrasting and complex years for the Latvian art scene during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the diversity of artistic practices during its formative period. During the independence period, the artist was inspired and confidently painted everything that he found interesting to his heart's content. However, during the first Soviet occupation and the German occupation he became increasingly quiet, focusing more on commissioned works. After the Second World War, during the Soviet era, Bīne lived out the reality of life as a Soviet period artist.

Jēkabs Bīne tried to divide his talent and imagination between the twists and turns of power and artistic directions. The artist's creative *oeuvre* does not reveal the ambiguity of the historical situation, or the problems and pain resulting from the time he lived in. In his works of art, the painter revealed his truest and deepest essence. He painted events, people, and places he cared about and infused them with his thoughts and feelings. His eclectic creative *œuvre* ostensibly invites one to decipher Jēkabs Bīne's personal endeavours and deepest nature through his works of art, as opposed to his words and actions. Throughout his life the artist tried to assiduously combine the pleasures of his heart with the reality of life. During the post-war years, when he lacked materials for painting, Bīne was reduced to painting on canvases painted during his time at the Academy.