ric way. S. Virpilaitis considers possibilities of plastic expression of the material to be crucial.

Such an approach reflects postmodern beliefs of the author, in contrast with modern tradition of j ewelry. The latter has enforced a certain hierarchic approach toward materials, when alternative cheap ma terials were considered to be more contemporary than traditional ones (gold, silver, precious stones). Mean while, given the influence of postmodern aesthetics, all materials were once more acknowledged as equal in the artistic sense. The issues of artistic status of materials are no longer important for the contemporary jewelry. However, just like in other areas of fine arts, nowadays it is much more important to seek the confluence of art and life and its integration within other areas (mass culture, fashion, information).

S. Virpilaitis also uses these principles in his works. The postmodern aesthetics encompass a combination of different artistic traditions (archaic, modernist, fluxus), elements of "high" and "low" (hippy) cultures, tendency to join a means of specific jewelry with means characteristic of other areas. An artist of ten treats amber as an archeologist: he does not change it, even if it is a number of cheap fractions, leave it the way it was found, thus showing, that this stone is interesting to him as a relic of archeic past. It is not a coincidence that some plastic pipes slightly remind of nearly kept museum articles. Meanwhile, the combination of amber and fox fur has probably been inspired by present ideas of "second hand", thriving within Lithuanian street fashion.

Hence, S. Virpilaitis is inspired by a variety of contemporary culture forms. The artists do not avoid commentaries on stereotypes and certain clichés of present jewelry, as well as a critical approach to tradition of creating and wearing jewelry. The individual approach of the creator in this case becomes crucial. On the other hand, the artist tries not to enclose himself within narrow frames of the genre. Each of his works is in a way a new intellectual intrigue, hiding beyond itself a rich dialogue of past and present cultures. Amber works of S. Virpilaitis seem like playing with histories of different ages, and it is the right of a viewer to create an ultimate interpretation of their collision.

Unlike most Lithuanian jewelers, this artist does not enjoy primary, natural, inborn beauty of amber. First of all, he puts forward intellectual, but not decorative aspects of the artwork. Amber is seen through a new prism and is considered not as a unique stone from the Baltic region or national symbol, but as a material, that could invoke various cultural associations, oftentimes having nothing to do with national identity.

In this way the artist realizes a drive for a different approach, considered to be important in the present art. An ability to operate signs of different cultural contours and unrestricted devotion to mind-born associations testify to S. Virpilaitis being a subsequent representative of postmodern jewelry. His creative work gives a special contribution to a new reflection of experiencing different past cultures, making an intercombination of very different artistic traditions and even marginal elements, casting a contemporary outlook, saturated with aesthetic an approach of the creator.

Translated by Simonas Serys

References:

2 Feliksas Daukantas (died 1995) worked only with amber.
3 In his career were formed by the artists who had graduated from the Metal Department of Tallinn Art Institute in late 70s Vytautas Maruliūnas, Birute Suldaitiene, Maryė Gurevičienė, Arvydas Gurevičius and also Aleksandras Sepkus, who studied design in Vilnius Art Institute.

7 From author’s interview with the artist, recorded on January 10, 2001.

A personal exhibition of Sigėnas Virpilaitis was hosted by Mirgiysis Amber Gallery, Vilnius, in 1999.

ALTHOUGH TODAY LITHUANIA HAS LESS than a hundred kilometers of Baltic seaside, the most beautiful Lithuanian tales and legends are related to the sea. The most popular of them Egže the Queen of the Grass Snakes is one of the most original Lithuanian miracle tales, and the romantic legend about the unhappy love between the queen of the Baltic sea the goddess Jūrate and a fisherman Kastytis also tells the story of the origins of amber.

In the classical mythology the appearance of amber is related to the myth of Phaethon, who took his father’s Helius, the god of the Sun chariot, however he could not control it and fell into the river Po. His sisters, Helius’s daughters had mourned for Phaethon’s death and then turned into poplars, and their tears have dropped from the young eyes and hardened into amber in the sunlight and the river sent them to the Latin brides to enjoy and admire.

The Lithuanian legend of amber tells about it not as a thing, but about the place of its discovery – the coast of the Baltic sea. This is the legend of Jūratė and Kastytis, recorded in 1842 and written down by the historian, writer and poet Liudvikas Adomas Juščiūnas, who was famous for his romantic attitude towards Lithuanian history. The main heroine of this legend – the sea goddess Jūratė – is not mentioned in Lithuanian mythology – thus it is more likely that this tale is not of mythical, but of literary-romantic origin. L.A. Juščiūnas mentions this legend in his treatise The Memories of the Samogitian Land, which was published in Vilnius in 1842. Similarly, the writer mentions a tale about the Baltic sea, which he heard as a child – about you, about your queen, about the storms, about the amber palace, looming in your depths1 and later gives the whole story. There he mentions Jūratė’s palace, whose walls were of pure white amber, thresholds of gold, the roof of fishbats, the windows of pure diamonds 2. Jūratė gets angry that Kastytis – a worthless mortal dared to destroy the peace, my innocent subjects get caught in his nets and are condemned to death 3. Together with her fellow goddesses she took one of a hundred amber boats, decorated with pearls and went to punish Kastytis: Let us take him with our dance and admiration into the cold embrace of the sea, let us execute our vengeance, stretch him with our embrace, and cover his beautiful eyes, adored by all Samogitian girls, with not gravel. The image of Kastytis in L.A. Juščiūnas’s story is represented in detail – he is young and beautiful, his cheeks are covered with the first beard, his face is the most beautiful, prolonged and white, and his hair is black and long. However his soul and heart are calm and thoughts practical: Kastytis is dreaming about an abundant catch. In the legend, written by L.A. Juščiūnas Jūratė is represented as severe and imperious – with the crown on her head, with the amber stick of power When Kastytis, lured by the songs of Jūratė’s friends, is going to fall into their arms, Jūratė holds them back. She says to Kastytis: Your youth and beauty are very attractive to me; if you promise to leave me, then you will find happiness in my arms. This sounds not like a declaration of love, but like an order. Kastytis
has no choice, he has to obey: he has either to promise love or die. Thus the young man knelt down, bent his head and declared his permanent love. Since then every evening at the mountain, which was named after Konytainis, Jūratė was meeting the fisherman. Perkūnas – Thunder – found out about these secret dates.

...he got terribly angry ... And when the queen returned to her palace, he threw lightning from the sky. It cleared the waves of the sea and struck the queen’s house, killed her and broke the amber palace into pieces. And the fisherman was nailed at the bottom of the sea to the rock and his lover’s body was placed in front of his eyes. He has to look at it forever and mourn his misfortune. However, now, when the winds make the waves run high, people can hear mourning coming from far away – this is the poor fisherman mourning; and water throws out pieces of amber – those are the bits of the queen’s palace.”

It is interesting than L.A. Jučevičius inserted a story about the shape of the flounder into this tragic legend. In the references the writer claims that Lithuanian people together with the Samogitians think that flounder has only one eye and the shape of half a fish, because the queen Jūratė used to like them greatly and thus she granted their second half and threw them back into the sea.”

In 1920 the legend about Jūratė and Kastyris was popularised by Maironis – he created a ballad with the same title perhaps based on L.A. Jučevičius’s text. Of course, in the poetic Maironis’s work there was no information about Jūratė’s looks or her goddess – the unhappy love of the goddess and the fisherman is in the centre of the ballad. Both principal characters are idealized by the poet: Kastyris’s thoughts are flying in the skies, and when the goddess appears, which is white like the flames of waters, covered with green up to her waist, he is not scared; his eyes sparkle and radiated with immense power. Jūratė sees Kastyris as a mighty giant and forgetting her virginity, her divine dignity she falls madly in love. The end of the ballad is different as well: the waves kiss Kastyris to death and Jūratė is still mourning, crying, when she remembers Kastyris and that her palace is broken.

It is understandable that this romantic story was not only a subject for writers, but also for theatre artists. The melodramatic story fitted more to a musical than verbal or dramatic genre. Several years before Maironis wrote the ballad, Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis got interested in the legends of amber, or to be more precise the story about Jūratė
and Kastytis's love. Perhaps Sofija Kymantaite, Ciuirlionis's wife, told this legend to him. The symbolist tone was remarkable in her writings already in 1905 before meeting M.K. Ciuirlionis. One of her first essays is written about the Palanga sea, such is its title. But amber is not mentioned here in any way – she speaks about the wonderful, powerful, miraculous, mysterious and always young sea, which heard our happy songs and the cry of the heart pierced by a sword. In his letter of 21 October 1908 M.K. Ciuirlionis urges S. Kymantaite to start writing the libretto for the opera: Will you stay your words? Yes, Zasme! It is necessary. I want terribly to write "Jurate", you understand? S. Kymantaite wrote the libretto for "Jurate" in a few weeks – in his letter of 19 November 1908 M.K. Ciuirlionis thanks her for the libretto, which she had sent to him. Unfortunately it has disappeared, thus it is difficult to talk about its dramatic qualities as well as about the origins of amber as presented by the writer. However, it is clear from the references in the letters, that the libretto gave some recommendations with regard to musical forms, and that there were discussions about the future opera: I have to avoid folk melodies, don’t I? I have to take into account technical difficulties, don’t I? For when I think that our people are so proud and have nothing, then I feel pity that this work will leave them behind, and you and we want to give them something... I do not want to make it easier for myself, just want to solve an even harder task. I want to stage it even in Warsaw and then in Vilnius, but there is still long way to go... Zasme, my dearest, you don’t have any idea how I like "Jurate". I have read it three times and every time I liked more and more the beginning, the combination with "fugue" and everything (19 November 1908, a letter written from St. Petersburg) . In another letter M.K. Ciuirlionis writes that he will use the melody from the folk song "the waves murmur, sleep, sleep...", he wants to make the overture sad, almost sinister, strange and fantastic, like the depth of the sea, which could be called "The Depth of the Sea" and should be performed in a dark hall. The composer and artist was thinking not only about the music for the opera, but also about its staging, details of mise-en-scène, lighting. On M.K. Ciuirlionis's opinion the curtain should rise in the second part of the introduction and from the darkness should appear slowly the outline of the main accessories: firstly, the fantastic starfish, strange plants, amber palace etc. Everything should appear slowly with more and more light – the music follows light and dissolves into silence. Then the ballad song starts "The Waves Murmur" – it is repeated and Kastytis’s song is heard as echo "I Love the Sea" and then the ballad again, and then V.M. [Water Virgin - Prayer] choir, which I intend to make like this: she also start and appear, then II soprano and also appear, and then I soprano alike. "We Have to Tell the Queen" is the theme of a fugue for three voices (28 November 1908 letter written from St. Petersburg). In the same letter M.K. Ciuirlionis writes that Zasme’s role is different – what Zasme sings is unchangeable and I would like to surround her with noble poetry. M.K. Ciuirlionis had not only started to create music for the opera, but also the setting. From the three sketches known today (and dated 1908), two represent the submarine world, one – the seaside. The amber palace in the artist’s drawing have fantastic shapes reminiscent of oriental architecture, with towers, belts by
a huge grass snake, surrounded by sea plants, with the shapes of fish and starfish in the background. In the right side of one sketch there is a navel fish starting with an open mouth. The shape of the palace is different in both sketches – perhaps M.K. Čiurlionis was searching for a more appropriate image for the setting of the future opera. The sketch representing the seaside the fisherman is pulling a magnificent boat to the shore, whose figure is outlined.

One way or another this Čiurlionis family idea was not realised, and in M.K. Čiurlionis’s letters available presently there are no more references to "Jūratė".

Lithuanian theatre directors returned to this theme in the beginning of the 30s. The legend of amber was used for the first Lithuanian national ballet. The libretto based on Mašonis’s ballad was written by the opera soloist Marija Lipièiene; the main emotional paraphrases of the romantic ballet are remarkable here. The opposition of the two worlds – the earthly and fantastic, love between the human and non-human beings – a mermaid in this case and the impossibility of that love are very typical to the repertoire of the romantic ballet. Such a dramatic conflict is characteristic also of the ballet “Mermaid” by Cesare Pugni, produced by Julies Perov in London 1843. Although there is no proof that the old romantic ballet would have made any influence for “Jūratė and Kastyris”. The libretto of “Jūratė ir Kastyris” is naïve: Kastyris returns from the sea, he is suffering from longing, he goes to the sea again and meets Jūratė –

white like the foam of the waters, with long blond plaits. Suddenly his eyes sparkle with unspoken power and he, full of giant force, rushes in Jūratė. A feast is taking place at the bottom of the sea. Kastyris sees Jūratė even more chaste and beautiful, falls to her feet and happy slaves at her with his eyes flashboyant with love.

The happy moments are interrupted by Thunder: the wave creature lure Kastyris to the shore and kiss him to death; and all nature is mourning together with Jūratė 11. The music for the performance was written by Juozas Grūdis, choreographed by Nikolaj Zveeve, setting and costumes by Adomas Galdikas. The performance was on show together with two other quite different works – “The Swift of Dance” by Vytautas Bačevičius and “Marchmaking” by Bolyjs Dvarionas. The critics focused mostly on “Jūratė and Kastyris” from all the three performances – the audience liked the romantic music by J. Grūdis and of course, the melodramatic story itself. Although the duration of the performance was only 35 minutes, the critics appreciated its Lithuanian character, the choreographer’s efforts to create the plastic imagery of the performance based on Lithuanian dance:

P. Zveeve in this ballet succeeded to give something Lithuanian. For e.g. one can feel Lithuanian character in the Palanga boys and girls’ dance. There are even very beautiful dances here. <…> The general impression of this performance is very good. Beautiful, poetic, musical.

On the other hand, the inconsistency in the dramaticy of this performance was remarked upon, the problems of the proportions between the musical and choreographic parts, which were obvious also in the later productions of this ballet:

However, one has to note that there is some disharmony in the composition of the ballet. The first and the third scene are too short, the musical brakes, whatever their value, are too long. Thus the choreographic impression is a bit waning and is overwhelmed by the musical impression 14.

The setting and costumes of the performance are close to the decorative style of the Art World setting, although in the first scene – Kastyris’s bar at the sea – there are features of the more strict and rhythmic Art Deco: with stylised waves, decorative groups of white clouds and the pine tree forest framing the stage. For the submarine amber palace the artist used more paintly style. He did not emphasise the amber palace, but focused on the fantastic submarine vegetation. The costumes for Jūratė are very ingenious: smart outline, abundant decorative accessories – necklaces, diadems, interesting details of the sleeves. The main roles in this ballet were performed by the then soloists of the State Theatre ballet: Vera Nemch国ova and Anatoly Obozkhov, and after they left Lithuania in 1935, they were replaced by Marija Juozapaitë and Bronius Kelbauskas, who later started to stage ballets himself.

It is interesting that Bronius Kelbauskas finished his career as a choreographer in 1965 with the ballet “Jūratė and Kastyris” by J. Grūdis. The premiere took place
on the 11th of July. The conductor Chaimas Petaldis composed a ballet of three acts and five scenes from J. Grieg’s music. The ballet lasted one hour 50 minutes. The libretto based on Maironis’s ballad was edited by the choreographer himself. In this version the theme of the estrangement between the main hero and his environment, typical to romantic ballets, is very important. There are motives, present in other classical ballets, for instance, in “The Swan Lake” by Peter Tschaikovsky. B. Kelbauskas in his libretto emphasises Kastytis’s timidity, loneliness – he is shy, confused does not know how to thank the blondes, does not dare to look into the girls’ eyes. When he sees Jūratė, he forgets his home – some unusual, immense power draws the young man to Jūratė and he abandons himself to the destiny and disappears in the waves .

The setting was designed by Juozas Jankus. The amber palace was ornamental, decorated with rhythmical combinations of graphic lines. It is difficult to say today how the final of the performance was staged – the fall of the amber palace.

In the ballet “Jūratė and Kastytis” like in his other works the choreographer focused on dance, solved the main dramatic turns by using choreography. The dancers claimed that the choreography was powerful, especially the adagio in the third act. The performance should be considered an important example of Lithuanian choreographic romanticism – this was many times emphasised in the discussion of the performance. The main roles were performed by Genovefa Sabaliauskaite, Tamara Sventickaite, Leokadija Akelovičiūtė (Jūratė), Henrikas Kunavičius, Henrikas Bausys and Raimundas Minderis (Kastytis).

The performance staged by B. Kelbauskas did not last long, after little more than twenty years, in the beginning of the year 1978 the Opera and Ballet Theatre was discussing again the production of “Jūratė and Kastytis”. The conception of the performance was prepared by the choreographer Alfredas Kondratavičius: a prologue and four scenes one act performance (B. Kelbauskas’s version had three acts). He did not dramatise, but attempted to emphasise the main theme in the classic romanticism – the tragedy of the clash between a man and the supernatural world. The music was edited by the conductor Jonas Aleksa. According to him, he would have added to the 1933 version some works by J. Griegus to make a one hour performance. As the set designer was invited Liucija Carneliauskaitė wanted to use projections (the sinister face of Thunder had to be projected on the screen), other technical effects. However this work was finished by V. Braždilius (the premiere took place 7 December 1978). Perhaps because of the lack of time the performance was not very successful, did not last long in the repertoire, but there the rationality, lyricism, avoidance of empty decorative plastic means characteristic to V. Braždilius’s choreography became remarkable.

The life of the legend of amber on the opera stage is related to the name of Kazimieras Viktoras Banaitis, who worked in emigration. K. Banaitis started to think about the opera on this subject in 1932, then he wrote several scenes for the opera based on a libretto by Bronisłau Buivydiūtė, who wrote it according to Maironis’s ballad. However he returned to this work only in the 50s. The music was finished in 1955, however published only in 1971. Although the composer himself did not care that opera was staged (he just wanted to publish the score with English and German translations). However in 1972 the conductor Aleksandras Kučiūnas organised a production of this opera by the Chicago Lithuanian Opera Theatre (the premiere took place 29 April in Chicago’s St. Mary Higher School). A. Kučiūnas shortened K.V. Banaitis’s music – the duration was around an hour and a half. The author of the libretto B. Buivydiūtė (differently from the earlier ballet interpretations of this story) created a typical opera love triangle: next to Kastytis and Jūratė, there was Rūtėlė – the earthly love of Kastytis: The sea goddess Jūratė bewitched Kastytis and took him away from his family and friends and from the “earthly” girlfriedn . There is also Kastytis’s father in the libretto who disappeared in the performance – he curses Kastytis. It is understandable that here, like in other works on this subject, the legend of amber was not very important – the crash of the amber palace was used as an effective finale of the performance, producing a tragic atmosphere. The setting was designed by Adolfo Valezka:

The setting was too overloaded; it is hardly possible to avoid this in such a piece and the stage of this size. Adolfo Valezka’s setting was sparkling with fantastic and interesting colours. There were various opinions about them, some were expecting a different seabed. In the first two scenes the action takes place at the seashore; only in Kastytis’s visions the depths of the sea appear in the background of the stage. The third act in the amber palace at the bottom of the sea has hardly represent the bottom of the sea as we see it on television, when it shows divers working. Here the young seamaids are celebrating Jūratė and Kastytis’s wedding, and which then collapses, when Thunder decides to revenge for the goddess’s love to the mortal fisherman, although Thunder himself does not have a vocal role here (in the version of the Chicago Lithuanian Opera this character existed, performed by Januris Pauniūnas). Other roles were performed by Sabina Martiniatyte and Gediminas Kučiūnas (Jūratė), Virgilijus Norveika and Vaidas Virčius (Kastytis) and Aukta Cicenaitė and Gražina Malinauskaitė (Rūtėlė).

At the moment there are no performances related to the legend of amber in the repertoires of any Lithuanian theatres. Their short lives are caused by the unfinished composition of the ballet and opera themselves, the inconsistency of their artistic quality and finally the unfavourable contemporary theatre situation (especially for romantic melodrama). The story of Jūratė and Kastytis as well as the amber palace could be reborn by writing a new piece, which would not attempt to illustrate the story, but try to see the classical conflict of the earthly and unearthly worlds differently.

Translated by Agnė Narvytė

