

## CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN AMBER JEWELRY AND TRADITION

**Lolita Jablonskienė**

*INSTITUTE OF CULTURE AND ART (LITHUANIA)*

The choice of the topic for my report was prompted by the character of this conference in Vilnius. An international interdisciplinary conference, where the topic of amber is approached in several aspects, those of archeology, history, collections and art, seems to invite one to make a more expanded analysis of the application of amber in contemporary jewelry art. The principal aim of this research is therefore: to analyze the extent of spreading of this branch of contemporary jewelry, to present the countries where it is actively developed and enjoys popularity, to discover some specific features and peculiarities which are particular of the schools of individual countries and artists together with the factors which unite them and are typical for contemporary amber artifacts in general. On the other hand, I would also like to discuss an attitude to amber not only in the context of the present-day jewelry art, but also in that of a long-established tradition of amber articles. The intention to think over the interpretations of contemporary amber art works in the discourse of tradition and its transformations was provoked by the reviewed illustrative material, presenting artistic practice in different countries – albums, catalogues, where in frequent cases the production of amber in the modern times makes a mere batch beside the copious pages of the glorious past. The present report is principally based on a comparative analysis.

The last decade witnessed several important exhibitions presenting contemporary amber art: in 1989 an exhibition of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian

amber was held in Vilnius, in 1993 the German Amber Museum in Ribnitz-Damgarten initiated a competition of amber artifacts by German artists, in 1994 an international amber fair was held in Gdansk, in 1998 an international competition for amber jewelry was held at the initiative of the mentioned museum in Ribnitz-Damgarten, and in 1999 the same museum hosted a big international exhibition of contemporary amber art works. Amber museums in Oksbol (Denmark), Hölvikén (Sweden), Malbork (Poland), Kaliningrad (Russia) and Palanga (Lithuania) rendered their help when organizing the exhibition. The geography of these mentioned events as well as the list of the artists-participants witness that first of all it is German, Polish, Russian as well as Lithuanian and Latvian artists who favor amber in their present-day works. Amber is also used by few Swedish, Danish and Finnish jewelers, and even more seldom by the artists from other European countries. Thus, this unique material of specific beauty is most popular in those countries where it used to be discovered, gathered or excavated by industrial means; there, where it was originally employed in art works for long centuries.

The history of German amber artifacts in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. is based on the activities of the State Amber Manufactory in Königsberg (1926-1945). In the course of some twenty years, the manufactory formed an original series of amber products and their style – it produced dishes, clocks, boxes and a great variety of other household articles, liturgical objects as well as souvenirs, awards and amber statuettes. These objects are inlaid with amber

plates of various shades and textures. Jewelry was not the major specialization of the Königsberg manufactory, and it would rather be called serial bijouterie than original unique jewelry art: strings of polished amber beads, bracelets of amber plates and the brooches of naturalistic floral motives. Some of the best examples of the fine amber plastics (small sculptures) in this manufactory were created by the sculptor Jan Holshuh. In 1929 and 1936 for his mastery in this field the artist was honored with the Grand Prix at world exhibitions. It is not only the prestige of amber sculpture in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. but also the rebirth of this branch in the late 20<sup>th</sup> c. that are associated with the name of J. Holshuh. The exhibitions featuring his amber articles "Amber 84" and "Amber 89" in the German Museum of Ivory in Erbach demonstrated the artist's mature style and the original interpretation of amber. The latest amber objects by J. Holshuh are close to the stylistics of contemporary sculpture in respect of its two major tendencies: organic and constructivist. Today, the German artists are also successfully elaborating the line of amber objects (e.g. works of A. Klinger, A. Wippermann, W. Friedrich, V. Schwalm, L. Lippert), which is specific to Germany - amber sculptures are less popular in other neighboring countries. German amber jewelry reflects the general international tendencies: the variations of diverse design trends from minimalism to sculptural luxuriance as well as an important subject of the relationship between jewelry and body are present in the works of S. Todorow, R. Fuhrmann, H. Burgeninks, Ch. Matthias, H. Siebke-Rasehorn, A. Wippermann and others.

In Poland an amber theme is mostly represented in its Baltic seaside cities, first of all in Gdansk, where the workshops of amber craftsmen were known since the 15<sup>th</sup> c. Their artifacts were mostly sumptuous boxes and liturgical articles decorated with variegated amber mosaic, sculptural elements and carving. This region has also preserved a folk tradition of amber jewelry - strings of round amber beads, rosaries and amulets with the images of saints were popular here through centuries. The rich amber collections possessed by the Malbork Castle Museum and the Museum of Earth in Warsaw present the important role of amber in the history of Polish culture. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the mass-production of amber artifacts was also concentrated in Gdansk: amber workshops "Bursztyny" and the state enterprise "Polsrebro" which produced series of amber artifacts should be mentioned. The

movement of the unique contemporary amber jewelry in Poland is also associated with this city. It is said that it started in 1964, when the "Desa" gallery in Gdansk opened the exhibition featuring the jewelry by Pawel Fietkiewicz. From here an interest in the employment of amber in jewelry and the influence of the works by Pawel and Maria Fietkiewicz spread to other Polish cities. The works in silver and amber executed by these artists speak of the original interpretation of the Art Nouveau tradition: metal constructions of refined bent silhouettes, frequent details of flora, a sumptuous whole are characteristic of their work. The application of amber in jewelry makes artists search for the specimens which distinguish themselves by color and textural aspects. The unique character of an amber piece is brought out by way of removing its rind and masterly polishing. A similar combination of silver plastics and painterly qualities of amber is exploited in the works by T. and M. Sokolowski, S., G. and L. Piro, W. Jakubowski and other Polish artists. The other famous Polish amber jeweler - M. Lewicka-Wala followed the trend of a more restrained design. A penchant for natural amber uniques and a sculptural silversmith's art is a bulwark of the modern Polish school of amber art.

The richest amber deposits in the world are concentrated in the present Kaliningrad region in Russia. The state amber enterprise, opened in Kaliningrad in 1947, specializes in the creation of models for mass production, though original artists' works are produced here too. In recent years many free-lance jewelers, without any links with the enterprise, also create amber jewelry and various other articles decorated with amber. The 60s witnessed the emergence of a contemporary amber art style in Kaliningrad due to the jewelry, small sculptures and objects by A. Popov, E. Lis, V. Mitianin, A. Kvashin, A. Jaroshenko, R. Benislavski, V. Shorokhov and other masters. The Russian artists tended to interpret amber as a semi-precious stone. In their works: in the compositions of jewelry pieces or objects, in the ornaments of metal framing they elaborate historical traditions of the Russian jewelry art, fine metal works and semi-precious stone articles. A new generation of artists of the 70s enriched this tradition with new aspects. Their works similarly to the Polish ones are marked by the touch of the Art Nouveau style, which is popular with Kaliningrad jewelers up to the present time (L. Serebriakova, L. Sakharova, N. Lapinus and others). One also recognizes in them an organic or "nature" style, which was popular in applied arts of this region in the 70s and 80s. Contemporary Russian amber works are very diverse in

respect of types of products. Many artists apply amber in making functional household objects. Jewelry pieces are less associated with internationally popular minimalist design - they are more picturesque and intricate in their patterns.

In Lithuania and Latvia the tradition of amber processing is based on centuries-long works of folk craftsmen. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. the cities of Riga and Liepaja in Latvia had several amber jewelry workshops. In pre-war Lithuania amber articles were produced in the towns of Palanga Kretinga, Plungė and Kaunas. In the postwar years, amber processing was concentrated in art enterprises (in Liepaja, Klaipėda and Vilnius) and factories of folk masters. In the 50s, the department of Amber and Fine Metal Works (the only one in the Baltics) was established at the Applied Arts College in Liepaja. Lithuanian and Latvian enterprises produced mainly models for mass production (jewelry, souvenirs), however, the artists working there also shaped their individual style, which demonstrated itself in full measure in their unique works. In the 60s, with the formation of the Lithuanian and Latvian contemporary amber art style, two major trends emerged both in mass-produced and original works. The first one fostered an ethnographic tradition of amber jewelry, frequently associating it with the elements of the then fashionable design style (particularly the so called "festival" style): e.g. Latvians: J. Surdmalis, V. Ansulis, E. Rubenis, V. Lenke, L. Andrukaityte, and Lithuanians: A. Vertulienė, J. Vertulis, I. Pakutinskienė, F. Pakutinskas, A. Milkintas, E. Augaitytė and others. The second trend is characterized by the search for original modern forms, highlighting the specific character of amber material. In Latvia the pioneers of this trend were: O. Keterlinis, M. Burve, A. Meldere, E. Auninis, G. Romulis and others, in Lithuania - F. Daukantas, L. Šulgaitė, P. Balčius and K. Simanonis. The Lithuanian school of amber jewelry in the 60s-80s is famous for F. Daukantas' minimalist and K. Simanonis sculpturally decorative works, which reminds also of the two similar trends in Polish amber art (associated with M. Lewicka-Wala and the Fietkiewicz couple). Some of the Lithuanian amber jewelry, especially the works by K. Simanonis are also frequently associated with the tradition of Art Nouveau crafts, which naturally leads to the conclusion that Eastern European jewelry artists in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. were much more bound to the sources of modern jewelry than to its contemporary trends. Currently, in the recent decade the application of amber seems to be more popular in the works by Lithuanian jewelers than those by their colleagues in

Latvia. The Mizgiris family, patrons and founders of amber museums-galleries in Nida (1992) and Vilnius (1998), have greatly contributed to the popularity of this material in Lithuania today. Original amber jewelry works and modern objects from amber are created and displayed at many local and international exhibitions by B. Stulgaitė, S. Virpilaitis, V. Matulionis, Ž. Bautrėnas, S. Krivičienė, J. Balčiūnas and V. Vidugirytė, A. Mikutis and others.

The review of the development of contemporary amber art in various countries, comparing it with a historical tradition of amber articles, witnesses that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the application of amber and the attitude to this material is usually based on one of two principles. From the 60s onwards the greatest role in amber jewelry belonged to the artificially disclosed unique expression of amber, which was complemented or developed by a metal construction. Parallely to this trend, there exists another approach to amber - less as a unique material (nearly a precious stone) but more as a found object or simply a thing. This interpretation can be illustrated by mass produced amber jewelry, where tiny pieces of amber are more often used, and also by original works, particularly in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., when the growth of object type tendencies in jewelry overshadowed the worship of materials. If we directed our glance to historical amber articles, we should have to juxtapose the first standpoint with the tradition dominating in this craft up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> c. Till then craftsmen almost exclusively used amber not for the creation of jewelry but for the decoration of things. Here amber was interpreted as a decorative material like bone or semi-precious stone and was used for the refinement of luxury articles. This tradition, incidentally, can be seen in the production of the amber manufactory in Königsberg in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in some works by contemporary Kaliningrad artists. Amber as a found object is more typical in a folk art tradition. Folk articles: strings of beads, brooches, and amulets are usually executed from less processed segments, resembling amber naturally found in nature. Such jewelry, particularly beads from monochrome or multicolor pieces of amber (in Poland they are wittily called Hawaiian) today are still widely produced by amber-processing amateurs and sold as souvenirs in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Russia. From the point of view of the history of material culture, amber as a found object has older and longer living traditions than amber as a decorative material.

In the catalogue of the 1999 international exhibition, Ulf Erichson, director of the Ribnitz-Damgarten Amber Museum, pointed out the principle features characteristic of contemporary amber art. Among them, he

first of all mentions that today amber is mainly used in its natural shape, its forms remain almost untouched or the artist's intervention is utterly minimal. In his opinion, the great majority of jewelers admires a natural rough surface of amber finds and only sometimes contrasts it with the polished or differently processed details. "Amber is a very ancient material and is therefore often expressly used to express time and time-related topics".\*

Indeed, a tendency followed by the present-day international amber art seems to contradict the dominant opinion in the 60s-70s that amber can become an effective material only thanks to the artist's special efforts to bring it out through specific technical means. The oeuvre of the contemporary amber jewelry classics (e.g. Polish artists M. and P. Fietkiewicz, M. Lewicka-Wala, Lithuanians – F. Daukantas, K. Simanonis, etc.) can be definitely called modernist in the sense that it has rejected all the previously observed traditions in the sphere of amber art: both ethnographic, showing amber as a found object, and that of historical handicraft, treating amber as a decorative material. Having included amber into the circulation of contemporary jewelry the mentioned and other artists had an ambition to turn amber articles into exclusive art works and to kindle in them a glimmer of spirituality through their mastership.

The recent amber works, particularly created in the latest decade, witness the loss of interest in the very modernist style. The original works demonstrate the rebirth of fascination with the simplicity and objecthood of amber. Jewelers came to more often combine amber with more everyday materials: wood, ropes, plastics, steel, etc. (B. Stulgaitė, S. Virpilaitis, W. Friedrich), to again employ it for inlay work and sculptural forms (Ž. Bautrėnas, A. Matulionis, H. Stegemann), and particularly play with amber finds, reminding those collected by people on a sea shore (B. Jungrichter, P. Süzert, U. Scheer, C. Kurth, A. Wippermann, K. Gorzareck, L. Visy, etc.). This tendency of contemporary amber artworks also stimulates to differently approach the sources of modern amber art – the works created in the early 60s, which were pushed away to the margins of the craft by the judgments established in the context of modernist attitudes. The mass-produced amber jewelry and the statuettes composed of nearly unprocessed samples of material (e.g. F. Daukantas' early works), can be measured by the criteria of object-like attitude to amber too, and should occupy their proper place in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. history of amber art.

George Kubler, an American art historian, as early as 1962 proposed a different outlook on the history of art\*\*. In his opinion, the history of art should unite

all man-made objects: both those which are usually attributed to material culture and those – specifically artistic. G. Kubler's history of art is the history of things. Quite a few attempts to analyze a non-monosemantic relationship between a thing and an art object have been also made by exhibitions, like "What if Anything, Is an Object" (1994 in the Fogg Museum of Art, Cambridge, US), "Useless Things" (1997 in the Applied Art Museum, Tallinn) or "Unchained Things" (1998 in the Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius). The two outlooks on amber in contemporary amber jewelry join this polemic too. A modernist stand, as properly expected, is anti-traditional in respect of form, however, it protects the positions of exclusive high art. Contemporary art combines traditional and non-traditional expression. Its characteristic feature is manipulation with the perceptions of "high" and "low" art. Today amber art witnesses its rebirth time – the reason seems to be the reflexive understanding of both historical and modernist dogmas.

\* Moderne Bernstein Kunst / Modern Amber Art. Ribnitz-Damgarten, 1999, p. 9

\*\* G. Kubler. The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things. New Haven and London, 1962.

#### References:

- M. Тихомирова. Литовское золото. Вильнюс, 1973  
 P. Gudynas, S. Pinkus. Palangos gintaro muziejus. Vilnius, 1974  
 С. Савкевич. Н. Сохранская. Янтарь. Балтийский самоцвет в изделиях Калининградских художников. Калининград, 1976  
 F. Daukantas. Vilnius, 1977  
 V. Anšulis. Baltijas dzintars. Riga, 1979  
 M. Knobloch. Polska Bizuteria. Warszawa, 1980  
 J. Grabowska. Polish Amber. Warsaw, 1983  
 Internationaler Wettbewerb 1984 Passform. Jan Holshuh. Bernstein '84. Ausstellung im Deutschen Elefantbeinmuseum Erbach. Erbach, 1984  
 Jan Holshuh. Bernstein '89. Ausstellung im Deutschen Elefantbeinmuseum Erbach. Erbach, 1989  
 B. Kosmowska-Ceranowicz. T. Konart. Tajemnice bursztynu. Warszawa, 1989  
 В. Лебедев. Изобразительное искусство Калининградской области. Т. IV. Янтаря дивный свет. Калининград, 1997  
 U. Erichson, L. Tomczyk. Die Staatliche Bernstein-Manufaktur Königsberg 1926-1945. Ribnitz-Damgarten, 1998  
 Šiuolaikiniai lietuvių dailininkai gintaro galerijoje-muziejuje. Vilnius, 1998  
 Moderne Bernstein Kunst / Modern Amber Art. Ribnitz-Damgarten, 1999

## AMBER IN DENMARK

*Mariann Ploug*

*THE DANISH AMBER MUSEUM (DENMARK)*

It should be possible to find amber almost anywhere in Denmark, if you dig deep enough, but most people are under the impression that amber is only found by the coast. Most of the Danish amber is succinite as Baltic amber, but amber from the Cretaceous Period has been found under the earth too.

The largest amounts of amber are found near Blåvandshuk and on Fanø, but amber is washed up in large quantities along the whole of the west coast of Jutland up to Thyborøn. Around Skagen, on the other hand, the current is so strong that the sea carries off the amber to quieter shores as the Kattegat coast from Frederikshavn southwards to below Limfjorden, as well as in Limfjorden itself. Actually amber has been found as far south as Århus Bight.

The north coasts of Læsø and Zealand are acknowledged to be good places for finding amber, and some can be found on Øresund. A certain quantity of amber is also washed up on the beaches of the smaller, southern islands.

#### Coastal amber

Amber, sometimes in large quantities, is often discovered in connection with the dredging of channels, the building of harbours and other coastal works. Amber has even been found in Copenhagen. In 1681, a lump weighing more than 1,400 grams was dug up at Kalveboderne, and later, at the northern entrance to the moat, a piece weighing about 1,200 grams was discovered. Both these pieces were presented to King Frederik III.



Fig. 1. Amber gatherers at Blåvandshuk, about 1980.