

## Juris Bergins: Creative work as a search for identity



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Juris Bergins, born and raised in Riga, the capital of Latvia, did not come to ceramics by a direct route. He first studied painting at the Janis Rozentāls Art High School in Riga, and later, design at the Art Academy of Latvia. As he began his artistic journey, the young artist tried various areas of creative activity, but found his true calling in ceramics. He displayed his first ceramic works, dishes and vases with overglaze decoration as well as a painted toilet, in 1987 at an exhibition at the “Jāņa sēta” Gallery in the Old Town of Riga. It was the success of this show that led Bergins to develop his individual style that produced a stand-out series of works at the 1989 exhibition held at the Dzintari House of Artists in Jūrmala. Strange as it

may seem, it was actually an advantage that Bergins had not passed through an academic programme of ceramics, as he was protected from clichés and taboos arising from a traditional ceramics education. The search for his own creative identity coincided with the time of an historical breakthrough: Gorbachev's policy of liberalisation (*perestroika*) in the Soviet Union and the 'singing revolution' of the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) which made it possible for the restoration of their independence in a largely peaceful way. Bergins' maturation was influenced by the broad spiritual up-welling of this period, and the increased attention paid to the historical past of his country and its people.

Bergins' early creative work was marked by conspicuous political and civic engagement. The American potter Joseph Bennion noted the anti-Soviet character of the works when he visited Latvia in 1989. Several years later he recalled his encounter with Juris: "The work he showed was remarkably different from the other Latvian work we were seeing. It was out of step with the generally conservative and classical orientation of the other Baltic artists." In the same article, Bennion postulated that the originality of Bergins' creative work resulted from, among other factors, isolation from the influence of Western art. Bergins sought to overcome the isolation factor after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, coupled with Latvia's restoration of its independence in 1990, and the opening of borders. This brought about an acceleration and strengthening of artistic processes matched with an unprecedented dynamism. Bergins was one of the artists who put enormous effort into learning from the experiences of democratic countries and exhibiting his work in exhibitions abroad.

In 1992, Bergins won a three-month residency at the Banff Centre (in Alberta, Canada; Program Director: Les Manning). The works he made there were included in *Refleksija* (curator Daina Augaitis), an exhibition of works by Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian artists held at the Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery, and reflecting the political and spiritual changes in the life of the Baltic countries.

Self-reflection and the will to tell history from his own point of view were characteristics of Bergins' works from the beginning. Searching for his identity, the artist dove deep into the political reality of those days, and the experience of a Soviet citizen's relationship with global reality. A sculptured head mottled with Soviet passport entries (*Autoportretas*, 1989), a fish wrapped into a *Playboy* magazine with a Soviet film star on the cover (*Pusryčiai*, 1989) and the head of the artist himself resting on a real brick, sticking out of a bucket (*Never But*, 1990) were works that made Bergins well-known at the end of the last century as one of the most original Latvian ceramic artists of the younger generation. His works were full of expressive hints as to the inner feeling of a person from that period, the political realities, and the trappings of Western mass-culture inundating the grey every-day life of an Eastern European.

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In the closing decade of the 20th century, the artist began to create playful porcelain 'still-lives', called simply 'cups', 'teapots', 'coffee pots'. They were assemblages interpreting the forms of traditional house-ware, painted with the portraits of political figures and ideological symbols and covered with bitten-into fruit and household items: table utensils, packs of cigarettes, and sweet wrappers. One can see in them several sources of inspiration, including the graceful plasticity of Meissen porcelain, the 'propaganda porcelain' that made inter-war Latvia infamous, the traditions of the 'Baltars' (*Baltic arts*) and pop-art still-lives. However, it is obvious that the material associated with slap-in-the-face pop-art was never the purpose of the artist's creative work. This playful aggregation, also having an aesthetic dimension, is not coincidental. The deliberately chosen banal household elements, coordinated with ideological and religious symbols and portraits of powerful figures (Marx, Lenin, Stalin), have a deep subtext. The dissonance between external attractiveness, household utility and the individuality-crushing symbols creates a metaphor regarding the fate of the common person in the hands of great political manipulators. The cup with the smiling image of Lenin (*Puodelis*, 1995) superimposed on the dream of

many a Soviet person, and a pack of *West* cigarettes, bear eloquent witness to the hypocritical existence forced on such people, their lack of belief in Marxist-Leninist ideology, and their thirst for Western trinkets.

It was precisely these works that earned international recognition for the Latvian. In 1995, three of his works won the Premio Acquisto (Purchase prize) at the 49th international ceramics exhibition-competition in Faenza (*Concorso Internazionale della Ceramica d'Arte*, Italy) and were accepted into the collections of the International Museum of Ceramics.

Bergins' creative work is consistent, without dramatic zig-zags. However, one can discern certain differences between the early works and his present-day searches in terms of the materials he used. The artist formed his early sculptural compositions on the basis of contrast, in one work coordinating various materials that included chamotte, red clay and bone china. His experience as a designer proved to be useful when constructing an object, as was his skill as a painter when painting the motifs. Digital technologies never appealed to Bergins; as he did then, so now, he continues to paint by hand all details and portrait images. Sometimes he calls his exhibitions "painting exhibitions", even the early ones. Only porcelain dominates in his later creative work as he chooses not to use other ceramic bodies. For this reason, the compositions perhaps lose a portion of their earlier acerbity, but not their irony and critical reflectiveness, which remains an important instrument in communicating meaning and world-view. The personal relationship with lived history is important to the artist, and perhaps for that reason he is always the observer of the environment in his works. At first, he memorialised himself in the form of sculptural heads and painted portraits, and later, in nude figures.

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The combination of political hints and self-portrait usually raises many questions in the mind of the viewer. In his early creative work, Juris Bergins often examined political issues of importance, which was completely natural at a time of liberation from a totalitarian regime – yet he never lost his sense of social vigilance. Bergins' eye finds fault in much of the present-day environment. He presents his nude figure looking upon a world panorama from an enormous amphora (*Vaza su portretu*, 2008). He “hears and sees” could well paraphrase the title of one of his

works. His composition *Tarp Karlo Markso ir Johno R. Rokfelerio* (2006) critically assesses both political systems, the socialist and the capitalist, which art critics had already perceived and written about earlier in his career.<sup>3</sup> The teapot *Krizē* (2009) calls to mind a pink bubble with the image of a well-fed cat and the word *fat* (*fat cat* as a description of a banker), and has the figure of the artist himself sliding out of it. Archetypal Latvian symbols and the attributes of a poverty-stricken everyday life allude to the contrasts of present-day existence, including social inequality and the insatiable greed of the powerful.

Conversely, Bergins and his work can be serious, quiet and contemplative, especially when depicting those dear to him (*Autoportretas su senelīais*, 1997) or opening the painful pages of the history of the Latvian people. A reserved, temperate composition of muted tones (2007) was dedicated to Rūdolfs Pelše (the founder of the Ceramic Master Studio of the Art Academy of Latvia), who died in Siberian exile. The top of the vase is expressively wreathed with barbed wire, and a portrait of the professor, who suffered at the hands of the Soviet regime, is on the side.

The mythology of the Balts, the linguistics<sup>4</sup> and art heritage have especially interested Bergin in recent years. Because of his thorough preparation, studying the material and visiting museum collections, the exploring gaze of an intellectual is evident in his works. Objects similar to the symbols of Baltic civilisation discovered during trips to other countries often pique his creative interest, and he appears to see and elevate that which most people do not seem to notice.

## THE SEARCH FOR HIS OWN CREATIVE IDENTITY COINCIDED WITH THE TIME OF AN HISTORICAL BREAKTHROUGH ...

The search for identity and historical memory is obvious in works, which on the surface seem to be different. In a composition based on the analogies of archetypal images, *Etruskai* (2011), Etruscan and Baltic anthropology, ornamentation and linguistic similarities<sup>5</sup> are compared. Bergin chooses an analogous comparative route in the work *Karvės burna – Gangos pradžia* (2013), in which an enormous porcelain cow's head, with water flowing from its mouth, is inscribed with Latvian words. The work symbolises one of the sources of the Ganges River, a rock located in the Himalayas, named Gomukhi, the form of which resembles a cow's head. Its Sanskrit name coincides with the Latvian *govs mutē* (Latvian for cow's mouth). However, the cultural past may be imagined otherwise, as in a modest yet sublime metallic (reduction-fired) porcelain vase dappled with the symbols and characters of different continents naming the cult of the Earth Mother goddess and Heaven (*Daoizmas ir Didžioji motina*, 2015). The historical finds inspiring the works, sometimes themselves dictate the artistic means. In the composition *Du Janai ir Narvos kultūra*<sup>6</sup> (2015), in which ancient Baltic and Roman artefacts are compared, chamotte imitating black-glaze pottery is used, suggesting associations with an archaic past.

The juxtaposition of classical European art and Baltic culture, mythology and language, has formed the basis for much of Bergins' work during the last decade. The subjects of ancient mythology and the forms, decorative details and painted images of Greek vases in which elements of the ancient Baltic heritage may be seen, are put to use in his works. The title itself often tells a story, as in *Pirmas izraelių karalius pagonis Saulius meta ietį į karalių Dovydą* (2016), provoking one to read between the lines and consider the subtext of the story carefully painted with underglaze and overglaze decoration. In the composition *Ganimedas ir Dzeuso erelis. Vaza su Florencijos katedros tapybos motyvais* (2015), the plot of the ancient myth becomes a pretext to draw together into one narrative the legacy of the art of different eras: classical antiquity, Baroque, and ancient Baltic. Bergin perceives Baltic ornamentation and ancient symbols in the dress of the mythic figures of classical antiquity, thereby juxtaposing classical art and Latvian historical heritage as he travels across epochs, considering different versions of the sources of culture, art and religions, as well as interconnectedness and continuity. He seeks to put together a coherent mosaic of the history of the people from fragments of artistic inheritance. Historical memory in his creative work is inextricably linked with the topic of existence itself. One can hear unspoken questions: who are we, where are our roots, what will we leave behind when we are gone? Perhaps it is for this reason Bergins returns from time to time to cups and vessels (ware) with the portraits of political figures, the products of mass culture and the threatening images of historical calamities. It is apparent that he remains concerned for the fate of

the ordinary person in a world dominated by the strong and the great. This person, holding a leaning classical-form vessel with the baggage of history (*Kavinukas su motyvais iš Vatikano kolekcijos*, 2015), must withstand the enormous weight of the past, while at the same time assuming responsibility for tomorrow. Is that not what the artist wishes to say in his work *Paukštis ir dangus* (2017), where a bird of particular beauty perches next to a beer can that has the image of an atomic mushroom cloud on it?

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### Endnotes

1. Bennion, Joseph, 'Eloquent Irony: The Ceramic Art of Juris Bergins', *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, 1992, No 8, p. 13.
2. 'Baltars' (*Baltic arts*): a Latvian porcelain works which operated from 1924 to 1928 in Riga. It was noteworthy for its national romanticism, constructivism and art deco features. The founders and artists of the workshop were Romans Suta, Sigizmunds Vidbergs, and Aleksandra Belcova. Baltars works earned international recognition and influenced the development of Latvian ceramics and applied art.
3. Sanders, Christopher, 'The Shepparton Awards: A Preview', in: *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, 1996, No 26, p. 99.
4. The Latvian language belongs to the Baltic group within the Indo-European family of languages. Having maintained many archaic sounds and grammatical forms, it shares common features with classical Sanskrit as well as ancient Latin and Greek.
5. According to some researchers, a portion of the Balts in the third millennium BCE moved from the shores of the Baltic Sea to the Balkans and the Apennines and created a state there, the cultural elements of which may be seen in the Etruscan civilisation.
6. The Narva culture was a Neolithic archaeological culture, found in the fifth–fourth millennia BCE between the Narva and Nemunas rivers in what is now Estonia, Latvia, northern and western Lithuania, Kaliningrad (formerly East Prussia) and neighbouring territories of Poland and Russia.

### Image Captions

*Teapot with motives*, 2014, porcelain, ht: 28 cm.  
*Bird and Sky*, 2016, porcelain, ht: 16 cm.  
*Ganymede and sir Zeus eagle*, 2015, porcelain, ht: 35 cm.  
*Fight and Rest*, 2017, porcelain, ht: 32cm.  
*Teapot*, 2017, porcelain, ht: 31 cm.  
*Horn force*, 2017, porcelain, ht: 38 cm.

All images courtesy of the artist.

by Lijana Natalevičienė

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