

LACQUER AND LEGACY: OPENING THE BOX TO SOVIET NARRATIVES AND BALTIC REALITIES



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DE-RUSSIFICATION

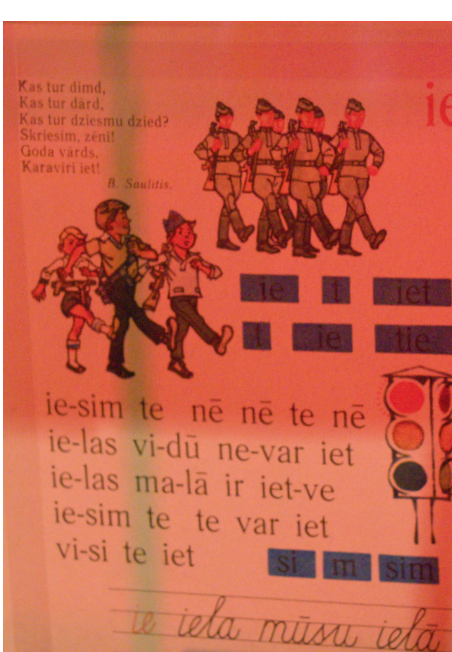


- The full-scale invasion in the Russo-Ukrainian War has heightened de-Russification initiatives in the Baltic region.
- Latvia, a Baltic state bordering Russia to the East, underwent occupation by the Soviet regime from 1940 to 1941 and from 1944 until 1991.
- Resultantly, Latvia has the largest Russian-speaking population in the European Union.
- As part of Latvia's nationalist policies to reduce Soviet influence, Soviet-era monuments are toppled and Riga's KGB headquarters museum is to be publicly sold.



• The Baltica Festival, a folklore event, pictured above hosted Baltic and Ukrainian performances of dance, song, and crafts to celebrate culture previously suppressed during Soviet occupation, Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.

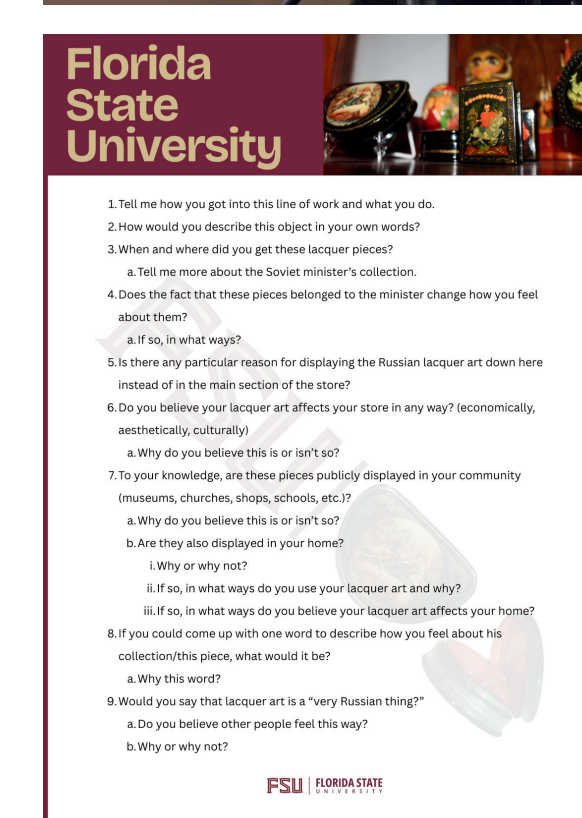
CONTESTED MEMORY



- Allegations of “Russophobia” have thus emerged from a third of Riga's population: ethnic Russians.
- The tripartite struggle between public pro-Latvian memory, private ethnic Latvian memory, and private ethnic Russian memory manifests in public and private spaces.
- Sites preserving artifacts of Soviet occupation, such as Riga's Museum of the Occupation, pictured left, primarily represent public pro-Latvian memory by displaying state-oriented materials—political posters (right), Gulag uniforms (bottom left), and Latvian children's Soviet military songs workbooks (upper left), Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.

METHODOLOGY & THEORIES

- Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things* is a collection of anonymized textual portraits detailing individuals' use of everyday objects to cope with loss. This structure inspires a compilation of portraits chronicling Riga's contested memory narratives surrounding lacquer art.
- To do so, six object-based interviews were conducted with ethnic Russian and Latvian academics, clergy, and antique dealers aged 18 to 45 at their place of work.
- Ian Hodder's Theory of Entanglement argues objects shape human habits, behaviors, and mental processes as much as humans shape them. Applying this to lacquer reveals its ability to entangle individuals in its spatial, historical, and personal narratives.
- Sophie Works' Universal Glass Case Theory states display cases are not neutral, but active vessels imputing narratives on their objects, owners, and space.
- Photogrammetry, the overlapping of 2D photographs to create 3D models, was used to curate the visual aspect of the interviewees' portraits.
- A Russian lacquer box is in step one of the photogrammetry process: photographing the object's angles (top), Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.
- Tailored to each informant, 10 to 12 questions were asked in both Russian and English (middle), Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.
- In Riga's Old Town—a center for tourists—several pieces of Russian lacquer art are on display in this antique store, exemplifying its commercial, souvenir narratives (bottom), Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.



RUSSIAN LACQUER ART



- The iconoclastic 1917 Bolshevik Revolution forced iconographers to pivot to secular folklore lacquer painting.
- This historical endurance across ruptures in Russian history enables lacquer as a paradigm of ‘Russianness’.
- Russian lacquer descends from Russian Orthodox iconography, demonstrated by the icons of Jesus Christ (upper left, upper right, and center), Virgin Mary (bottom left), and the Romanov Family (bottom right), Riga Nativity of Christ Orthodox Cathedral, Latvia, Sophie Works.
- Lacquer portrays intricate, pastoral depictions of folk wondertales, motifs, nature, and ideological themes within the Russian canon—like *The Scarlet Flower*, which is pictured (left), Fedoskino, USSR, lacquer, papier-mâché, photographed in Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.

INTERVIEWS



- “My brother used to have an incredible collection. Our love for items like this is why we opened our antique store.”
- Latvian, antique dealer, late 20s.
- “I think it's disgusting that this kind of art is on display.”
- Latvian, academic, late 30s.
- “I haven't seen anything like this since seeing it as a child in my grandmother's house. Seeing it now unlocks a core memory.”
- Russian, member of the church, early 20s.



• Two lacquer boxes depicting the same artwork, “Paschal greeting”, are made two centuries apart—one in the 1880s (left), Vishnyakov Manufactory, Russian Empire, and the other in 2001 (right), Fedoskino, Russia—photographed in Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.



REPOSITORY

- Using CreateFSU, the repository is an open-access digital archive hosting thirty 3D models of lacquer paired with six anonymized textual portraits.
- Participants in the antique and religious sectors share a perspective on lacquer, viewing and highlighting narratives beyond its commercial value.
- Contrastingly, those in academia assigned narratives of imperialism to lacquer by grouping it with larger public pieces such as Lenin monuments.
- Among ethnic Russians, a narrative of nostalgia for childhood and familial possessions—rather than the Soviet-era itself—is imposed onto lacquer.
- Lacquer thus reveals how non-precious, domestic art accrues new layers of narrative—beyond original intent—to reflect ways individuals experience, resist, and reinterpret historical legacies through material culture.
- Amidst the ongoing conversation of displaying or displacing Soviet objects within the de-Russification movement, this repository presents a digital platform to examine how art of this nature, rather than the current use of military-industrial material culture, may soften the approach to bridging Riga's contested memory site.



- A lacquer plate is in step two of the photogrammetry process: rendering the model (left), mid-19th century, Russian Empire, tempera on wood, photographed in Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.
- QR code linking to the digital repository and references (middle).
- A Russian lacquer box depicting *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (right), late 19th century, Fedoskino, Russian Empire, oil on lacquer, photographed in Riga, Latvia, Sophie Works.

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- To my mother, thank you for instilling the thrill of the antique hunt in me and inspiring my love for Russian lacquer art.