

INTERWAR FURNITURE IN LITHUANIA: DESIGN AND HISTORY

AISTĖ DIČKALNYTĖ

Wydział Sztuk i Edukacji, Techniczna Szkoła Wyższa w Kownie
Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Applied Sciences
in Kaunas
aiste.dickalnyte@go.kauko.lt

Lithuanian researchers and society started paying more attention to the development of Lithuanian design of the interwar period. This was in part due to Kaunas being granted the European Heritage Label as well as the accolade of the UNESCO City of Design¹. Exhibitions that presented the lifestyle and home design of that period started to become very popular. As a result of their modern style and easy adaptation to any interior, the furniture of the interwar period became sought after, not only by antique collectors but also by ordinary citizens. Despite this popularity, there is still a lack of deeper knowledge about the specifics of their design and development, as well as their prevalence within Lithuania.

The aim of this publication is not only to discuss the topic of furniture of the interwar period in Lithuania but also to reveal the furniture design tendencies in dwellings and representative interiors. Great attention is also paid to country-wide exhibitions in Lithuania and presentations abroad, such as the 'International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life' (1937, Paris World Fair).

¹ When Lithuania lost its historical capital Vilnius in 1919, during the interwar period, the city of Kaunas was the 'temporary capital' of Lithuania. On 15 April 2015, Kaunas of 1919–1940 was awarded the European Heritage Label. The European Heritage Label is an initiative of the European Union designed to acknowledge historical and cultural significance of locations and events for the creation of Europe and the EU. In the same year, Kaunas was granted the status of a UNESCO City of Design in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

THE FURNITURE DESIGN TENDENCIES IN DWELLING INTERIORS

Before World War I in Lithuania, the most popular pieces of furniture were in the style of historicism and *art nouveau*, such as Thonet chairs and simple metal beds. If we look at photographs of Lithuanian towns' dwellers in the 1920s, we would see interiors furnished in the same style as before World War I. The conservative society of the interwar period associated Historicism and classical-style furniture with coziness, comfort and solidity. International-style interiors were sparse as dwellers were afraid of radical changes and what was deemed luxurious was the interior styles of western countries. For example, furniture with tubular steel frames were not popular at all. Despite that, design innovations came even to classical interiors. This was influenced by the educative propaganda in media. The tendencies of European architecture and modern culture was associated with the progress and adaptation of new values, or so it was supposed to be perceived in Lithuania, especially in Kaunas, during the interwar period. Because of this, it was promoted by the media and different social groups began to pay a lot more attention to this new lifestyle².

One of the early influencers of this new lifestyle was architect Vldas Švipas and his book *Miesto gyvenamieji namai (Urban Dwelling Houses, 1933)*. In this book, great attention is paid to reflecting on international-style interiors and furniture. However, Dr Halina Kairiūkštytė-Jaciniene (1896–1984) was the most famous media critic of modern living. Her studies in Germany, which were known for their progressiveness, had great impact on the modern perception of this researcher. She gave some lectures on the radio about 'The Modern Design of the Houses and Flats' (1927–1931)³. H. Kairiūkštytė-Jaciniene repeated the insights of the western-international-style modernists that the concept of beauty consists of function and hygiene; however, she resided in a large house with many rooms as opposed to a smaller one. Given the fact that a radio set was expensive, it is obvious that

² L. Šatavičiūtė, *Modernaus būsto idėja tarpukario Lietuvoje: tarp funkcionalizmo ir tautinio romantizmo*, „Menotyra“ 2011, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 288.

³ H. Kairiūkštytė-Jaciniene, *Moderniškas namų ir butų įrengimas. Radijo paskaitų tekstai. Mašinraštis su autorės taisymais, 1927–1931*, [in:] LLMA, fund 397, inventory 1, file 31.

the audience of the radio lectures were rich people who could afford bigger homes. In the 1930s, the ideas of modern lifestyle were still quite new and begun to make the first appearances in houses through its unique design but were mainly affordable for rich people. The representation of foreign fashions by this art critique on the radio and, later on, in magazines dedicated to housewives were not very radical but undoubtedly formed what was deemed as good taste during the interwar period.

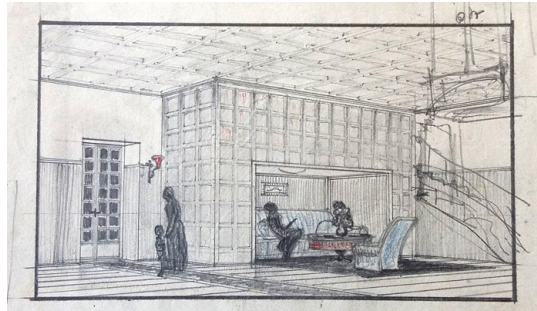


Fig. 1. Project of a niche by V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis

The new generation of architects like Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (1893–1993), Arnas Funkas (1898–1957), and Bronius Elsbergas (1901–1998) also influenced the modernization of dwelling habits. After the war, renting became very common due to the lack of accommodation – that is why space-saving solutions were very important, even during the construction of bigger houses. Architects who graduated from universities in Western and Middle Europe brought built-in furniture – one of the most important tendencies of the international style – to Lithuania. This was the best adaptation of modern innovation in the country. Built-in closets were integrated under windowsills and stairs, as well as around the doors in the hallways for the most rational space-saving solutions. For example, one of the most famous architects of that time, V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, designed built-in furniture in 1932 for the house of Tadas and Julija Petkevičiai in Kaunas. The space under the stairs was occupied by a bookcase; shallow book shelves were installed on the façade and a couch was placed beneath them⁴. This interior did not last, but a similar project with a niche under the stairs by V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis has remained (fig. 1).

⁴ L. Preišegalavičienė, *Lietuvos tarpukario interjerai 1918–1940*, Kaunas 2016, p. 102–103.

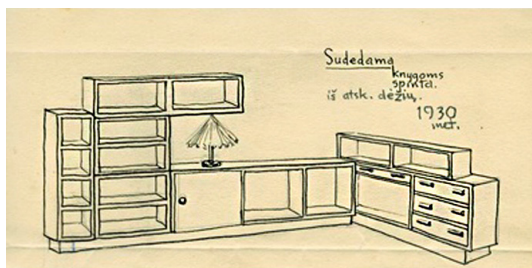


Fig. 2. Gerardas Bagdonavičius, wall units, 1930



Fig. 3. Type of sideboard popular in 1930's

Wall unit furniture was another design innovation highly valued in the interwar period because of its space-saving and multifunctional qualities. Some projects involving open wall units were created by Lithuanian artist Gerardas Bagdonavičius (1901–1986) (fig. 2). Unfortunately, there is no information about the fulfillment of these projects. The artist stated that he had analysed some particular foreign literature (published in Germany and other countries) and used some ideas in his furniture projects. For example, in 1929 German designer Franz Schuster (1892–1972) published a book titled *Ein Möbelbuch*⁵ (*The Book of Furniture*) with examples of standard wall unit furniture which could be found in specialized bookshops in Lithuania. So, innovations of wall unit furniture were well known by Lithuanian

⁵ F. Schuster, *Ein Möbelbuch: ein Beitrag zum Problem des Zeitgemässen Möbels*, Frankfurt am Main 1929.

designers. A very popular piece of furniture was a sideboard with a much smaller portable top part (fig. 3). Despite the fact that this type of sideboard was not a novelty, the design of this furniture has changed dramatically in the interwar period. This was pointed out by H. Kairiūkštytė-Jaciniienė. She asserted that ‘the heavy, huge two-store sideboards are not suitable for the modern flat. They are quite low, consist of one store, are quite small and have got simple lines and shapes⁶. The popularity of this furniture was undoubtedly determined by the variety of its models (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Sideboard, 1930's. (photo by Aistė Dičkalnytė, 2017)

An important task for designers was to reduce the dimensions of this type of furniture. The norms of functionally designed furniture were often established by grafting the properties of the human scale onto standardized forms of things, especially regarding furniture used in relation to sleeping. Special attention was paid to the sofa bed. It was often designed with drawers and shelves beneath it, or sometimes with a wardrobe built around it. Jonas Prapuolenis (1900–1980), one of the most unique designers, represented his couch design in a 1938 exhibition⁷ and received positive recognition. That sofa bed managed to preserve the straight, modern lines in accordance with the consoles and drawers surrounding it. ‘That was a really tasteful and comfortable furniture for the small room. It took a very little space and

⁶ H. Kairiūkštytė-Jaciniienė, op. cit., fund 397, inventory 1, file 31, p. 13.

⁷ J. Prapuolenis represented his modern couch in 1938 at the Third Autumn Art Exhibition in Kaunas.



Fig. 5. Table with the shelves by Arnas Funkas, 1935

were not as strict as is typical in the international-style movement – they were streamlined like late *art déco* style. The rounded corners of cubes, the curved and low legs, and flat and polished surfaces created a sleek silhouette. The furniture had a similarity to that of cars or airships, which was undoubtedly admired by society of that time, impressed by the technological progress. In Lithuania, as well as in Scandinavian countries, tubular steel was not popular and, in fact, designers preferred wood and veneer. *Art déco* furniture was made of wood and covered with a thin, decorative veneer of walnut or mahogany. That particular technique was used to make furniture look luxurious and splendid in the eye of the beholder. Tubular steel, plywood and plate glass were introduced in the interwar period as progressive materials. As a result of this, furniture made from these materials was produced by well-known artists, designers, manufacturers and small furniture workshops, with many designs inspired by Czechoslovakian and German interior magazines and catalogues.

Furniture innovation not only referred to the role of the space-saving but also time-saving and energy-saving designs. Newer designs of furniture did not feature any dust-catching décor so, according to the modernists, it was more hygienic and much easier to clean. Jonas Prapuolenis, Jonas

was capacious⁸ – as it was written in „The Craftsman” magazine. Tables with shelves (fig. 5) were also known for their space-saving qualities. These multifunctional pieces of furniture were made not only by the furniture workshops but also by famous artists.

The design of the space-saving furniture had geometrical forms but they

⁸ J. Vaidoto, *Dailieji amatai III-je rudens dailės parodoje*, „Amatininkas” 1938, Vol. 24, No. 189, p. 30.



Fig. 6. National style furniture by Jonas Prapuolenis, 1930's (photo by Aistė Dičkalnytė, 2017)



Fig. 7. The wall wardrobe with motives of M.K. Čiurlionis painting by Jonas Prapuolenis, 1930's (photo by Aistė Dičkalnytė, 2017)

Vainauskas (1906–1987), Gerardas Bagdonavičius, and other designers created unique and exclusive pieces, utilising floral or abstract geometric shape intarsias, inlays with amber, and upholsteries emblazoned with Lithuanian Folk patterns. Designers often drew inspiration from different kinds of furniture from different styles, such as ethnic and modern *art déco* wares. This kind of furniture went on to be considered Lithuanian national style (fig. 6). The most famous furniture designer J. Prapuolenis had created unique furniture décor using the motives of paintings by the well-known Lithuanian painter Mykolojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911) (fig. 7). Lithuanian national-style furniture was unique and was not reproduced; therefore, only rich people could afford it.

FURNITURE IN REPRESENTATIVE INTERIORS

According to historian Dangiras Mačiulis, the cityscape of Kaunas, which became the temporary capital of Lithuania in 1919, was *tabula rasa* with a surprisingly small number of traces of the Tsar Empire present in the collective memory⁹. Because of this reason, representative buildings, which were conforming to the national identity, arose in the new capital.

⁹ D. Mačiulis, *Lietuvių nacionalinis judėjimas ir Tautos muziejaus kūrimas*, [in:] *Nuo Basanavičiaus, Vytauto Didžiojo iki Molotovo ir Ribentropo: atminties ir*



Fig. 8. Interior project Anga ('The Hole') of President's room in the Officers' Club by Aleksandras Gordevičius, 1936

The representativeness was created both on the facades and in the interior. The Officer's Club in Kaunas was the most outstanding representative building of that period, built between 1931–1937 (arch. Stasys Kudokas). The building was dedicated for the army, but it also had to showcase pathos and express national aspirations of the government.

The first ever known Lithuanian interior design contest was held in the most important room of this building – the Cabinet of President. National identity was the main criteria in this contest. 'The walls, ceilings, floor, windows and furniture have to be designed in that way, that it would create the solid view and would represent the evolution of national art showing as much Lithuanian identity as possible' – as it was declared by the rules of competition. The usage of local wood, the carpets or fabrics with ethnic patterns and the fireplace of 'Lithuanian character' were also required.

atminimo kultūrų transformacijos XX–XXI amžiuje, ed. A. Nikžentaitis, Vilnius 2011, p. 140.

The room had to look 'luxuriously, seriously and impressive in general'¹⁰. A committee of officers, architects and artists was brought together for this contest. Twelve projects were judged by the committee in a session which took place on 23 April 1936. Some of the projects were rejected because they were



Fig. 9. Interior project Rūta ('Rue') of President's room in the Officers' Club by Sofija Pacevičienė, 1936

not comprehensive and did not meet the requirements, e.g., a project called *Bum Bum*, in which the committee found some oriental motives¹¹. This circumstance illustrated how the national style and identity were perceived differently in the interwar period.

The winner of the contest was architect Aleksandras Gordevičius (1891–1941) with his project called *Anga* (*The Hole*), having submitted a piece based on medieval interior with quite laconic, massive, and ethnic wood furniture (fig. 8). This project was possibly accepted more by the conservative officers on the committee than the work submitted by the second-place artist Sofija Pacevičienė, the author of a more modern and decorative interior design project (fig. 9). In the end, the project *Anga* was not realized due to commitment issues. This meant that the designing of the room was entrusted to architect Stasys Kudokas and furniture design was given to G. Bagdonavičius. The sketches and projects of Officer's Club were implemented. The furniture set of the President's Cabinet was made in a unique, artistic manner, in line with the concept of national identity at the time, containing full intarsias of floral patterns, which were perceived as ethnic, in the shape of tulips on the chairs' backrests. On the other hand,

¹⁰ *Ramovės naujuose rūmuose prezidento kambariui įrengti konkurso sąlygos, žiuri komisijos protokolai ir susirašinėjimas su dailininkais ir skulptoriais kambario įrengimo klausimais*, [in:] LCVA, fund 6, inventory 1, file 39, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

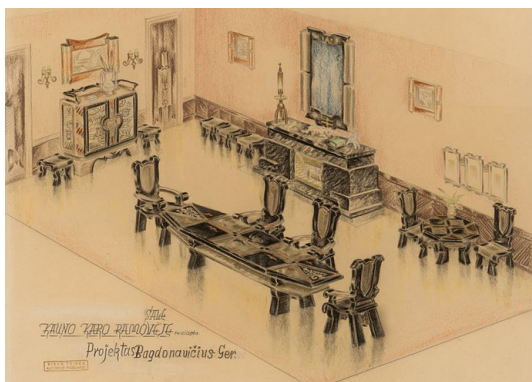


Fig. 10. Interior project of President's room in the Officers' Club by Gerardas Bagdonavičius, 1936



Fig. 11. National style table by V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis in the The House of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, 1938 (photo by Aistė Dičkalnytė, 2018)

the features of Czech cubism and interwar rondo-cubism (Czech *art déco*) of the beginning of 20th century was common in the furniture design by Josef Gočár and Pavel Janák and can be noticed in the curved, broken shapes (fig. 10). This decorative manner is also visible in other furniture projects of public interiors by G. Bagdonavičius.

The House of Commerce, Industry and Crafts was another significant public building built in 1939. The interiors as well as the furniture were designed by the author of the building – famous architect V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis. As it was declared in the media, it attempted to create the national-style

interior – the same as in the other representative public buildings¹². As it is visible in the remaining interior elements and promotional publication of this building, the furniture made at the end of interwar period follows the well-established expression of national style. The wooden furniture was big in scale, possessing the common interpretation of folk furniture forms and decorated with floral inlays and cut-out carvings (fig. 11).

The national style that took inspiration from ethnic patterns and forms was also used to represent Lithuania abroad. There was an interesting case of furnishing an interior of the Pittsburg University (USA) in this style. The *Cathedral of Learning* at Pittsburg University was built between 1926 and 1937. Twenty-four nationality rooms were planned and would be located on the first and third floor of this forty-two-story skyscraper. Pittsburg's Lithuanian community initiated the contest of furnishing these rooms.

All the requirements were carefully discussed but the main idea was clear – the rooms had to be ‘furnished so that it would become a teacher of history, language, art and literature by itself’¹³. Lithuania decided to represent itself as the old country and characters such as rakers and spinners were used to depict it as a strong, agricultural country. It was decided that the interiors and furnishing elements would best represent this theme if done by artist Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989). Archived documents testify that the main inspiration for this artist was ethnic furniture made of light, natural oak. The main focus of the interior had to be on the chairs, with decorative backrests that typify the shape of a traditional spinner (fig. 12). Unfortunately, this project was not fulfilled and the rooms were furnished in a more primitive manner.

FURNITURE OF LITHUANIAN DESIGN IN LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

Theme exhibitions of furniture and interiors did not take place in Lithuania. There are two main reasons for this: Lithuanian furniture makers did not come together to form groups or unions and there was no competent institution that could coordinate such an exhibition. It was very expensive

¹² *Puošia Prekybos ir pramonės rūmus*, „Lietuvos aidas” 1938, No. 218, p. 5.

¹³ *Pitsburgo universiteto lietuviškojo kambario projektas, brėžiniai, eskizai ir kt. medžiaga*, [in:] LLMA, fund 221, inventory 1, file 3, p. 52.

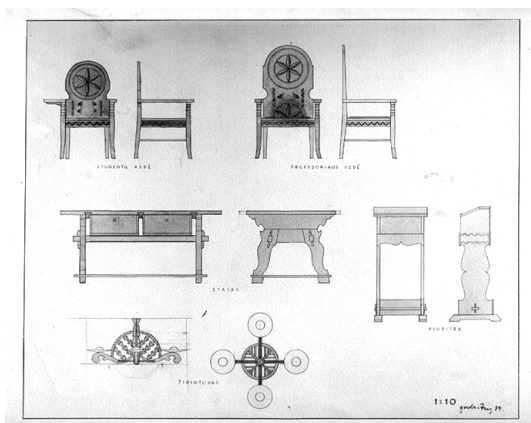


Fig. 12. Sketches of pieces of furniture and a chandelier from the interior project of the Lithuanian Auditorium in Pittsburgh by Antanas Gudaitis, 1934

to organise a personal exhibition but, in spite of that, it was done by the furniture makers J. Prapuolenis in 1932 and J. Vainauskas in 1938. Both designers tried to create the national style by using interpretations of ethnic furniture, while some successful attempts to follow the western *art déco* style can be found too. Both exhibitions were praised for embracing the Lithuanian spirit and the authors were lauded as

the creators of national style by the press at that time.

During the interwar period in Lithuania, the exhibitions of agriculture and industry¹⁴ were particularly popular. The exhibition furniture manufacturers participated sluggishly; however, the owners of small furniture workshops such as J. Prapuolenis introduced themselves there. These exhibitions were aimed at influencing the taste of society and promoting national awareness, especially among the inhabitants of the countryside who visited the exhibitions abundantly. Craft schools that attended the educational activities at the agricultural and industry exhibitions not only exhibited furniture created in the national style by their students, but also invited young people to study at their school.

The greatest preparation for an exhibition was required by participating at the Paris World Fair 'International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life' (*Arts et techniques dans la vie modern*, 1937), where the aim was to design a salon and dining room in Lithuanian national exposition. In the rules of the contest, it was declared that 'the main character has

¹⁴ In Lithuania, the grandest stage for furniture manufactures was the agriculture and industry exhibitions in Kaunas and regions (Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Telšiai), which were organized intermittently until the middle of the 4th decade.

to be Lithuanian and has to have strong relations with the ethnic style furniture, but also has to be modernized in that way, that it would conform the construction and would be practical¹⁵. In order to decide which artist would design these rooms, there was a plan to use projects from previous contests, such as those submitted for the presidential room in The Officer's Club in Kaunas. This idea was rejected as 'the furniture in the Officer's Club would be too massive as the size of this building was much bigger. That is why they can be not suitable for the exhibition by their character itself'¹⁶. No documents about the development of this contest survived and there was only one conclusion made by the committee of the Paris exhibition, saying that 'the contest of furnishing the rooms and the chapel gave very sad results. The reason might be in the inappropriate guidelines of our schools'¹⁷. This statement makes it obvious that the contest was dedicated to the craft schools which did not meet the expectations.

While the project was in preparation, it turned out that the dedicated area for the exhibition decreased and the commission decided that 'the consoles and other furniture for displaying the exhibits in the hall are entrusted to design for Prapuolenis and Jonynas'¹⁸. The artist Vytautas Kazimieras Jonynas (1907–1997) was one of the organizers of the exhibition, so we can assume that he knew what kind of exhibition was appropriate. J. Prapuolenis was also involved in the preparation activities as the advisor of the technical fulfilment. The role of furniture design was not strictly defined. The limited amount of furniture at the exhibition had only a utilitarian function and were used for displaying the other exhibits. Such a decision made by the organizers was pointed out at the time: 'the furniture did not play any role. If they wanted to exhibit Lithuanian furniture, they were supposed to furnish the rooms separately [...] and exhibit the furniture

¹⁵ *Ekspонатų ruošimo konkurso Paryžiaus pasaulinei parodai dokumentai*, [in:] LMAVB RS, fund 245-6, p. 96.

¹⁶ *1937 m. Paryžiaus parodai ruošti komiteto posėdžių protokolai 1936–1937*, [in:] LMAVB RS, fund 245-9, p. 189.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 161.



Fig. 13. The chair by Jonas Prapuolenis in the World's fair in Paris, 1937 (photo by Narimantas Šerkšnys, 2017)

in the 1930s, historicism would more often give place to modern trends in furniture design. The modernisation of dwellings was promoted by the mass media, following the example of western countries. That had a great influence on the modernisation of conservative town dwellers. The new generation architects who have installed innovations of international style, such as built-in, multifunctional and section furniture, also increased the popularity of novelties and European trends. The middle- or higher-class Lithuanians used to renew their interiors, or the part of them, typically with *art déco* furniture, possessing characteristics of decorative veneering, as well as geometric and streamlined forms. *Art déco* furniture was also popular due to their esthetic and hygienic qualities.

there because now they did not fit to the hall' – this was written by the press¹⁹. Only the chairs functioned as independent exhibits. The chairs with intarsias of segmented stars in the backrests by J. Prapuolenis made the greatest impression (fig. 13). This ornament has been used for decorating Lithuanian ethnic carpentry production for many years.

CONCLUSIONS

The most distinctive characteristic of furnishing in 1930s was the sequence of traditions. Still,

¹⁹ V. Petravičius, „Pasaulinės parodos atgarsiai. Laiškas iš Paryžiaus, „Iliustruotas pasaulis“ 1938, No. 2, p. 4.

Despite the obvious modernisation of private interiors, famous artists and architects were invited to design public and, especially, representative interiors in interwar Lithuania, and it was required to design interiors in the Lithuanian national style. As it can be seen in the case of The Officers' Club in Kaunas, there was no general dominant idea of what Lithuanian national style should be. Despite that, in a large variety of projects created by different artists, dominated national symbols as well as interpretations of ethnic motifs. So, the main tendency in interwar Lithuanian national style was to modernise Lithuanian ethnic style and to use only locally-sourced wood. We can see this tendency in the furniture designed by V. Landsbergis-Žemkalnis for the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, and also in the interior project by A. Gudaitis in the Pittsburg University's Lithuanian nationality rooms. The Lithuanian national style was also predominant at representations and exhibitions of furniture makers. Only J. Prapuolenis and J. Vainauskas organised private furniture exhibitions, which proves that they were the most famous custom furniture designers. In the design of state-ordered exhibition furniture, the symbolic expression of the Lithuanian national style prevailed and the design was not innovative.

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Fig. 2. Šiauliai museum 'Aušra', ŠAM D–T 6303.

Fig. 3. Šiauliai museum 'Aušra', ŠAM I–D 2625.

Fig. 4. Author's private archive.

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Fig. 6–7. Author's private archive.

Fig. 8–9 LCVA, fund 6, inventory 1, file. 47.

Fig. 10. Šiauliai museum 'Aušra', ŠAM D–T 2393.

Fig. 11. Author's private archive.

Fig. 12. LLMA, fund 221, inventory 1, file 3.

Fig. 13. Author's private archive.

Interwar Furniture in Lithuania: Design and History

This article analyses the furniture created in Lithuania during the interwar period. Today, from a time perspective, we can shed light on the development of furniture making, with the aim to reveal the furniture designers and the particular interiors where this kind of furniture became popular, as well as the styles that influenced them. In this paper, the author mostly describes artistic designs for secular interiors. The selection was based on

the fact that this furniture best reflects the prevailing tendencies when it comes to design during a particular period.

After independence was restored to Lithuania, the design of produced furniture became more modern and similar to that of Western Europe. This was caused by the educative propaganda in the media and the new generation of architects and artists who had graduated from universities in western countries. The new, rational construction of houses where all the free rooms were usually rented during the crisis caused demand of space-saving furniture. The architects usually designed both buildings and the built-in furniture with that concept in mind. Architects attempted to tailor built-in furniture to the user's needs and financial capabilities in the most optimal way. Built-in modular storage systems, kitchen cupboards, and bookshelves were conceived as architectural components. They were used to divide and to model the space. The small living space required the number of furniture pieces to be reduced. That is why unit furniture became the second-most trending innovation during the interwar period. The combination of wardrobes, bookcases, and sideboards into one piece was the most popular modular unit furniture. Tables with shelves and couches with consoles were also popular examples of space-saving furniture. These modern innovations of furniture were made in *art déco* style since the late 1920s.

The search for Lithuanian national style was particularly relevant in the interwar period and design was used as an instrument for political purpose. This is obviously prevalent in the furniture of representation interiors. Leading architects like Vytautas Landsbergis-Zemkalnis, Bronius Elsbergas, and Arnas Funkas, and also some popular artists such as Jonas Prapuolenis, Antanas Gudaitis, and Gerardas Bagdonavicius, designed not only furniture innovations but also furniture in the Lithuanian national style as part of their representative-interior projects. Country-wide Lithuanian exhibitions and presentations abroad were also dominated by the Lithuanian national style, propagated by the authorities. Interpretations of ethnic furniture decor and forms, as well as national symbols became dominant in all Lithuanian-national-style furniture.

Keywords: Lithuanian furniture, Lithuanian national style, interwar, modernism, *art déco*