

*Strand 4. Research and Doctoral Theses in Progress*

## **The ceramic wall tiles – characteristic late Art Nouveau vestibule decoration material in Riga**

Agnese Tambaka

### **Abstract**

At the end of the first decade of the 20th century there was a period of building boom in Riga, Latvia. The period from 1910 to 1913 was the most productive period in the city's history. The practising architects in Riga at that time were mostly local residents, along them approximately ten Latvian architects

Ceramic wall tiles were among the most preferable polychromatic materials used for the decoration of the vestibules in the rental buildings of Riga in the late Art Nouveau period. All known wall tiles were imported and, in most of the cases, produced in Germany in at least ten different factories. Examples of wall tiles that have survived to the present day indicate diverse motifs, including typical Art Nouveau floral stylizations alongside abstract motifs whose origins are related to historical styles. Freely interpreted approach to classical tradition in wall panels was a universal resource for decorators of Riga's apartment buildings.

**Key words:** Art Nouveau, Neoclassicism, interior, vestibule, wall tiles, dado, Rīga, Pēkšēns, Laube, Vanags

### **Introduction**

More than a third of the buildings in the centre of Riga are from the Art Nouveau period. The exact figure is unknown but architectural researchers estimate there are between 800 to 1000 Art Nouveau tenement houses in the city. Research on Art Nouveau architecture in Riga began in the 1970s when the style was re-examined. However, at that time the focus was on the façades while the interiors of the houses and their décor, including wall tiles, remained in the background.

Interior research began only in the late 1980s. The first attempt to study wall tiles was made by the historian Inta Štamgute, and the findings were presented at an international conference organized by the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Further research on wall tiles resumed just three years ago when the author of this article turned to researching them as part of her forthcoming PhD thesis.

In the last decades, significant research in Europe has been carried out in the study of tiles from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which helps to attribute the hitherto little-known manufacturers of wall tiles used in the buildings of Riga and thus to place this material in a broader context and in correlation with the history of production in Western European factories. The use of ceramic wall tiles in the interior décor of vestibules in Riga appeared no later than 1901 and within a few years, especially in the late Art Nouveau period (1905/1906-1914), became a particularly popular form of décor in the vestibules of buildings.

### **Attitude towards Art Nouveau**

Attitudes towards Art Nouveau have changed several times over time. The initial enthusiasm and excitement was replaced by ignorance and complete rejection after World War I. A striking example is the architect and theoretician Eižens Laube (1880–1967), who in the 1930s referred to the tenement house at 23 Tallinas Street, 1901 (archs. Konstantīns Pēkšēns (1859–1928) and E. Laube) as the mistake of his youth.<sup>2</sup> This building is now considered one of the most distinctive examples of the early Art Nouveau period and one of the earliest instances where a wall tile dado has been used in the vestibule.<sup>3</sup>

After World War II, Art Nouveau in Latvia, part of the USSR at the time, was for a long time considered decadent. It was only in the 1970s that a new awareness of its

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<sup>1</sup> On 26th and 27th of November 1993, the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO organised an international conference "Centre of Riga - an Urban Monument", where Inta Štamgute presented her report "Ceramic Tile Decoration in Riga Houses of the Early 20th Century". The material presented at the conference resulted in the historic centre of Riga being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997, highlighting the concentration of Art Nouveau buildings as one of its main assets. For more information see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/852/>. Consulted on 01/06/2023.

<sup>2</sup> Jānis KRASTIŅŠ. *Latvijas arhitektūras meistari*, Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, 1995, p. 69–70.

<sup>3</sup> Loose tiles in the dado made it possible to identify them as being manufactured in the M. O. & P. F. factory.

importance grew.<sup>4</sup> After Latvia regained its independence in the 1990s, former owners recovered their nationalized properties and the first renovation works took place following the degradation of the Soviet period. This was often without understanding the essence of Art Nouveau and the then important idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (all-embracing art form), frequently destroying essential parts of historic interiors, including tile dados, for example when installing and improving utility services. It should be noted that after World War II – during the Occupation period – low prosperity encouraged the ‘preservation’ of Art Nouveau buildings while in Western Europe they were demolished or rebuilt. The wall tile dados still survive today, having been fully or partially covered with floor paint from the mid-20th century. Since the identification of wall dados in the late 1980s and the listing of 186 dados,<sup>5</sup> more than 40 have been entirely lost, although fortunately their photographs still exist<sup>6</sup>. Among the lost dados were some very interesting and unique tile motifs not available anywhere else in Riga.

### **The historical context**

From the late 18th century until World War I, the territory of Latvia and the other Baltic States was part of the Russian Empire whose territorial ambitions spanned Poland, Ukraine, and other neighbouring lands. Latvia was established as an independent state in 1918. From the mid-19th century, the Industrial Revolution also began in Latvia, and in the early 20th century the city experienced an economic boom. The general industrial, commercial and cultural flourishing was accompanied by an unprecedented construction boom at the end of the first decade of the 20th century. The period from 1910 to 1913 was the most productive period in the city’s history. During this period, around 150-220 multi-storey masonry tenement houses were built annually.<sup>7</sup> The practicing architects in Riga at that time were mostly local,

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<sup>4</sup> Since the 1970s, Riga Art Nouveau has been studied by architect Dr.arch. Jānis Krastiņš, see. Jānis KRASTIŅŠ. *Jugendstila arhitektūra Latvijā / Art Nouveau architecture in Latvia*, Riga, Madris, 2018., Jānis KRASTIŅŠ. *Rīgas Jugendstila ēkas / Art Nouveau Buildings in Riga*, Riga, ADD Projekts, 2018. Later, architectural décor became the focus of art historian Dr.art. Silviņa Grosa, see. Silviņa GROSĀ. *Dekors Rīgas Jugendstila perioda arhitektūrā*, Riga, Neputns, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Inta ŠTAMGUTE. Dekoratīvo keramikas flīžu paneļi Rīgā. External MA dissertation, Rīga, Art Academy of Latvia, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation has more than 100 photographs of the vestibules and staircases of Art Nouveau houses taken in the 1990s by Georgy Yemelyanov for the exhibition "Art Nouveau in Riga Architecture, Art and Domestic Life", but only a few of them show wall tile panels (no more than 30 interiors in total).

<sup>7</sup> J. KRASTIŅŠ. *Rīgas Jugendstila...*, p. 14.

among them approximately ten Latvian architects such as K. Pēkšēns, E. Laube, Aleksandrs Vanags (1873–1919) and others. More than a third of the Art Nouveau buildings were designed by them.

It should be emphasised that from the end of the 19th century onwards, architects educated at the local school, Riga Polytechnic (later Riga Polytechnic Institute), were mostly active in Riga. The Riga Polytechnic (founded in 1862) was an important centre of education in the Baltic and Polish context.<sup>8</sup> Some of the architects active in Riga had received their education in St. Petersburg and German architecture schools.

### **Local tile production vs tile import and trade**

Previous publications on the architecture of Riga's Art Nouveau period and its interiors have devoted rather little attention to ceramic tile dados, probably because wall tiles were an imported product in Riga. Wall tiles as a manufactured ceramic object became popular in Europe at the end of the 19th century and were particularly widely used at the beginning of the 20th century. Tile researchers attribute this to the dual functionality of the objects. On the one hand, it is a polychrome accent on the façades of houses<sup>9</sup> and an aesthetic wall décor in interiors. On the other hand, alongside such interior wall treatments as wooden wainscoting and wallpaper, wall tiles have several important functional properties. They are not only lightfast but also dirt-resistant, easy to clean — hygienic, which is particularly important in public places with a high daily footfall. Wall tiles in Riga can be found not only in the vestibules and staircases of residential buildings, but also in the Atis and Anna Ķeniņš School (arch. K.Pēkšēns, E.Laube, 1905), in the two entrances to the platforms of the Dzirnavu Street viaduct of the Riga Railway Station (until 1914), as well as in buildings that served as banks. A small number of original tiles that once decorated the staircase of the department store at 2 Audēju Street (arch. Paul Mandelstamm (1872–1941), 1910) are kept in a private collection.

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<sup>8</sup> From 1863, it had a Department of Engineering, and from 1869 a Department of Architecture (Construction). For more details see Silvija GROSA. “Arhitektūra”, *Latvijas Mākslas vēsture IV. Neoromantiskā modernisma periods 1890–1915*, 2019, p. 405–470: 422–427.

<sup>9</sup> Ceramic tiles were often used in the houses of Nordic National Romanticism period (1905–1911) where the decorative idea of the façade might be based on contrasts of texture and colour. The smooth, glazed and colourful surface of wall tiles contrasted strongly with the rough materials of local hardstone such as travertine.

However, even though Riga was one of the most important industrial cities of the Russian Empire, the production of wall tiles was not advanced. The issue of wall tile production in Riga is unclear. The ceramic and stove tiles produced by *Zelm & Boehm, Riga*, have won gold medals at numerous exhibitions and are widely distributed in the region. However, did this factory also produce wall tiles?

The material so far identified indicates that wall tiles were an imported commodity and mostly produced in Germany in no less than nine different factories,<sup>10</sup> which confirms the historically established and still active contacts with Germany.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, German tile factories played an important role in the development of the industry and their produce most likely reached customers in Riga via the historically important port of Hamburg. Some of the best Art Nouveau artists (Otto Ekman (1865-1902), Peter Behrens (1868-1940), etc.) were involved in the design of wall tile motifs in Germany, and the first Art Nouveau motifs appeared in German tile factories in 1895.<sup>12</sup>

In her fieldwork, the author has currently obtained information on early 20th century wall tiles in around 200 vestibules *in situ*, as well as data on more than 40 vestibules<sup>13</sup> where wall tiles were still present at the end of the 1980s but have since been lost. In total, more than 240 vestibules have been documented, more than 150 referring to the vestibules of late Art Nouveau tenement buildings.

### **Tile distributors' ads**

An important issue for tile attribution relates to the distributors in Riga via whom the ceramic wall tiles reached the customers – the sale of wall tiles in Riga. The

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<sup>10</sup> Aktiengesellschaft Norddeutsche Steingutfabrik Grohn bei Bremen (hereinafter – NSTG), Boizenburger Plattenfabrik, Meißner Ofen und Porzellanfabrik v Carl Teichert Meissen (hereinafter – M. O. & P. F.), Ernst Teichert Ofen- und Porzellanfabrik, Sächsische Ofen und Chamottewaarenfabrik SOF/SOMAG, (hereinafter referred to as SOMAG), Tonwarenfabrik Mügeln, Grohner Wandplatten Fabrik, Villeroy & Boch, Mettlach, and Wessel Bonn wall tile factory.

<sup>11</sup> There was an active exchange of artistic impressions in architecture: architects had the opportunity to see examples of German architecture in print and to go on exchange visits to Germany. German architectural influences also reached Riga through the imperial capital of Saint Petersburg.

<sup>12</sup> Mario BAECK, Ulrich HAMBURG, Johan KAMERMANS, *Industrial Tiles. Industrielle Fliesen. Industriële Tegels. Carreaux Industriels 1840-1940*, Boizenburg, Hasselt, Otterlo, 2004, p. 45

<sup>13</sup> This information has been obtained from the materials of historian I.Štamgute, art historian Vita Banga and the archives of SIA "Arhitektoniskā izpētes grupa". The information on the wall tiles in the kitchens, bathrooms, toilets and wall tile arrangement (*Wandverkleidung*) behind the radiators as a heat-reflective object cannot be overlooked while researching these materials. Wall tile arrangement behind radiators were also offered by the Riga company *Zelm & Boehm*, mentioned earlier.

signature tiles preserved in the early 20th century press and in vestibules help to unravel this issue, as they can indicate the supplier of the tiles and the origin of the product they distributed, as well as the location where they could be bought in Riga. In most printed publications of the early 20th century, wall tiles are advertised in general terms as 'glazed wall panels' and so forth. Occasionally, the Meissen factories are mentioned, for instance 'glazed Meissen wall panels', but rarely are there examples where a distinction is made between the several known wall tile factories in Meissen. There are about 10 signature tiles in the vestibules of late Art Nouveau buildings, most of which refer to the company Velten-Berlin. Some of them contain text indicating that the company distributed NSTG tiles manufactured in a German factory, for example in the vestibule of **8 Mednieku Street** (arch. A. Vanags, 1908) where one of the eight laurel leaf wreath dados has a signature tile in the centre. At other times, however, the signature tile is limited to the name of the company, the address and the company's telephone number. The material on the activities of this company in Riga that has been collected so far is insufficient to draw any conclusions. It is known that one of the syndicates of this firm was one *J.S. Rabinowitsch*, which had a warehouse for stove tiles, majolica tiles and floor tiles. The activities of this firm should most likely be linked to the town in Germany, *Velten*, which is well known for its extensive production of stove tiles and other ceramic products. In 1905, 36 kiln pot factories were listed in the town.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, the press listed Carl Nevermann & Co Riga as one of the representatives of the *Meissner Wandplatten Fabrik*, which offered tiles from simple to elegant designs<sup>15</sup> and glazed wall tiles from special catalogues<sup>16</sup>. The company was founded in 1871 and was one of the 3 largest producers of cement products, including cement floor tiles, in the territory of Latvia.

### **Development and arrangement of motifs**

The original arrangement of tiles in dados is analogous to the decoration of walls with ornamental wallpaper with a matching horizontal border. Several such examples have survived in Riga, for example at 43 Bruņinieku Street (arch. Alfred

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<sup>14</sup> Monika DITTMAR. Märkische Ton-Kunst. Veltener Ofenfabriken. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des Heizens, Berlin (Germany), Deutsches Historisches museum, exhibition catalog, 1993, p.13.

<sup>15</sup> In German: *fliesen vom einfachen bis zum elegantesten Muster*.

<sup>16</sup> In German: *glasierte Wandfliesen laut Spezial-Katalog*.

Pihlemann (1853—unknown), 1905). The square-shaped base tiles, which make up most of the tile dado, are decorated with curved lines that thicken in places to form the ornaments so characteristic of Art Nouveau. The rectangular tile that completes the base tile is also designed in the same way. The final frieze tile features a stylised floral motif, a rosette motif, a meander and an ovation. Later, a type of tile dado decoration will become popular where only the tile band in the frieze is highlighted and the rest of the wall tile dado is covered with monochrome tiles forming a band.

In the late Art Nouveau period, various flora and fauna motifs can be found in the wall tile motifs, but they are not predominant. A small number of tiles depicting birds - swans and doves - have survived. The swan motif was very popular and was produced in several wall tile factories. Examples surviving in Riga were produced by NSTG (model no. 828)<sup>17</sup>. They can be found in buildings designed in 1911. The dove motif can be seen in the vestibule of the house designed by K. Pēkšēns at 117 Aleksandra Čaka Street (1911). The wall dados include stylised laurel trees in decorative pots, festoons and ribbons in blue and green, but the most striking is the 16-tile dado, made up of tiles of various sizes - in the centre of which is a wreath with red roses and two white doves inside it.

The richness of flora motifs comprises tulips, buttercups, chrysanthemums, thistles, roses, wild roses, irises, yews, cones, even seaweed and other plants that are unidentifiable due to their stylisation. Particularly remarkable are the wall dados where the floral motif is placed along its entire length - the tile panels with lily flowers (M.O & P.F., model no. 754) in the vestibule of 41 Matīsa Street (arch. Friedrich Scheffel, 1865—1913), whose manner of painting allows to draw parallels with the Aesthetic Movement in Great Britain. As well as panels in red and mustard with distinct Art Nouveau curves in the depiction of an amalgamation of rose branches and ribbons (M.O. & P.F, model no. 134) at 76 Brīvības Street (arch. Jānis Alksnis (1869—1939), 1908-1910).

The idea of man's supremacy over all living things, which was prevalent in late Art Nouveau, also appeared in tile motifs, as the preference of flower vases and baskets over other motifs and the transformation of natural motifs to abstraction. For

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<sup>17</sup> Here and in the following, Mario Baeck's expertise has made it possible to identify a specific model number for a tile, which can be found in historical factory catalogues and other materials.

example, the flower vase motif (NSTG, model no. 1111)<sup>18</sup> in the vestibule and entrance area wall tile dado at 9 Miera Street (arch. Nikolai Nord (1880—1934), 1912) has transformed into an unidentifiable amorphous mass. The motif of fruit and flower baskets in wall tile décor was also widespread in Riga. Their variations were produced by several wall tile factories, making it particularly difficult to determine their origin without looking at the reverse of the tile.

The most luxurious examples identified so far are four hand-painted tile dados at **36 Daugavgrīvas Street** (arch. E.Laube, 1912). Each 'tile painting' consists of 24 tiles and, as studies in Western Europe indicate, such artistically superior examples are most likely reproductions on tiles of a hitherto unattributed work of art.<sup>19</sup> The buildings in the 'tile paintings' appear to be typical Latvian farmsteads, but the mountain ranges visible in one of them do not correspond to a typical Latvian landscape.

After 1905, the motifs of tiles produced in German factories became more abstract<sup>20</sup>, various geometric motifs - chevrons, squares, triangles and circles - are common and occur widely in the material identified in Riga. Researchers should be cautious about wall tiles with abstract motifs made in Germany, as Art Deco motifs begin to appear as early as 1908<sup>21</sup>. During the renovation of the building of Riga Second Savings and Loan Association Bank at 46 Brīvības Street (archs. K.Pēkšens, Augusts Malvess ((1878—1951)), 1907) in 2013-2015, the original vestibule with its early 20th century décor was lost due to changes in the layout of the ground floor.<sup>22</sup> Copies of the wall tiles decorated with geometric motifs have been laid in the newly created vestibule, while a small number of original tiles have luckily ended up in the collection of the Museum 'Riga Art Nouveau Centre'. Such NSTG factory wall tiles in brown tones decorate the vestibule of Jānis Brigaders' tenement house at 58 Brīvības Street (1906), the first residential project designed by the architect Aleksandrs Vanags after he had left the architectural office of Konstantins Pēkšēns. The design of the vestibule of the tenement house was also significant,

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<sup>18</sup> Michael WEISSER. *Jugendstilfliesen*, Verlag, Fricke, 1983, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> The tile researcher M.Baeck speculates that these tile dados may have been painted by *Ernst Teichert Ofen- und Porzellanfabrik*.

<sup>20</sup> Mario BAECK, Ulrich HAMBURG, Johan KAMERMANS, *Industrial Tiles...*, p. 45

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* - P. 49.

<sup>22</sup> J. KRASTIŅŠ. *Rīgas jūgendstila...*, p. 213.

perhaps even innovative, in its time, as its photograph was included in the Second Yearbook of the Riga Society of Architects (*Jahrbuch für Bildende Kunst in den Ostseeprovinzen*) in 1908. Today we can only imagine the role that the polychromy of the vestibule walls and sculptural décor played in the overall interior design.

Examples and research materials that have survived to the present day have led to the conclusion that, as in other decorative materials, it was the Neoclassical décor that was common in tile decoration in Riga - the predominant motifs are those associated with historical styles and especially with the art of antiquity - chevrons, ovals, palm friezes, stylisations of antefixes, the 'running dog' and others, sometimes repeated in various combinations. The most frequently used variation is the classical garland. The material identified so far shows that the late Art Nouveau interest in the use of Neoclassicism motifs in the tile dados of the vestibule walls appears no later than 1906/1907.<sup>23</sup>

Around 1910, architecture in Europe was increasingly leaning towards Neoclassicism and Riga was no exception. The return to classical values in Riga can be observed not only in the decorative motifs used on the façades,<sup>24</sup> but also in the interior décor, including the wall tile dados. The festoon motif by the factory NSTG (model No 869) is particularly plentiful - appearing more than 10 times - in different colours. In most cases, the festoon motif is combined with a wreath motif in the tile dados, but there are interiors where only the wreath motif has been chosen. A floor-to-ceiling tile dado with a stylised leaf festoon motif adorns the walls of the vestibule at **1A Kalnciema Street** (arch. J. Alksnis, 1910). This is one of the few exceptions of British wall tiles in Riga (factory T&R Boote model No. 214).

The industrial wall tiles used in the interior design of early 20th century vestibules and staircases are often the only evidence of the original interior décor. Although all decorative elements must be considered in the overall stylistic characterisation of an interior, it is often the tiles that become an important and very significant landmark in this respect. Although industry and the production of ceramic products in Riga developed rapidly at the beginning of the 20th century, the material

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<sup>23</sup> For more on wall tiles with neoclassical ornaments, see. Silvija GROSA, Agnese TAMBAKA. "The 'Ornament Grammar' of Neoclassicism in Late Art Nouveau Interiors of Rīga", *Letonica*, No. 46, 2022, p. 140–158: 146–147.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Neoclassical ornaments, see Silvija GROSA. *Dekors Rīgas...*, p. 326-361.

surveyed indicates that the most important source of the wall tiles was Germany, mostly supplied by the NSTG factory. However, it was the local, hitherto anonymous, craftsmen who, mainly using German manufactured products, managed to create artistically valuable interior décor.

However, the study of wall tiles, given their variety of colours and the many variations in ornaments, makes it difficult to identify a specific manufacturer. Although catalogues of early 20th-century factory production have survived, they are a bibliographical rarity in the hands of private collectors, and only in a few lucky cases in the hands of individual researchers, which makes it possible to study these materials. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that often even the decorative motif of wall tiles published in the original factory catalogues is not a sufficient starting point for attribution to a specific manufacturer, since the reverse of a tile with a possible manufacturer's stamp should be examined for clarification. Since in Riga tiles are generally placed on the walls of vestibules, for obvious reasons this is only possible in exceptional cases. Therefore, more information on the tiles used in Riga houses can be obtained through further cooperation with specialists in other countries, as well as by searching for material in archives, therefore the material currently acquired is open for further research.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Mag. art. Agnese Tambaka (1990) is an art historian. In 2018 she obtained Master's degree in art at the Art Academy of Latvia for her thesis *Christian Iconography in Dutch Tile Décor on the Territory of Latvia in the 18th–19th Centuries*. Publication: "Certain Evidences of the 17th–19th Century Dutch Tiles in Riga" in the collection of articles *Senā Rīga 9: Pētījumi pilsētas arheoloģijā un vēsturē (Ancient Riga 9: Research of the City's Archaeology and History, 2018)*. Currently, she is a doctoral student and works on the theme "Wall and Floor Tile Decoration in the Architecture of Riga at the Late 19th and Early 20th Century" (scientific adviser Dr. Silvija Grosa)