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## **MOTIFS OF NATURE IN RIGA ART NOUVEAU MUSEUM**

### **Abstract.**

The paper analyses the interior of Konstantīns Pēkšēns' apartment in Alberta street 12, with special attention paid to the symbolism of the colours and floral elements used. The Riga Art Nouveau Museum is currently housed there. The interior of the museum provides an example of interiors in Riga at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The interiors are analysed, drawing parallels with the work of other European architects.

### **Introduction**

The Art Nouveau style started developing in Riga's architecture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the city experienced economic growth facilitated by industry and trade. The population in Riga rapidly increased – in 1887 there were 255,879 inhabitants, whereas by 1913 the figure had doubled, reaching 517,264 (Zināte, 1978). The ethnic composition of the population changed, the proportion of Latvians increasing considerably. Economic growth also contributed to the development of construction. Over one year about 150 to 200 new buildings were constructed in Riga, mostly multi-storey apartment houses, which “reflected the ideals of the society of that time. Everything in them was intended for ostentatious luxury” (Krastiņš, 1980). Most of the architects who worked in Riga were local, and had studied at the Riga Polytechnical Institute. The School of Architecture opened there in 1869 (Krastiņš, 2007).

Art Nouveau as an architectural mode of expression emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, introducing a contemporary system of styles. The architect Jānis Krastiņš writes: “The creative principle of Art Nouveau was an artistically expressive interpretation of the utilitarian elements of the building i.e. functional planning, structural elements, building materials etc. Art Nouveau features very different formal artistic varieties (eclectically decorative, rationalistic, national romanticism). The essence of style is not in ornamental décor, however a number of Art Nouveau buildings bear ornamentation, peculiar only to this style” (Krastiņš, Tipāne, 2008).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ornamental décor in Art Nouveau architecture was still seen as a criterion of beauty. The Art Nouveau ornament featured a characteristically innovative treatment of shapes. “Any décor, no matter how abstract it might be, needs a theme that can be developed into a generalised image or symbol, it needs a prototype for stylisation. Stylisation was free and creative, it retained a rather associative relationship with the original image” (Krastiņš, 1980).

Stylised elements of nature were among the most popular motifs in Art Nouveau décor. During the Art Nouveau period, the aesthetics of symbols were established, with various elements, including objects and colours, being treated as symbolically significant.

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In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Art Nouveau architecture displayed typical features of Romanticism, manifested in a desire to eliminate reminiscences of previous historical styles and to create a unique artistic world with its own symbols (Николаева, 2003). This tendency was mainly apparent in the treatment of the massing and the façades of buildings, as well as in interior decoration. Buildings had intricate compositions of volume – they resembled fairytale castles and fortresses. Façades were asymmetrical, accentuated with bay windows, balconies, and various structural elements such as pediments. Towers, which were often topped with interesting weather-vanes, formed the silhouette of the building.

### Riga Art Nouveau Museum

The building at Alberta street 12, the former home of the great Latvian architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns (1859–1928) also displayed features of Art Nouveau's romanticism. It was designed by Pēkšēns in 1903 in collaboration with the architect Eižens Laube (1880–1967) (Krastiņš, 2007). The building stands out with its exceptionally impressive massing and expressive silhouette. The architectural form masterfully incorporates ornamental reliefs with stylised motifs of local plants – pine needles and cones. As the house belonged to the Latvian architect, motifs derived from typical Latvian vegetation were mostly used for the decorative finish of its façade and interior. The pine is one of the most common trees in Latvia and it symbolises consistency and stability. Ornamental reliefs are also supplemented with certain popular elements of Latvian fauna – birds and squirrels.



1. Riga Art Nouveau Museum on Alberta street 12, (photo: Olegs Kotovičs)



2. The plan of the building Alberta street 12, by architects K.Pēkšēns and E.Laube

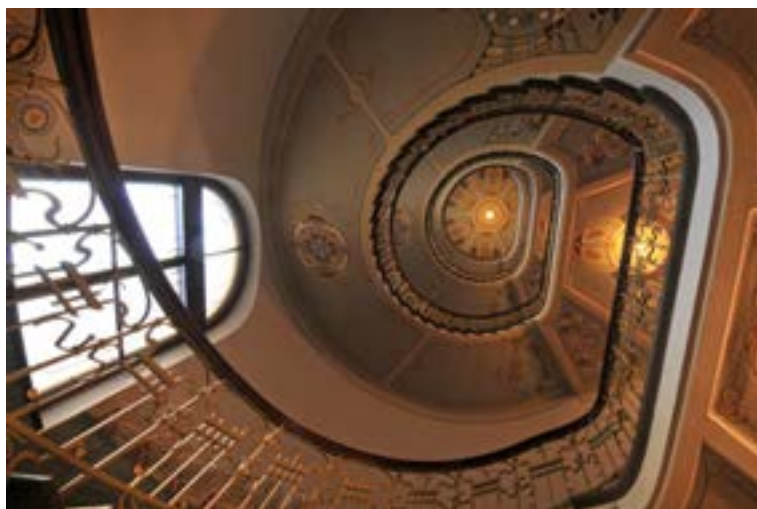
The façade of the building includes a heraldic decoration – a coat of arms. By analysing this, we obtain interesting information about the architect and the owner of the house, Konstantīns Pēkšēns. The coat of arms tells the history of the Latvian nation, which was not established until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The basic element of the coat of arms – the shield – is empty because the owner of the house was not of “noble” descent. The shield is held on both sides by griffins, which symbolise Vidzeme – one of Latvia's regions – and suggests the Pēkšēns' family roots. Above the shield is a wreath woven from pine twigs and decorated with cones – a symbol of Latvian nature. The symbols in this coat of arms indicate that Konstantīns Pēkšēns had acquired a good education and had become a wealthy man, and that he was proud of his homeland and ancestry.

The porch leading into the building is supported by ionic columns with capitals decorated with fir twigs and cones. The new interpretation of the classic orders is characteristic of the early Art Nouveau period, when new elements were introduced and used in conjunction with previous styles. Similar portico ornamentation can also be found in other European cities, e.g. in Lodz, with the mansions designed by architect Gustaw Landau - Gutenteger for Rappaport and Kindermann in 1904 (Jordan, 2006). The decorative finish of the portal includes motifs of pines and vines, which are symbolically associated with the Paradise Garden. The vine motif is also to be found in the architecture of other countries, e.g. in Ryabushkin's villa in Moscow, designed by architect Feodor Shehtel (Николаева, 2003).

The “creation of a special, artistic world” continued into the interior of Art Nouveau buildings. These were colourful, with a saturated decorative finish. Colours were often used to convey a symbolic meaning, as in the hall at Alberta street 12. The lower part of the hall is rusticated and painted in a saturated red tone. Murals feature in the upper part of the wall in the hall and in concave arches. Four landscapes are of high artistic quality – seascapes and Dutch scenery. Ornaments of stylised stencilled plants are located below the landscapes and on concave arches. They depict the same elements that are displayed on the façade – pine branches and cones. Reliefs similar to those decorating the portal add ornamentation to the hall interior.

In the building at Alberta street 12 the ornamental ceiling mural above the winding staircase was probably inspired by the sketches of the great Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls, who also lived in this building. This Art Nouveau stairway is one of the most expressive in Riga, and perhaps also in Europe, with its stylised elements of flora and fauna. The walls are decorated with a stylised cornucopia symbolising the harvest, fertility and prosperity. The ceiling is adorned with various stylised floral motifs associated with the earth, water and sky. The most expressive is the stylised image of a ladybird; as ladybirds are a symbol of good works and success, its location in the stairway serves as a friendly welcome. The stylised elements of the fauna are lavishly supplemented with floral motifs. Originally the stairway was lit by stained glass windows, which unfortunately disappeared in a later period. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the use of stained glass became very widespread. Stained glass windows were quite often used in

the stairways of apartment houses, making them more luxurious, bright and cheerful. They usually presented floral motifs, such as different flowers, twigs, leaves and fruits.



**3. Staircase of the building Alberta street 12, by architects K.Pēkšēns and E.Laube**

The Riga Art Nouveau Museum, which opened on 23 April 2009, is located on the ground floor of the building, in the apartment where architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns lived and worked together with his wife Anna until 1907. The layout of

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the apartment is rational and comfortable. The hall leads to the most stately part of the apartment – the drawing room, sitting room and dining room, which are arranged in enfilade. The apartment was also the architect's place of work. The bedroom was located in the furthest section of the residence, which was fitted with all the possible amenities available at that time, i.e. the bathroom and the toilet. The kitchen, pantry and maid's room were located at the second entrance to the apartment, which covers 208 square meters. The restoration of the authentic 1903 interior started in 2007, with a meticulous study of the rooms, revealing the original interior design. The restoration work was carried out between 2008 and 2009 under the guidance of restoration expert Gunita Čakare.

The entrance hall reveals the owner's taste. Its walls are light blue with a band of stencilled roses. Blue symbolises purity, wisdom and intelligence, while the rose motif stands for love and harmony. Rose motifs were very popular during the Art Nouveau period and many architects and artists used them, e.g. Arthur Richter, the artist from Dresden, made sketches of stylised roses in 1904 (Jugendstil in Dresden, 1999). The use of floral elements in decoration of anterooms or halls was widespread all over Europe. Thus, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the magazine *Moderne Bauformen*, published in Stuttgart, included several projects where floral elements were shown as samples, e.g. the mansion near the Rhine by German architect F. W. Jochem, Edgar Wood's house in Manchester (Gradl, 1905) etc.

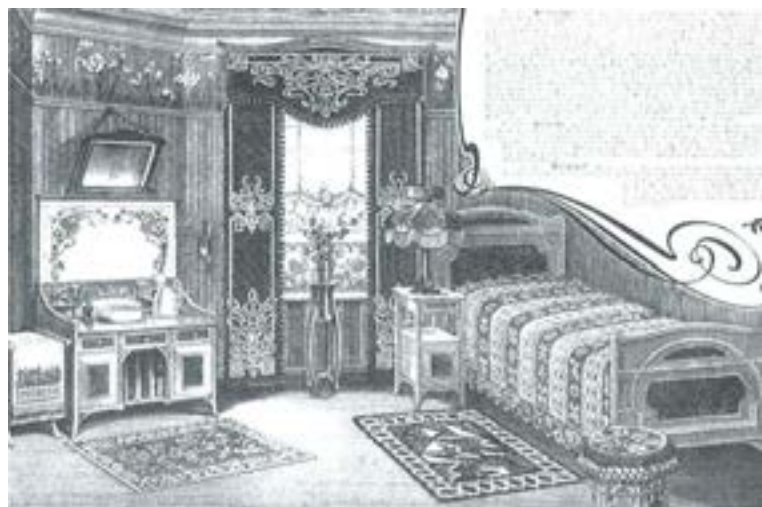
The hall was also often used as a waiting room. It led to the study, where the architect met with his clients. This room was his workplace and had to be fitting for his social status. The walls are toned maroon, but the plinth is slightly darker. Brown is the colour of the earth and simplicity, while red symbolises success. The room's tranquil colours created a favourable atmosphere for conversation. The upper section of the wall features stylised ornaments – large stalks of plants with fan-shaped flowers, namely hemlocks. The features of National Romanticism can be discerned in the stylised treatment of this plant and flower. Later, the walls had been covered with several layers of paper, which give an insight into the development of wallpaper from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1990s. Stylised motifs of plants also appear in the wallpaper patterns.



**4. Interiors from Wyrzykowski's house. Architect Max Scerwinsky (Schervinsky: 1901)**

The hall leads to the drawing room, which is at the centre of the apartment. Its walls have regained their former blue colour, symbolising tranquillity and intellect, which fully corresponds to its function. The interior of the drawing room boasts elegantly arranged floral elements derived from Latvian nature. Floral ornaments were also widespread in the interiors of other houses in Riga, e.g. in the drawing room of Viganovskis' house designed by Max Scherwinsky (Schervinsky, 1901).

The upper section of the walls in Pēkšēns' drawing room is adorned with an ornamental frieze



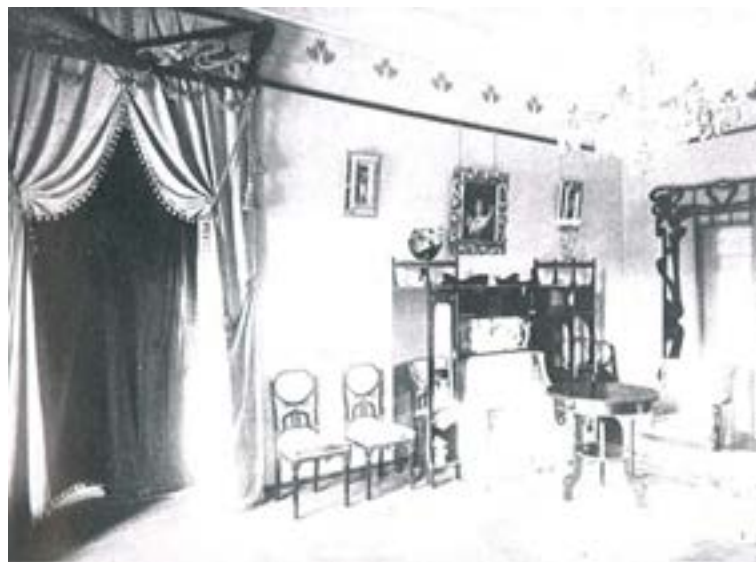
**5. Interior from Wyrzykowsky's house. Architect Max Scerwinsky (Scherwinsky: 1901)**

and daisy motifs. Daisies are among the most common plants in Latvia and bloom throughout the summer. They also symbolise the sun and summer solstice; Midsummer's Day is celebrated in Latvia as a traditional feast day, when women adorn their heads with wreaths made of flowers, mostly daisies. This motif is also used in a stucco décor on the ceiling, where bunches of daisies are bound together with decorative, expressively shaped bands. Daisy motifs were also used in other interiors in Riga,

e.g. the interior of F. Albert's drawing room designed by Jūlijs Madernieks (Grosa, 1999). A band with stylised rose buds can be seen on the ceiling in Pēkšēns' drawing room.

Rose motifs, which was very popular in the Art Nouveau period, was also used by many foreign architects and artists, and were also published in albums of sample drawings. The architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh particularly favoured rose motifs and used them for interiors as well as for the decoration of individual elements (Hackey, 2004).

The striking detail in the room is the recess, separated from the drawing room by a wooden decorative element designed with characteristic Art Nouveau shapes. Decoration of this type was also used by many foreign architects, e.g. in Ryabushkin's villa "Black Swan" (1903) designed by Adamovich and Mayatma in Moscow (Нащокина, 2000). These recesses were also used as winter gardens for live plants, which brightened rooms and supplemented decorative elements within the interior.



**6. Drawing room with daisy motifs of Riga Art Nouveau Museum. (photo: Oļegs Kotovičs)**

The fireplace-room is also located in the central area of the apartment, and was used as the sitting room. Its walls have also regained their previous green colour. Green is a symbol of life, hope and happiness, and is therefore an appropriate colour for the function of the sitting room, which had been designed as a place for leisurely fireside talks. Floral motifs also decorate the interior of this room, drawing inspiration from the diversity of Riga's trees. An ornamental frieze with motifs of chestnut leaves and fruits runs along the top of the walls. A stucco decoration adorns the ceiling, with a diamond-shaped rosette placed in the centre of the composition, but an ornamental ribbon-like band is also arranged along the perimeter as a decorative element with chestnut leaves. Chestnut leaves, fruits and flowers are among the most popular and favoured motifs of Art Nouveau architecture. Stucco decoration with motifs of chestnut leaves, fruits and flowers were also used by architect Gustav Landau - Gutenteger on the ceiling of Kindermann's villa in Lodz (Poland). The fireplace in the sitting room of the Riga Art Nouveau Museum was made in the "Zelm und Behm" factory based in Riga. The fireplace has glazed green tiles decorated with motifs of chestnut leaves and flowers.

Similar motifs are also used in the decorative finish of Benih's Palace in Lodz (Jordan, 2006).



**7. Fireplace room with chestnut motifs of Riga Art Nouveau Museum. (photo: Oļegs, Kotovičs)**

Floral motifs were often used in sitting rooms as part of the decorative finish, one example being in the Suur-Merrioki country house, designed by architect Eliel Saarinen (Gradl, 1905).

The most luxurious room in the apartment was the dining room, where both formal dinners and ordinary meals were served. Its decoration includes wooden panels in the lower section of the room and decorative wooden beams for the ceiling. The application of decorative panels and beams was a popular

technique for interior fittings at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was also used by the artist Madernieks in the interior of the dining room designed for the Riga lawyer F. Alberts (Grosa, 1999). The interior, which was shown at Riga's 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition, was also decorated with panels in the lower section of the walls and with ornamental beams for the ceiling finish (Scherwinsky, 1901). The Russian architect Shehtel used decorative beams for the dining room in his house. The lower section of the walls in the dining room at the Riga Art Nouveau Museum is made of green wooden panels, which symbolise youth, hope and joy. The decorative ceiling beams, door and window are also green. The wall is painted purple, symbolising wealth and luxury. All these symbols indicate that the Latvian architect came from a wealthy family. Stencilled pine motifs adorn the upper part of the walls. Many Latvian folk songs celebrate the pine-tree and its stability and resistance. The pine is a symbol of immortality, while pine cones symbolise fertility both in ancient Greek and in Latvian mythology. The pine motif can also be seen on the ceiling, while the murals present still-lives – one depicting game and the other, seafood.

The dining room is the only room in the apartment with stained glass windows, introducing notes of colour and vibrancy. The most popular motifs on stained glass windows are taken from nature – trees, plants and natural landscapes. The composition of stained glass designs is usually symmetrical and develops from the bottom upwards. The stained glass in the Riga Art Nouveau Museum also features trees; the motifs of a chestnut and laurel tree frame the middle section, which depicts a landscape with irises, water lilies and reed-maces. This composition is similar to the stained glass created by Jacques Gruber in 1905 for the Nancy mansion. (Buffet-Challie, 1982). Elements of nature also prevail in the works of Louis Comfort Tiffany, founder of the stained glass technique in the Art Nouveau period (Baal-Teshuva, 2008). The symbolism of trees and their representation in the Riga Art Nouveau Museum is very interesting – the foliage of the chestnut is intertwined with the laurel, a symbol of immortality and victory. The lower section of the stained glass is also impressive. Irises, one of the most common flowers in Art Nouveau works, are depicted growing from the grass. In ancient Greek mythology the iris was associated with the underworld. It was also associated with mysticism, which was popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Water lilies and reed-maces, as well as frogs, likewise all symbolise fertility. The water lily can be considered a symbol of Latvian Art Nouveau; like the lotus, it blossoms in wetlands and is pure and unblemished. In its essence the water lily is a flower of perfection. While the floral elements of the stained glass are related to the aesthetics of symbols, in its deepest essence the stained glass functions as a successful addition, adding an accent to the room.

The bedroom was located in the private section of the apartment. Here, the owners could enjoy a good night's sleep after an intense and active day. The bedroom walls have retained their original maroon colour. The wall is painted in two tones, with a darker and a lighter shade of maroon. Brown is associated with the earth, while red tone of the walls means passion – perfect for the room's function.

The upper section of the walls feature horizontal lines of a lighter maroon shade with evenly arranged stylised stencilled wreaths of roses. Each wreath is supplemented with drapery. The rose motif is used here as a symbol of love and rebirth. Many Latvian folk songs refer to roses and rose wreaths, also used in Art Nouveau decorative finishes. The rose motif was one of the most popular designs and it was also included in albums of sample drawings (Baal-Teshuva, 2008). A sample of a bedroom interior and furniture with floral and rose motifs was demonstrated at Riga's 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition (Scherwinsky, 1901). Bedroom interiors featured mostly floral décor, e.g. in the bedroom design by Czech architect Jindrich Eck (Gradl, 1905). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the art of interior design became a female domain, and fashion magazines started publishing articles and pictures of bedroom



8. Bedroom (photo: Oļegs Kotovičš)

interiors. The main decorative elements in these interiors were floral motifs adorning walls, ceilings and textiles. (Treasury of Art Nouveau Design & Ornament ,1980).



9. Interior design of bedroom.  
(illustration: 1908)

The bathroom and toilet are situated in the internal corridor, where the only ornament is a decorative band with a stylised floral décor.

The interior of the Riga Art Nouveau Museum provides examples of the interior design characteristic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many new findings were made during its restoration, prompting a need for research into interiors during this particular period in Riga.

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The Riga Art Nouveau Centre is the only museum in the Baltics that presents a complete picture of the historical heritage of Art Nouveau. Learn more. Alberta Street. Alberta Street is the Art Nouveau epicentre of Riga, as magnificent historical Art Nouveau buildings are located along the entire length. Learn more. Architecture. The cultural and historic heritage of Latvian architecture spans many centuries, from authentic rural homesteads to unique samples of Art Nouveau. Learn more. Riga. Load more items. The Art Nouveau architecture in Riga makes up roughly one third of all the buildings in the centre of Riga, making Latvia's capital the city with the highest concentration of Art Nouveau architecture anywhere in the world. Built during a period of rapid economic growth, most of Riga's Art Nouveau buildings date from between 1904 and 1914. The style is most commonly represented in multi-storey apartment buildings. Stylistic influences derived not least from present-day Austria, Finland and Germany. The authentic interior of 1903 has been renovated in the room. Walls are painted the same blue as they were before. The finish of the sitting room features floral elements inspired by the Latvian nature. An ornamental frieze with daisy motifs is located on the upper part of the walls. The most splendid finish is that of the ceiling - a stucco decor with elements of daisy blossoms as well as a band of ornamental painting. An interesting accent of the room is the bay window. It is separated from the room with a wooden decor in the character of Art Nouveau. The original parquet flooring, tiles, d