

BALTIC SCHOOL OF TEXTILE ART. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOVIET LATVIAN, LITHUANIAN, AND ESTONIAN TEXTILE ART IN THE CONTEXT OF LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

The Baltic School of Textile Art is a term used in the 1960s and 1980s to denote textile art in Soviet Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The article aims to provide an insight into the circumstances of the origin of this term and examine the school's idiosyncrasy in the context of landscape representation. According to the data obtained in the study, the term's introduction was determined by regionally oriented exhibition practice, the relevant folk art traditions and the similarities in the treatment of visual content and materiality of textiles. In this context, the dominance of landscape motifs can be considered one of the school's most characteristic features.

Keywords: Soviet Baltic art, textile art, landscape, tapestry, national school.

INTRODUCTION

From the late 1960s onwards, the development of textile art in the Soviet Union was marked by a dramatic shift, redirecting the previously utility-oriented applied art section into the realm of visual arts. The rapid transformations were determined by the renewed interest in the possibilities of pictorial weaving or tapestry technique as a way of image visualization, influenced by a renewed interest in tapestry art, mainly caused by the impact of the French Tapestry Revival (Wells 2018, 60). Tapestry became a relatively

free creative exploration for professional textile artists. Following the Polish School of Textile Art, which was announced after the Polish artist's contribution to the 1st International Biennial of Tapestry in 1962 (Kowalewska, Jachuła & Huml 2018, 5), various national schools began to emerge in the late 1960s. Since 1969 Baltic School of Textile Art has been established as a frequently used term to characterize the idiosyncrasy of textile art in the Soviet Union. The earliest reference to the existence of the Baltic School of Textile Art can be found in the magazine *Dekorativnoje Iskusstvo SSSR*. Writing about the first All-Union exhibition of applied art, which took place in the exhibition hall *Manege* in Moscow in 1968, Varvara Savickaya highlights the tapestries of Baltic textile artists, with a particular emphasis on Latvian and Estonian artists (Savickaya 1969, 21). While acknowledging that it was too early to talk about a stable Baltic School of Textile Art, Savickaya accented to the emergence of such a school and the possibility of compiling a competition for the already widely recognized Polish and Yugoslav textile art schools. In Latvia, Tatjana Suta wrote a review on the same exhibition, suggesting that apart from the performance of two Moscow textile artists, only the textiles of the Baltic artists have been noteworthy (Suta 1969, 7). The title of the article – *Baltic gobelin* – clearly indicates the emphasis of a region. Henceforth, the term Baltic School of Textile Art was frequently used throughout the following decades. The tapestries of the Baltic republics were united by a common approach based on the national heritage, colour usage, bold experiments with the materials and techniques, the high professional standard of execution.

The article aims to examine the content of the term Baltic School of Textile Art. Considering the accepted similarities marked by the term, critical attention is paid to the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian national schools as a phenomenon of the Soviet period both in a unifying and distinctive sense. The article provides insight into the conditions of the formation of national schools and their individual development in relation to textile art. Special attention is paid to the role of higher professional education in the formation of school and the choice of imagery and techniques for textile artists. The dominant theme in Latvian textile art from the 1960s to the 1990s was based on various landscape motifs. Therefore, cross-cultural comparison has been carried out to identify the similarities and differences in landscape representation in other schools that altogether contributed to Baltic School of Textile Art.

The study was conducted using an inductively oriented qualitative research methodology applying a combination of research methods. According to the research questions, a thematic selection of iconographic and written sources has been compiled and analysed. Soviet periodicals and photo albums representing textile art, as well as exhibition catalogues and

reviews, including Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Russian editions, have been used as secondary sources. Visual sources have been analysed at the Museums of History and Applied Arts in Riga, Vilnius, Tartu, and Tallinn. Historical data analysis, comparative analysis, formal and iconographic analysis of visual data and interviews have been used as research methods.

THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL SCHOOLS IN SOVIET TEXTILE ART

The new tapestry movement, which spread rapidly in Europe in the 1960s, first and foremost was driven by the artist-executor. The centuries-old method of split work used in the production of French tapestries, where the image of a tapestry is created by an artist, executing a detailed cartoon or design, but a professional weaver performs its realization in fibre (Barty 2000) was changed. At the 1st show of the Lausanne International Biennial of Tapestry it became clear that the previously strong and established tradition of tapestry weaving could grow into completely unpredictable modifications if artist completed realization of textile artwork. The organizers of the exhibition had to find that the “new tapestry” from Eastern Europe, by contrast, challenged France’s pre-eminence on entirely artistic grounds, suggesting that the state-sponsored art academies of Communist bloc were actually better incubators of contemporary experimentation than the West’s individual artist’s studios and commercial galleries (Wells 2018, 103).

The example of Latvian textile art clearly illustrates the impact of higher education on the development of the industry. Until 1961, the education of a textile artist in Latvia was obtained only at the level of secondary education. Such specialists were trained at State Applied Art Schools and were called art weavers (Lāce 1957). Even though in the 1950s there were initiated experiments with the diversification of materials, introducing, for example, straw, reeds, unspun wool (Ivanova 1974), the constant use of techniques practiced in folk art based on shuttle weaving prevented free interpretation and limited the artist’s creative approach. The turning point was marked when, because of general reforms in art education, the art weaver Rūdolfs Heimrāts committed to organizing the new department dedicated to textile art at the State Art Academy of Latvia SSR (Bļodone 1974, 9). The tapestry weaving technique turned out to be a dominant way of image expression in textile material. Significant part of the learning process established by Heimrāts was dedicated to folk art heritage and landscape studies (Heimrāts 1985). In 1971, the term Latvian School of Textile Art was introduced by Tatjana Suta (Suta 1971, 21). The school was acknowledged for its unique ability to unify immaculate classical tradition

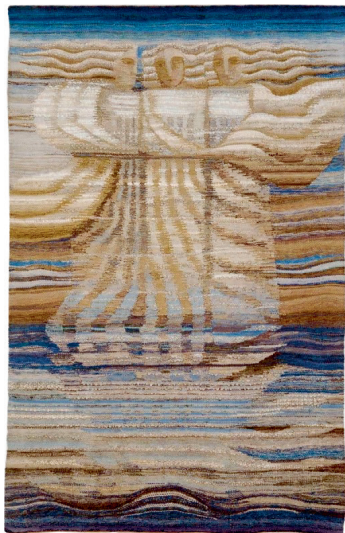


Figure 1. Juozas Balčikonis. *The Song of the Amber Coast*, 1972, tapestry, 300 × 200. http://tdaile.lt/Autoriai/J_Balcikonis/J_Balcikonis.htm

1. attēls. Jozs Balčikonis. “Dzintara krasta dziesma”, 1972, gobelēns, 300 × 200. Attēls iegūts brīvpieejā: http://tdaile.lt/Autoriai/J_Balcikonis/J_Balcikonis.htm

with bold, innovative experiments (Neimisheva 1990, 8). Remaining outside the regulations applied to fine art, tapestry became the extensive field of artistic expression equally supporting spatial and textural experiments, abstraction, and classical narrative weaving.

Lyrical poetics reflected in landscape-based compositions gained the momentum in textile art of Lithuania, which, similarly to Latvia, was formed under the influence of the industry leader and head of higher professional education. Named as the Patriarch of Lithuanian textile art, Juozas Balčikonis (1924–2010) was passionately interested in Lithuanian folk art and oriental art, and collected samples. It is estimated that almost all the most significant pedagogical, organizational, and creative events in the 20th-century Lithuanian textile art are related to him (Andrijauskas 2018, 148). Already during his studies, the artist made attempts to find a way to combine folklore images, folk art motifs and music in textiles. Rhythm emerged as the main rule in this process (Pinkus 1974, 10). A significant shift in this regard was the reorientation to tapestry technique in the early 1970s. Tapestry *The Moonlight Sonata*, woven in 1971, with its distinctly notional image formed in a melodic rhythm, can be perceived as the quintessence of Balčikonis' creative interests, where poetry is fully embodied in the pliant forms of woven structure. In these flexibly formed colour gradations augmented by the medium-specific features of the tapestry were realized the most famous artworks of Balčikonis, including *Poetry Spring* (1972) and *The Song of the Amber Coast* (1972) (Figure 1). Examining the samples of the Lithuanian textile art created during the flourishing years of the Balčikonis School in the 1970s–1980s, a stylistically and materially unified monolith approach can be noticed.



Figure 2. Peeter Kuutma. *Evening in Tallinn*, 1986, tapestry, 150 × 150. https://www.muis.ee/en_GB/museaalview/1642783

2. attēls. Pēters Kūtma. “Vakars Tallinā”, 1986, gobelēns, 150 × 150. Attēls iegūts brīvpieejā: https://www.muis.ee/en_GB/museaalview/1642783

In Estonia, the boom of textile art was initiated by discovering the possibilities of new tapestry in the 1960s and, to a large extent, it developed similarly to Latvia and Lithuania. However, there are also significant differences. The central inequality is the lack of a prominent leader, who would be both the principal teaching force of the art institution and the most visible representative of the industry. Of all three Soviet Socialist Baltic republics, the Estonian textile art had had the longest course of development, since higher education here was introduced already in the pre-war years. At the same time, due to the availability of academic education, the tradition of tapestry weaving developed substantially differently. The first tapestry *Song Festival* was woven in 1946, authored by Adamson-Eric (Teder 2015, 23). Consequently, Mari Adamson’s tapestry *Tallinn I* woven in 1956 was considered as one of the first new Soviet tapestries (Strizenova 1975, 75), and also must be noted as one of the first landscape textiles in textile art of Soviet Socialist Baltic republics. Mari Adamson, as the head of the Textile Art Department in 1944–1977, established the approach that turned out as a feature typical only for textile art in Estonia in comparison with Latvia and Lithuania. According to that, the weaving could be transferred to a professional weaver. Estonian artist Peter Kuutma became the most visible representative of this approach. He initiated the constructivist – geometric direction in Estonian applied art (Teder 2015, 29). Kuutma’s tapestries and carpets are designed as laconic, well balanced, geometrically structured compositions. This is demonstrated by the artist’s most famous artwork *Evening in Tallinn* (1986) (Figure 2), as well as *Northeastern Estonia* (1984), *Series Northland* (1988), *City of Memory* (1994). Overall, the representatives of Estonian textile art school are the least concerned about form and texture

experiments. The decorative value of textiles comes to the fore, where both the perfectly executed design of the weaving and the superiority of the colouring are equally important.

Summarizing the general overview of the national schools of Soviet Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, it must be concluded that the boom of popularity of tapestry art, which acquired the Soviet Union countries in the 1960s, developed a coherent approach based on local cultures and the model of professional higher education. The conditionality of the forms determined by the material increased the attempts to express the subject matter in symbolic language. Colour and material became an essential part of textile visual content. Such an approach determined the main differences between the national schools of the Soviet Socialist Baltic republics and other Soviet republics. In this respect, landscape as a genre in textile art emerged as an idiosyncratic, especially valuable ample material of conditional expression.

LANDSCAPE AS A GENRE IN BALTIC TEXTILE ART

The overall qualities that form a unified whole of the Baltic School of Textile Art become apparent in comparison with the performance of other textile schools in the Soviet Union. Specifically, the variable manifestations of the landscape acknowledge the differences in the creative approach, thematic interpretation, and technical execution demonstrated by the Baltic textile artists. An example here can be the All-Union Exhibition of Visual Arts with the common theme of *The USSR – Our Homeland*, which took place in 1972 in Moscow. The review of the exhibition, published in the magazine *Dekoratивноje iskusstvo SSSR*, among others mentions several Baltic textiles (Kramarenko, Nevler, Uvarova 1973, 10). Special attention was paid to *The Song of Amber Coast* by Lithuanian textile artist Juozas Balčikonis. This figurative composition depicts the three Baltic republics as the three sisters according to symbolic meaning, thus showcasing the ideological motif of the friendship of nations (Natalevičienė 2020) based on the symbol of family, namely, sisterhood. However, its lyrical melodicality, the conditionally contained seashore component and the nuanced tonality of the colours reflecting the seawater and the sand make an obvious statement of an impression of a serene seacoast landscape.

The landscape as a season's portrait and impression of various daily conditions is a characteristic trait in the Soviet Baltic textile art of the 1970s and 1980s. The works dedicated to this subject matter were, for the most part, actively diminished by Latvian art critics, for example, indicating that any conditionally solved woven image could be named after the mood of a time of day or season (Lamberga 1981, 43). At the same time, the interviews with



Figure 3. Zinta Beimane.
Winter Patterns in the Dunes I, 1983, tapestry, mixed technique, 80 × 80. Photograph by Rita Broka, Museum of Decorative Arts and Design collection

3. attēls. Zinta Beimane.
“Ziemas raksti kāpās I”,
1983, gobelēns, jaukta
tehn., 80 × 80.

Fotografējusi Rita Broka

the textile artists prove that images of the seasons most often appear as observations of the cyclical transformations of a specific setting, which evidently means that such textiles can be considered valid variations of the landscape in art. Textile artist Dzintra Vilks, describing her creative approach and thematic choice, accentuated the fertile impact of interaction with a particular place. This can be illustrated by her textile compositions *Lake* (1977) *Landscape with the Grass* (1980), *Winter* (1982), *Spring* (1983). Thus, the landscape motifs are reviled as the woven reflections of the multisensorial perception (Vilks 2020). Furthermore, Zinta Beimane’s cycle of seven tapestries *Winter Patterns in the Dunes* (1983) is comparable to a documentary observation of a place over a long period of time, as a result of which the artist has selectively interpreted the impressions obtained in a textile fibre (Beimane 2021) (Figure 3).

In this case, the motif of the seaside landscape is not considered as a panoramic view but instead chosen by following the values essential for the medium-specific thinking of the textile artist, focusing the perception closer to tactile surfaces of nature in winter. In this context, the visual content woven into the textiles mainly reflects the areas indicated in the artist’s biography and individual experience, and therefore can be considered as landscape. The evidence can be found in the oeuvre of most Latvian textile artists educated by Rūdolfs Heimrāts.

Abstract compositions based on various perceptions of nature became even more comprehensive in Lithuanian textile art. A significant number of textiles can be found, which represent the mood observed in nature, yielding the emotional saturation contained in colours and rhythms. Often it is the impression of the colour gamut of a particular season, the changing



Figure 4. Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere. *Lifetime I-III*, 1972, tapestry, mixed technique, 350 × 76 (×2) 340 × 185. Photograph by Timurs Subhankulovs

4. attēls. Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere. “Mūži I-III”, 1972, gobelēns, jaukta tehn., 350 × 76 (×2) 340 × 185. Fotografējis Timurs Subhankulovs

state of the daily movement in an abstract image, and not a specific motif of the natural scenery. Notable examples are Vladas Daujotas's *Spring* (1974), Giedre Puodžiukaityte's *Spring* (1980), Jadvyga Gervyte-TvariJonavičiene's *Autumn* (1978), Liudvika Rusteikiene's *Glow* (1978), Joana Bazariene's *Morning* (1978) and *Dawn* (1977), Ramute Jasudite's *Autumn* (1978) and *Evening* (1979), Regina Sipavičiūtė's *Indian Summer* (1974), Genovaitė Žilinskaitė's *Summer* (1976). Landscape can also be depicted as a vision, a part of a mysterious world that remotely resonates with an image of a geographic place, rather offering a transformation of the impulses seen in the environment into the matter of another reality. Examples of such a landscape concept are Danute Kvietkevičiūtė's *Hypothesis* (1979), Valantinaite-Jokuboniene's *Rocks* (1972) and *Roads* (1977), Daiva Mačionyte-Jonaitiene's *Earth* (1974), Genovaitė Žilinskaitė's *Forest* (1975), and Rekertaitė-Načiulienė's *Forest* (1983).

Notably, in Latvian textile art landscapes or their motifs can be expressed as spatial forms (Rūdolfs Heimrāts' *Patience dock* (1973), Aija Baumanė's *Steep Shores* (1974), Edīte Pauls-Vīgnere's *Lifetime I-III* (1972) (Figure 4), which became increasingly popular in the 1970s (Kalniete 1989) and remained as a significant difference, setting Latvian textile apart from other national schools. Likewise, a landscape can appear as a textile relief of fibre thickenings and layers (Aija Baumanė's *Trees* (1971), Rūdolfs Heimrāts' *November* (1974), Egils Rozenbergs' *The Sea* (1976), and textured colour fields (Zinta Beimane's *Eternal Rhythms* (1983), Vīgnere's *The Green Land*

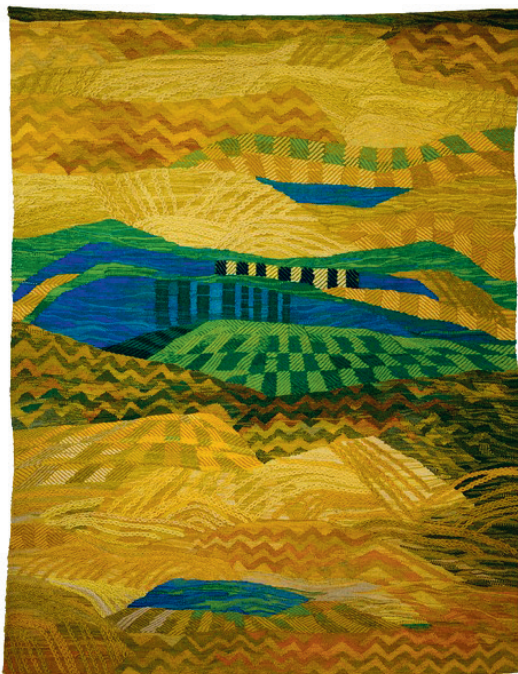


Figure 5. Mall Tomberg. *Landscape of Home*, 1973, tapestry, 208 × 266. https://www.muis.ee/en_GB/museaalview/1527016

5. attēls. Malla Tomberga. “Dzimtās zemes ainava”, 1973, gobelēns, jaukta tehn., 208 × 266. Attēls iegūts brīvpieejā: https://www.muis.ee/en_GB/museaalview/1527016

(1970), Ilma Austriņa's *Autumn mood* (1980), Rūdolfs Heimrāts' *Butterflies of Jāņkalni* (1974). The landscape can also be represented in a classically plain-woven tapestry as a part of allegorical compositions (Rūdolfs Heimrāts' *Līgo* (1977), Inga Skujiņa's *Vidzeme* (1984), Viesturs Bērziņš' *Summer* (1984), Leontīne Pīgozne's *Midsummer Night* (1985).

The amplitude of textile interpretation on the basis of such a motif is not characteristic to the same period of Lithuanian or Estonian textile art. Thereby, it can be considered as an indication of difference for the Heimrāts'-led Latvian school, as similar manifestations were not observed in any other textile art school of that period.

Against the capacity of various creative experiments realized by representatives of the Latvian Textile Art school, Estonian textile art is largely perceived as a promoter of a pictorial tapestry with the main emphasis on colour. As Tatjana Suta observing the All-Union exhibition *Soviet Gobelīn – 2*, has pointed out, “the qualities that characterize the national peculiarity of Estonian tapestries are a distinctly modern artistic concept, a precise linear drawing and a decoratively effective vivid colour” (Suta 1977, 54). In terms of colour expression, Estonian textiles differ from Lithuanian textile art samples of the same period. For example, Mall Tomberg's cycle *Landscape of Home I and II* (1976), depicts the land as if from a bird's eye view, where the main expressive accent appears in colour – a bright yellow or intensely green fabric plane (Figure 5). Tomberg as an artist who produced most of

her work herself, to an equal extent paid attention to the medium-specific expression, introducing knitted structures and mixed weaving techniques (Adamson 2010, 12).

One of the most visible textile artists Leesi Erm's artworks occupy a special place in the Estonian textile art of the 1960s–1980s in terms of landscape representation. Although the depiction of a certain motif does not characterize these textiles, the emotional impact of their colour and texture combinations ranks them in the group of the most fascinating images of nature. The majority of Leesi Erm's textiles are sensorial impressions of seasonal changes, where colour, especially in combination with the thick texture of fringe, becomes the main factor influencing perception (*Sunset* (1969), *Frost* (1973), *Autumn Gold*, *Winter* (1978)). On the contrary, Mari Adamson has designed more realistic lyrical landscape images, where the classical tapestry weaving benefits the depiction of a particular site. A series of works dedicated to the landscapes of Tallinn (1978–1980) are realized in the plain-woven tapestry technique, where the views of the city are revealed as immensely nuanced, intimacy-filled fragments of perception observed from the window of her apartment. Landscapes can also be recognized as the central motif in the tapestries designed by Peter Kuutma. Along with particular nature motifs, the representation of sky in various conditions takes a substantial place in his oeuvre (*Cold ground* (1988), *Clouds roll in* (1991) (Adamson, Kuutma 2016, 41). Although Kuutma is only an author of textile design, which must be performed by a professional weaver, even these distinctly constructive compositions reveal the tonality, specificity of motif selection and contemplative mood characteristic of the Baltic Textile Art School landscapes.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the data obtained in the study, it can be concluded that the introduction of the term “Baltic School of Textile Art” was determined by regionally-oriented exhibition practice of the Soviet period, the relevant folk art traditions of Baltic countries and the similarities in the treatment of visual content and materiality of textiles. It can be generally assumed that the ability to express the subject matter through conditional language of fibre medium became the main feature of the distinction of Baltic textile artists. The new tapestry, made by artists, became the realm of an expression relatively free from ideological dogmas, which simultaneously supported the subtle smooth-surfaced classical weaving and the sculpturally textured spatial forms. The dominance of landscape motifs can be considered as one of the school's most characteristic features. The symbolically

interpretable qualities of landscape motifs and their suitability for tapestry weaving proved to be a valuable source of associative imagery. As the research results reveal, the landscape and images of nature became one of the most widely represented topics in textile art not only in Latvia, but also in Lithuania and Estonia in the 1960s–1980s.

In a situation where the tapestry art as a monumental alternative of reproducing realistic images was recognized as an effective form of representation of ideological propaganda, the woven landscape became a field of more liberated, less censored interpretation of the subject matter. With a targeted selection of natural scenery, it became possible to express a lyrically emotional mood, allegorical meaning, and belonging to a particular setting and social space.

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BALTIJAS TEKSTILMĀKSLAS SKOLA. LATVIJAS, LIETUVAS UN IGAUNIJAS TEKSTILMĀKSLAS SALĪDZINĀJUMS AINAVAS ATTĒLOJUMA KONTEKSTĀ

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ANOTĀCIJA

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Atslēgvārdi: Padomju Baltijas māksla, tekstilmāksla, ainava, gobelēns, nacionālā skola.

KOPSAVILKUMS

20. gs. 60. gados Padomju Savienības tekstilmākslas attīstībā iezīmējās krass pagrieziens, ievirzot līdz tam priekšmetiski orientēto lietišķās mākslas nozari tēlotājam mākslai piederīgas tēlveides laukā. Turpmākajās divās desmitgadēs Baltijas reģiona mākslas kopainas priekšplānā izvirzījās profesionālā tekstilmāksla, kas paplašināto izteiksmes līdzekļu rezultātā piedzīvoja nebijušu popularitātes vilni. Jau 70. gadu sākumā tika organizētas atsevišķas jaunajai gobelēnu mākslai veltītas kopizstādes, kas izgaismoja nozares attīstības virzienus un izcēla lokālo specifiku. Plašā lietojumā nostiprinājās Baltijas reģionam raksturīgas pieejas apzīmējums – Baltijas tekstilmākslas skola. Mākslinieku izpildījumā gobelēns kļuva par salīdzinoši brīvu izteiksmes iespēju, kas vienlīdz atbalstīja gan gleznieciski niansētu gludi austu krāsu ekspresiju, gan tēlnieciski apjomīgu, fakturētu formu modelējumu. Par padomju perioda Baltijas tekstilmākslai raksturīgu iezīmi izveidojās virtuozā spēja atklāt emocionāli piesātinātu vizuālo saturu caur nosacītiem ainavas motīviem, dabas tēliem, krāsu noskaņām un ritmiem. Dabas motīvi kļuva par asociatīvas tēlveides resursu, kas, no vienas puses,

ļāva apiet sociālistiskajā realitātē balstītas tēmas, bet, no otras, organiski pakļāvās šķiedras materiāla noteiktai tēlojuma specifikai. Pētījums veikts, izmantojot kvalitatīva pētījuma induktīvi orientētu stratēģiju, lietojot vairāku pētniecisko metožu kombināciju. Dati iegūti, izpētot pieejamo rakstisko un ikonogrāfisko materiālu, lietiskos avotus.