

## **Exhibition “The Latvians: An Interpretation. Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896”**

From August 1 to September 15, 1896 there was much activity at the place where the Latvian National Theatre stands today in Rīga. During the course of a month-and-a-half, more than 45,000 people visited the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. A temporary pavilion was built, and reconstructions of four countryside houses from ancient and new times were built on the lot. There were 18 thematic sections, with more than 8,000 objects on display, thus providing a major panorama of Latvian cultural history and the nation’s latest achievements.

The Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition was the first major exhibition devoted to Latvian history, ethnography and contemporary culture, the first exhibition of fine art by Latvian artists in Rīga, and a major turning point in studying and preserving Latvian traditional cultural heritage.

The organisers of the exhibition – the Rīga Latvian Society and a group of specialists whom the Society invited to take part – created their own interpretation about Latvians, which was based on historical and ethnographic research, also myths and the ideas that prevailed at that time as to what kind of a person a Latvian should be.

The 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition confirmed the ability of Latvians to organise such a major event and also demonstrated elements of the emerging national self-confidence of Latvians, their most important values, their attitude toward history, their traditional cultural heritage and the era that existed at that time. Today the historical exhibition is twice that important, both as a significant collection of ethnographic and historical items and as a witness to the Latvian society that existed at that time, and to the values, which the new nation held in common.

Most of the items that were exhibited at the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition are now part of the collection of the National History Museum of Latvia, which is the heir to the Rīga Latvian Society’s Museum collections.

The exhibition “The Latvians: An Interpretation. Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896” looks at the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition from three perspectives – as an important cultural historical event, as a set of evidence about the era and the emergence of the Latvian nation, and as an encouragement to think about important values that unify society today.

For that reason, the exhibition offers a diverse look at how the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition was prepared and organised, offering more information about research and exhibition traditions at that time. It speaks of the national movement that was emerging at that time, the identity of Latvian society and the image of that society, as seen in the thematic structure of the historical exhibition and in the items that were

used therein. The topics and the exhibits have been selected as much as possible in accordance with the catalogue of the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition.

At the end of the exhibition, visitors can organise their own virtual exhibition – one that is based on social values that are of importance today, as well as in Latvia's efforts and achievements.

**The 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition stood witness to the development of ethnography, history, anthropology and linguistics.** The organisers could base their work on more than 120 years of traditions in terms of studying the past of the Baltic region. During the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people increasingly believed in human abilities and the need to learn about the world. They also believed in progress, which meant the rapid development of the modern humanities. Ethnography and history involved much attention on collecting and carefully exploring sources, as well as on improving research methods. The earliest research about the territory of Latvia and Latvians was conducted by Baltic German researchers who established research associations and the first museums, as well as published compendia of historical sources and scientific articles. The first researchers collected information from various areas and put together diverse collections of antiquities, books and ethnographic objects. Only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, increasing number of scientists in the Baltic provinces obtained an academic education and specialised in narrower topics. The prospective Latvian intelligentsia, which began to emerge in the 1850s, had its own views about Latvian history and ethnography, and it began to collect folklore and to develop the Latvian language. Latvian researchers, journalists and social activists often opposed the ideas of Baltic Germans during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the work that the Latvians themselves did was also based on older research traditions.

**In August 1896, the 10<sup>th</sup> All-Russian Archaeological Congress was held in Rīga – the most important science event in Latvia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** The congress attracted 619 participants from six countries, and 98 papers were presented over the course of two weeks. Preparation for the congress fostered the development of archaeological research in the Baltic provinces. This was seen in the number of antiquities that were delivered to museums, as well as an increase in the number of publications. Several exhibitions were organised as part of the congress, and the most extensive one was the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. Also abundant and of scholarly importance was the exhibition of the congress itself and its archaeological section. People could view important antiquities from local museums, as well as the most interesting objects from the museums of Russia. Interest in ancient clothing was facilitated by fragments of textiles with metal rings woven into them and ornaments from archaeological excavations. Professor Friedrich Kruse reconstructed a warrior's "helmet" that was actually made from bronze rings and parts of women's head ornament. In future years when artists started to present reconstructions of ancient Latvians, this artificial helmet was reflected in drawings, paintings and sculptures. During the congress, there was a demonstration archaeological dig at a Livonian (Liv) burial hillock "Pūteļi" in Turaida Parish which dated back to the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century. Some 200 delegates took part, including the chairwoman of the congress, Countess

Praskovya Uvarova. The most important papers from the congress after the event were published in three volumes.

**On the basis of major exhibitions elsewhere in Europe, the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition was housed in special temporary buildings.** Temporary buildings became popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and pavilions were built in Rīga for various exhibitions and song festivals. The city allotted an open field where the Latvian National Theatre now stands for the exhibition – a square between the city canal and Lielā Jēkaba Street (Kronvalda Boulevard today), with some 2 ha of land in all. The exhibition was designed by the architect Konstantīns Pēkšēns and the ethnographer Mikus Skruzītis. Contractor Pēteris Puselis built nine buildings for the exhibition – the main pavilion, ancient countryside peasant dwelling houses from Kurzeme (Courland) and Vidzeme (Livonia), the house of a wealthy peasant from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, an ancient bathhouse *pirts*, a music pavilion, a restaurant, a stage and a shed, spending 7,575 roubles. Grandiose entrance gates by the Nikolaja Boulevard (Valdemāra Street today) had to create solemn impression.

On the opening day of the exhibition, a ticket cost 1 rouble, the sum being reduced to 50 kopecks and then, on August 11, to 30 kopecks. Children up to the age of 10 and schoolchildren had to pay 15 kopecks. The exhibition was open from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM on weekdays and from 10:00 AM until 6:00 PM on Sundays.

40,315 people attended the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition with bought tickets, while some 5,000 people got in for free (those who donated objects to the exhibition, schoolchildren, etc.). The organisation of the exhibition cost 22,725 roubles, and revenues amounted to 24,618 roubles and 84 kopecks.

**The 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition marked a turning point in the collection and preservation of ethnographic Latvian materials for next generations.** The Scientific Commission of the Rīga Latvian Society began to collect objects of museum value in 1869, but the collection was not sufficient for a major exhibition in 1896. Where researchers had previously collected unusual and rare objects of the past, the organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition looked for everything that was used on a daily basis to reflect the lives of Latvians. The Rīga Latvian Society sought to involve city and countryside inhabitants, underlining the importance of collecting and preserving artefacts for the historical and ethnographic research. The Latvian newspapers *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, *Balss*, *Tēviņa*, *Mājas Viesis*, *Latviešu Avīzes* and others invited everyone to donate or loan the necessary exhibits for the event. During 1894 and 1895, 11 expeditions were held in all of Latvia's regions, obtaining more than 6,000 exhibits – everyday objects and tools, traditional clothing and ornaments, photographs, drawings, and descriptions of traditions. The Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition is important in the history of Latvian museums because of the unique items that were collected and the experience obtained during its organization.

**The items that were collected for the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition are an important component of the collection of the National History Museum of Latvia**

**today.** After the closing of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, the buildings were torn down, those exhibits that had been loaned were returned to their owners, and the rest became part of the collection of the Rīga Latvian Society (RLS) museum. The fate of the items was not very good during the next few decades because of a lack of facilities. Some of the items were stored at the RLS museum, while others were put in various warehouses. Design for a separate museum building was created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the process was stopped with the outbreak of the World War I. Many of the exhibits from the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition were not preserved because of frequent transportation and inappropriate storage. In 1920, the RLS collection was handed over to the government and became the foundation of the State Historical Museum's (the National History Museum of Latvia today) collection. Before a fire in 2013, the objects were stored in a collections' repository of the National History Museum of Latvia at the Rīga Castle. After the fire in the Rīga Castle they were transported to temporary facilities at Lāčplēša Street 106/108. The cornerstone for new museums' of Latvia repository was laid in 2016 at Pulka Street 8 in Rīga, and in 2018, the objects that were collected more than 120 years ago will finally be in a building that is specifically meant for the needs of a museum.

**The aim of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition was to demonstrate “Latvians as a nation in their lives and work,” from ancient times to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** The academically important 10<sup>th</sup> All-Russian Archaeological Congress that was held in parallel to the exhibition meant that the exhibition itself was a scholarly (ethnographic) event, but because Latvians wanted to prove their abilities and facilitate a sense of community, the exhibition went far beyond the borders of Latvian ethnography. The exhibition had 18 thematic sections – “Land,” “History and Law,” “Anthropology and Statistics,” “Language,” “Intangible Heritage,” “Written Literature,” “Schools and Education,” “Associations,” “Music and Singing,” “Fine Arts,” “The Dramatic Arts,” “Clothing,” “Buildings,” “Home Craft,” “Beekeeping,” “Agriculture,” “Fishing” and “Shipping.” There was a presentation of replicated open-air buildings and more than 8,000 objects – pieces of clothing and footwear, tools, model ships, documents, maps, books, photographs, drawings, paintings, etc. Three concerts were held to introduce visitors to folk music and the work of Latvian composers. “Performances from the Lives of Latvians” was a very popular event, with a theatrical presentation of weddings and other Latvian traditions, as well as works at home and farmstead. Such a large-scale cultural historical exhibition about Latvians was a unique event in the history of Latvian culture. It is not easy to find another event during the subsequent 120 years that would merge a conceptually new scholarly view, a large and comprehensive panorama, a large collection of objects that had never been exhibited before, a printed catalogue, and an extensive cultural programme.

**Faith in the ability of science to completely explore the development of humanity, ethnos and races during the 19<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the flourishing of anthropology.** Important part of anthropology was the physical or biological anthropology – research of the physical characteristics of various ethnic or other groups. Beginning at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Baltic and European scholars described the body and skull of Latvians, including also other measurements with an

aim to properly characterize the appearance of Latvians. Seeking to describe a Latvian in as precise and scientific way as possible, the organisers of the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition purposefully put together a section on anthropology and statistics, offering information from scientists about Latvians, photographs and drawings from expeditions, displaying skulls, and making mannequins based on anthropological measurements, which were dressed in traditional costumes. Researchers today are more cautious about an all-encompassing and precise description of a nation's physical characteristics, but physical anthropology remains important in areas such as the archaeology and prehistory.

**One of the cornerstones of the emerging Latvian nation's self-confidence was the consolidation of the Latvian history narrative.** In contrast to the political history traditions of Baltic Germans, Latvians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed the concept of 'Latvian history' from Garlieb Merkel and other authors about a period of freedom in advance of the arrival of German Crusaders in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, which marked the beginning of '600 years of slavery'. Latvian cultural workers became interested in the ancient period, particularly in the history of the so-called Curonian Kings, a group of indigenous vassals, who symbolised the ancient era of freedom. The life of Latvian peasants under serfdom was presented in gloomy colours. The abolishment of serfdom during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent reforms that opened the way for the emergence of Latvian social and cultural life were seen as the beginning of a 'new era of freedom'. The organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition displayed maps, blueprints, documents related to the peasants. The era of serfdom was represented by whips that were used to punish peasants. The period after abolishment of serfdom was symbolised by objects and photographs related to parish courts and boards as institutions of local self-government. This concept about Latvian history took deep root in the understanding of Latvian history. True, researchers today are critical about the idea that Latvians had '700 years of slavery', also questioning other ideas about Latvian history that date back to the era of the exhibition.

**Most Latvians, like other Central and Eastern Europeans, lived in the countryside in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and were engaged in agriculture and fishing.** Hence multiple sections of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition were devoted to Latvians as a nation of peasants and fishermen. There was a reconstruction of an ancient chimneyless dwelling house from Kurzeme (Courland), a chimneyless dwelling threshing barn and a bathhouse *pirts* from Vidzeme (Livonia), as well as the house of a wealthy peasant from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to provide a contrast to the more ancient buildings. The exhibition sought to confirm the rapid progress of agriculture, the increasing wealth of Latvian peasants, and the differences between the new era and the 'dark age of serfdom'. In the sections "Agriculture", "Fishing" and "Beekeeping," visitors of the exhibition could see ancient agriculture tools, fishing tools for catching fish in rivers, lakes and sea, as well as beehives. Like in agricultural exhibitions, the latest agricultural equipment was also on display and could be bought. Proportionally reduced in size models of the buildings and tools were prepared in those cases when the original object was difficult or impossible to transport. The items collected for the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition are an important part of evidence about traditional

farmstead-keeping at that time. Today countryside landscape, farmstead and peasant's work are no longer linked just to agriculture and fishing as important economic sectors. The emphasis of the traditional way of life at the 1896 exhibition facilitated the importance of the countryside and peasant theme in the Latvian identity.

**Traditional clothing was emphasised at the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition as one of the most vivid examples of Latvian cultural heritage.** Clothing is visually attractive evidence about the past, also speaking to the community of the culture. In the 1890s, it became a key component in the search for 'Latvianness'. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern culture excluded traditional costumes from everyday use, but as the importance of the national community was strengthened, interest in traditional costume expanded. The organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition did a lot of work to demonstrate the "beauty of true folk costumes," contrasting items that they had collected during their expeditions with the views of various contemporaries about "folksy dress". There were mannequins dressed in traditional costume from various parts of Latvia at various sections of the exhibition. The "Clothing" section displayed things that had been obtained during the expeditions organised by the Scientific Commission of the Rīga Latvian Society and donated: women's headdresses and woollen shawls (*villaine*), shirts, skirts and jackets, as well as men's hats, shirts, trousers, vests, long jackets, women's and men's overcoats, footwear, ornaments, mittens, gloves, socks, belts and woven ribbons. Modern handicrafts were also presented in the showcases with an annotation that "this art was developed among Latvian women in complete commensurability with modern culture". The understanding of national costume's wearing traditions has changed since the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition, but the clothing that was collected for it is the oldest heritage of traditional costume that has survived to this very day. Latvian national costume, moreover, has become part of the Latvian Cultural Canon.

**Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, inhabitants of the countryside made everyday items themselves.** At home people made clothing, footwear, wooden dishes, tools, furniture. During winter evenings, people tore the bark of lime tree and made footwear (*vīzes*), from flax and oakum made ropes. To emphasise the skills of Latvian peasants and craftsmanship as a potential source of financial profit, the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition featured a separate section on home craft, with tableware, lighting objects, spinning and weaving equipment, smoking accessories, and other items. Also some professional craftsmen sent products, tools and descriptions of their work to the exhibition, because during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as farmsteads became wealthier, they more often bought products and services from professional blacksmiths, potters, weavers, carpenters, shoemakers, roofers, building craftsmen, etc. The craftsmen often were small farm holders or landless peasants; also they were the youngest sons of peasants who did not inherit the farmsteads. Those who became apprentices could earn a living for themselves, and the extensive nature of craftsmen's skills continues to be seen as a big advantage today. This is seen in home economics lessons at schools, as well as the tradition of making or fixing household objects – something which non-Latvians often point to as a unique characteristic of Latvians.

**Developing the Latvian language, collecting and researching folklore – this was the first job for the emerging Latvian intelligentsia during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in terms of culture.** The founders of the Latvian national movement or the so-called ‘New Latvians’ saw the Latvian language, folklore and traditional culture as the marks of ethnic cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness that could merge and unite Latvians. This idea became of particular importance in shaping the identity of the emerging nation. Also elsewhere in Europe, linguistics and folklore research developed rapidly and became more and more popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Latvian folklore was studied by Baltic German scholars. The organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition sought to display everything that had been done in researching Latvian language and folklore, as well as to show the objects that described the traditional culture. Among the objects in showcases there were books about folklore and folk music, publications of folksongs, fairy tales and riddles, portraits of folklorists, folk music instruments and also ancient ownership signs, used on tools. Folklore and folk music materials, collected during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, folklore collections published by Krišjānis Barons, Ansis Lerhis-Puškaitis and other scholars today are the “golden foundation” of Latvia’s cultural heritage. Another unique part of museum collections today is authentic folk music instruments that were collected for the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition.

**The Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were distinguished by a high level of literacy among peasants and a developed network of schools in the countryside.** The educational traditions of peasants were facilitated by the efforts of the Lutheran Church to strengthen religious knowledge, the movement of brethren congregations in Vidzeme (Livonia) during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the spread of the ideas of the Enlightenment, and efforts by some noblemen to improve the level of education among peasants. After the abolishment of serfdom, it was up to parish institutions to maintain schools, and increasing numbers of school buildings quickly began to appear in Kurzeme (Courland) and particularly in Vidzeme (Livonia). Encouraging education became an important goal for the Latvian national movement, and countryside teachers became the main organisers of social and cultural life in the countryside, thus strengthening the achievements of the Latvian national movement there. Because of the importance of schools and education on the agenda of Latvian society, the organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition in 1896 dedicated a separate section to education, presenting books, portraits of school employees, photographs of schools and churches, as well as information about school-related statistics. Educational traditions in the Baltic provinces are seen today as a foundation for the rapid spread of newspaper and book reading among Latvian peasants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was also an important prerequisite for the establishment of Latvian associations, choirs and theatres in the countryside so as to help in the establishment of the modern Latvian cultural space.

**Beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, increasing number of Latvians pursued a higher education, attending universities and teacher’s seminaries, thus laying the foundations for the Latvian intelligentsia.** As the rights of all social ranks in the Baltic provinces expanded and peasants became wealthier, increasing numbers of

countryside and city inhabitants could afford to educate their children. The appearance of the Latvian national movement during the 1850s led to a situation in which many educated Latvians were actively involved in creating common social life. Latvians studied at Dorpat (Tartu) University and various educational institutions in Russia. In today's territory of Latvia there were teachers' seminaries in Valka (Walk) and Irlava (Irmelau), the Baltic teachers' seminary, and the Rīga Polytechnical Institute. The catalogue of the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition emphasised the training of teachers at the seminaries as the foundation for the improved quality of education, as well as the ability to "bring adults to education." Latvians who completed a higher education during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century laid foundations for national culture. Janis Rozentāls, Andrejs Jurjāns, Rainis and others are still recorded on the most important pages of Latvian culture, and the increasing level of education is seen as an important prerequisite for Latvians to become a nation with a common self-consciousness and goals for the future.

**The 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition was also the first exhibition of Latvian fine art.** Along with other cultural sectors, professional Latvian painting began to take root during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Artists who were studying in St Petersburg formed a club called "Rūķis" around 1890, and that was the first place where professional Latvian artists could come together. The organisers of the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition stressed differences between painters of Latvian origin from previous generations – Kārlis Hūns, Jūlijs Feders and Jānis Staņislavs Roze – and the younger generation of artists from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, insisting that "the previous artists focused little on Latvian life, but more recent artists largely take motifs from Latvia for their paintings." This was an important turning point in shaping and popularising national culture at that time. The exhibition featured paintings by Jānis Staņislavs Roze, Janis Rozentāls, Johans Valters, Ādams Alksnis, Vilhelms Purvītis, Staņislavs Birnbaums, Pēteris Balodis, Arturs Baumanis and Jānis Lībergs, as well as photo reproductions of Kārlis Hūns' paintings. Janis Rozentāls' works attracted particular praise. One of his masterpieces, the painting "No baznīcas" ("After the Service"), which was exhibited in 1896, has become a part of Latvia's Cultural Canon.

**Foundations for professional Latvian music, theatre, literature, newspaper publishing and book publishing were laid during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** Latvians and the organisers of the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition were proud of what had been achieved during the last few decades of the century in terms of shaping cultural and social life. The exhibition featured not just traditional Latvian way of life, but also the emergence of modern culture, thus making the exhibition more comprehensive so that it presented a vast cultural historical panorama of Latvian lives. In the sections "Written Literature," "Music and Singing" and "The Dramatic Arts," people could look at portraits of writers, musicians and theatre employees, handwritings, books and Latvian newspapers, musical score collections, photographs and prizes of Latvian song festivals. A chronologically broader retrospective was devoted to the emergence of Latvian literature, including examples of religious and secular literature from the previous centuries. Sections that were dedicated to contemporary Latvian culture and its first professionals confirmed self-

confidence for Latvians and others. The first steps that were taken during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the emergence of Latvian national culture remain important today. Contemporary culture from that time has become classical Latvian culture today.

**Societies were the centres for Latvian social activities in cities and the countryside during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** Latvians were not much involved in the governance of the Baltic provinces, and the state government provided minimal support for culture. This meant that self-organization was of particular importance in the pursuit of common goals. Economic activities were facilitated by agricultural, savings-and-loan and insurance societies, charity treasuries and welfare societies, there also were voluntary fire fighters' associations. An important task of charity, singing and so-called general societies was to facilitate cultural life. The centre of modern Latvian social and cultural life was the Rīga Latvian Society, which was established in 1868 and also organised the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. Of great pride for the organisers of the exhibition were publications of the societies and their organized events, facilitated social life, established libraries, paid scholarships and subsidies, also economic achievements. The badges, flags and prizes of the societies, as well as portraits of the leaders of the Rīga Latvian Society were displayed on the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition. We can be amazed today at the ability of Latvian society in general back then to get self-organised, admiring the self-denial and achievements of mutual work at a time when state and local government support for various events was very limited, indeed.

**Everyday life in cities and countryside changed more rapidly during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.** Reforms allowed peasants to gradually become wealthier and improve their life conditions. Industrial products, various everyday goods, spices, sugar, other food products became more available, the interior of homes changed, also clothing became different. The railroad made it easier to travel and communicate with others, and the reading of newspapers became more and more common. The organisers of the 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition tried to expand the topics that were considered, confirming faith in progress, pride about the achievements of Latvian peasants since the 'new times' when they took ownership of their land. The exhibition featured a 'dwelling house of a new-era peasant', which was supposed to demonstrate the way in which Latvian peasants followed along with the quality demands and fashions of the new era. Modern agriculture machines were exhibited, but the home craft section allowed visitors to look at fashionable handicrafts that no longer resembled the traditional heritage. Ancient traditions were preserved in Latvia's countryside for several decades after the exhibition, but contemporary innovations appeared more and more rapidly during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modernisation covered all areas of life, and Latvians were proud of their participation in the formation of the new era, as well as their increasing role in social, economic and political processes in the Baltic provinces.

**The existence of a nation is based on a sense of belonging, common understanding of what united people in the past and the present, and the desire to work together.**

The 1896 Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition attested to common values, traditions and achievements. Though it was rooted in the Latvian traditional heritage, it actually demonstrated the role of Latvians as an emerging nation during the existing period of history. The exhibition was contemporary, with each section covering not just cultural heritage, but also elements of Latvian self-confidence and the views of the organisers of the exhibition about Latvian society.

To what extent is our sense of belonging to Latvians and Latvia still dictated by the values that were seen as essential 120 years ago? Who are Latvians today, when the transformations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are behind us, and the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are ahead of us? Despite the passage of 120 years, the traditional cultural heritage has maintained its importance alongside new values, as have the topics of peasants and the countryside, and our common history. We are unified by outstanding cultural achievements and, perhaps, by stereotypes about the appearance and characteristics of Latvians. We can ask whether an exhibition about Latvians in 2016 would be as colourful and diverse as the one in 1896, which confirmed the abilities of what was then a new nation. How have our views about ourselves changed?