

Exhibition “Latvia in Colour”

This exhibition is about colour photography in Latvia from the early 20th century until the 1990s. It outlines the most significant turning points in the development of photography technology and provides a unique insight into Latvian cultural history, showing us the past in true colours.



1. Fascination of Colours

Only three years after photography was invented in France, it reached Riga and Jelgava in 1842. Excitement about the novel "light pictures" was mixed with disappointment: no matter how precise, a black-and-white photo could not reflect the world in its authentic colours.

For almost another century, colour photography remained a tempting, but difficult goal that kept both professionals and amateurs busy. They experimented with different technologies, filters, and chemicals, trying to discover how to get a colour image with just one shot and without colourising.

A new, yet temporary solution – photo colourisation – emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Black-and-white photographs were colourised with watercolours or aniline dyes. This allowed for a more realist feeling to enhance the emotional aura of the image. Province of Courland school inspector Oskar Emil Schmidt (1847-1917), a local history enthusiast and traveller, colourised selected images in his collection of 4300 photos, striving to bring to life the black-and-white landscapes, historic buildings, and vistas of small towns.

Around 1910, the earliest colour photos in Latvia, autochromes, were taken. However, autochromes were expensive and technically complicated; therefore, up until the interwar period, colour photography remained the subject of experiments by professionals.

2. Luxury of Colour: Only for Professionals

Until the late 1930s, the circle of people in Latvia who could take colour photographs was very narrow: a few art photographers, large book and magazine publishers, and national culture and science institutions. Thus, the first to document Latvia in colours were guardians of cultural history: ethnographers and archaeologists. These images were taken almost exclusively for professional purposes and remained at the disposal of scientists.

In 1924–1931, the Board of Monuments organised ethnographic expeditions to ten districts of Latvia to research traditional rural life. The ethnographers collected material items and also made visual notes of the items' original environment: farmsteads and artisan workshops. They also documented various farm jobs. To ensure scientific precision of these records, they took photos and later used them in their research.

Yet, even for a major institution such as the Board of Monuments, taking colour photographs was not standard practice but a rare exception. Of the over 53,000 Cultural Heritage Board photo negatives, only 20 are in colour. In the 1928 expedition to Cēsis and Madona Districts, photographer Matīss Pluka, Board of Monuments photo laboratory employee, experimented by taking 7 open-air autochrome images. Today they are considered valuable rarities.

Archaeology has used photography since the late 19th century, but it gained a permanent place alongside excavation plans drawn by hand in the 1920s. The introduction of photography significantly facilitated documentation of artefacts and soil layers. Several hundreds of diapositives, taken by State Historical Museum director Valdemārs Ģinters, during archaeological expeditions at Mežotne Hillfort (1938–1940) are unique examples of the use of colour photography in science.

3. Colourful Moments of Freedom

A new and dynamic era for colour photography began in the late 1930s. A crucial factor was the invention of photographic film and small cameras that allowed taking high quality colour images in any environment. In Latvia, the most popular – the "people's cameras" – were German Welta-Gucki and the Ikonta cameras made by Zeiss Ikon costing 40–50 lats. The cameras produced by Leica were even simpler to use; they were advertised as the best for capturing true colours. However, few people could afford them: the price – 309 lats – was equal to three months' wages for a factory worker or six months' for a farmhand.

Advertising and fashion industries were the first to use the innovations of the "revolution of colour photography". But in 1938, when the most modern cameras entered the Latvian market, taking photos became popular as a hobby. Diapositives from private collections give us unique insight into the daily life of ordinary families, into their care-free moments of celebration or leisure. Unlike ads, magazine photos, or art photos, these private images were intended for the family, other relatives, and friends. These photos stand out with their natural look and composition, which gives them additional authentic value.

The growth of colour photography coincided with the last years of independent Latvia. These images captured scenes from family life and vistas of towns and countryside and reveal the cultural environment of Latvia on the verge of World War II. Later, colour diapositives were also used to document the destruction of war and tough wartime life.

4. Colour Photography in the Post-War Period

The use of colour photography was hindered and reduced during World War II and Soviet occupation. With rare exceptions, colour images were again taken by professionals and photography enthusiasts only in the 1960s.

In the latter half of the 1950s during the political "thaw", improved photo and printing techniques allowed for colour postcards and occasionally magazine photos that depicted common scenes from Soviet cities and the countryside. Photography enthusiasts soon followed – as a technical challenge, as a hobby, and as a mission to document the changing environment. For instance, long-time photographer at the Latvian SSR History Museum, Arvīds Gusars, spent much of his life documenting cultural heritage. But in the 1960s, he purposefully started to take colour photos of both changing and permanent aspects of the Latvian cultural scene.

Colour photography was also used to polish the image of the Soviet regime. This goal was achieved by depicting Communist Party events, portraits of "socialist heroes", and the masses. These images personified the entire ideological spectrum: building the new system, its achievements, "friendship of the nations", and "indissoluble unity under the leadership of the Party".

Quite late in comparison with the rest of the world, in the 1960s and 1970s, colour photos began to be used to capture daily life in Latvia. Sports and cultural events and various unwritten traditions depicted aspects of public life the Soviet regime was not fully able to penetrate. Both the chosen event and its captured images signified changes in the lives of Soviet citizens and in society in general; they showed change in the spheres of the permitted and forbidden.

Lack of photo accessories and quality problems affected photography in Latvia for a long time after WWII. Soviet-produced cameras were available, but colour film could be bought only in the 1960s. More difficult was purchase of equipment needed to process and copy photos. There were few photo laboratories. Thus, photos were often processed at home or people worked with diapositives that did not need copying. The distorted images from a slide projector at a private gathering or a lecture are still strongly associated with the world of colour photography in 1960s–1980s Latvia.

Images from the late Soviet era bear important witness, but this cultural heritage is rarely studied. They show life in the USSR in all its diversity. Like diaries or private correspondence that contain reflections and problems that weren't talked about publicly, family photos uncover a reality we rarely see in censored newspapers, statistical data, and documentation of the Soviet period.