

Power and Love. Archaeological, Ethnographic and Contemporary Crowns in Latvian Culture

Crowns in the Archaeology Collection

The archaeology collection of the National History Museum of Latvia contains the oldest preserved crowns used in the territory of Latvia from the late 6th–early 7th century to the end of the 17th century. Although the number of crowns and their fragments recovered from archaeological excavations is impressive, these finds don't reflect the wide range of crowns used in various regions over the centuries. Crowns made before the 17th century are mostly found in burials. According to the pre-Christian tradition, the deceased were buried with their most important possessions, including crowns. They are found in women's and girls' burials, sometimes even several crowns together, indicating their distinctive symbolic significance not present in more recent times. Crowns are also found in male burials – as gifts or offerings, together with other female adornments. Sometimes crowns are also present in deposits, but only individual crown parts have been found in settlements.

Lying in the ground for centuries, the crowns have been subjected to various damage. They have arrived at the museum disintegrated, in fragments or partially crumbled, and have long since lost their original appearance. It is only thanks to in-depth research and the extensive work of restorers that these items can be displayed in an exhibition. With meticulous

work, the crowns can be restored to their ancient form and, to some extent, to their visual appearance; also the nuances of their craftsmanship can be explored.

The oldest crowns in Latvia are made by local artisans from imported bronze alloy. Over time, other materials – leather, wood, wool, linen, tin, glass, sometimes also silver and horsehair – were introduced as crown-making materials. Various techniques were used: forging, casting, engraving, carving, weaving, braiding and embroidery. Crowns can be divided into several groups according to the materials and techniques used. However, even the best-preserved and best-researched ancient crown cannot provide complete answers to the many questions about how they were made and used, so each visitor is invited to use his or her imagination and interpretation.

Until the 16th century, crowns used in the Latvian territory represented a local phenomenon. Similar types and shapes of headdresses as well as the custom of burying them along with the dead are not found in wider European territories.

In the crowns of the oldest and newest periods, we see the link to earlier traditions in the form of individual elements; however, it is not possible to trace the continuity of the tradition. The types of headdresses, their visual appearance and craftsmanship reflect the perception of beauty and traditions that changed and developed over time.

Crowns in the Ethnography Collection

For more than a century, the National History Museum of Latvia Ethnography Department's collection of clothing and textiles has provided the basis for understanding the traditional clothing used in the territory of Latvia.

One of the functions of clothing is to demonstrate the wearer's status, and this is where women's headdresses play a special role. The variety and splendour of unmarried girls' headdresses – crowns and headbands – is outstanding, with bridal crowns as a special category. Although these crowns were made and used mainly in the 19th century, they link to an earlier tradition that existed in the 18th century and continued thereafter. As time passed and the tradition lost its original significance, crowns gradually ceased to be worn and became relics kept as mementoes. These items have arrived at the museum in various ways. The basis of the collection was formed as a result of purposeful gathering and documentation of traditional heritage, which began in the Riga Latvian Society in the late 19th century. This work was successfully continued by systematic expeditions organized by the Monuments Board in the 1920s–1940s. The items' information sheets, supplemented by drawings and photographs, contain also stories about the making and use of crowns. Since the 16th century, there were new trends within the common European

cultural space which gradually affected the clothing and headdresses used in the territory of modern Latvia. As a result, the spread of similar headdresses covered an increasingly wider area and, unlike the crowns found in archaeological excavations, they no longer represented a narrowly local tradition.

Similarly to earlier periods, the 19th-century crowns were made by local artisans – both those practising their trade in the countryside and those working in workshops in the city.

The predominant technique of a part of the headdresses is embroidery on fabric or metalworking techniques appropriate to the characteristics of the crown.

The materials used were wool, linen, silk, cotton fabrics and threads, glass beads of various shapes and colours, metal, including silver-plated copper, wood, cardboard and paper, sometimes horsehair, brocade, ribbons and mirrored glass. Crowns made during this period are characterized by intricate combinations of materials.

The chemicals within these materials have reacted with each other over time, the crowns have become brittle and their decorations have lost their expression.

Only a long process of research and restoration enables us for the first time to present in this exhibition such a large number of headdresses from our ethnographic collection.

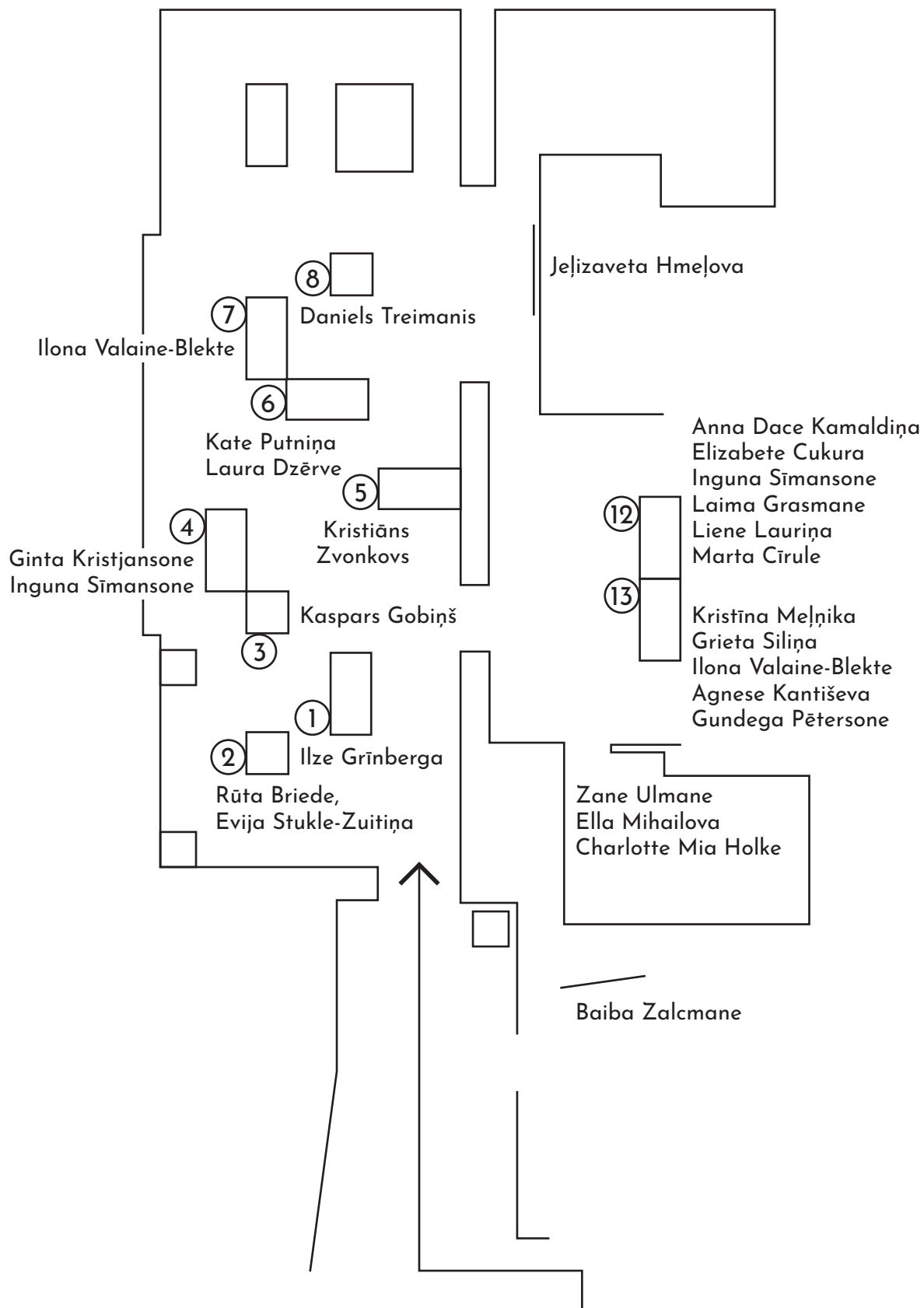
Contemporary Crowns

Although wearing a crown is a part of the cultural heritage, it is not unfamiliar today. The historical crown, whose use and symbolic meaning are still largely unknown, challenges us and raises questions, encouraging us to seek explanations in a way that relates to current events. Shimmering in its splendour and playful in its mysteriousness, it invites us to discuss tradition, values and cultural standards, our stereotypes and boundaries, sometimes even creating a somewhat uncomfortable vibe. By initiating a valuable and educational cooperation, the National History Museum of Latvia has given a powerful creative spark to the Art Academy of Latvia team.

A year of intensive research led to the creation of a contemporary crown collection; the initial idea grew into a prominent exposition at the international design fair *Salone Satellite* in Milan. The exhibition *Power and Love* features crowns whose stories manage to convey a contemporary message with the most precise accuracy and the most surprising connection to history.

The concept of the contemporary crown collection is based on a varied

interpretation of content to ensure the interaction of the archaeological and ethnographic headdresses with the contemporary world and its current issues. As one might guess, the gender affiliation of this garment has emphasized the need to talk about women's roles. It raises the question of whether modern women's freedom is just an illusion. To what extent have the abilities and powers attributed to women been transformed into an overwhelming burden of responsibility, which has historically formed an almost insurmountable threshold? The story of the crown broadens, including both the characteristics of a Latvian – the wisdom and problems – as well as the global perspective. The authors of the contemporary headdresses have each created a story, continuing both the crown's and our common narrative. The crown is not a closed circle, but rather a path we walk with respect and attention. This path reveals the depth and richness of our culture, at the same time stirring interest in the possibilities of interpreting its historical artefacts and inviting us to a conversation, first and foremost within ourselves.



Baiba Zalcmāne. *Fusion*
2023. Digital tapestry, woven on TC2
loom (digital manually-operated Jacquard
loom), polyester, cotton, merino wool

Putting a crown on your head impacts
your thoughts and has a calming effect.
The crown takes the mind back in time,
creating flashes of historical events and
national memory.

It creates a solemn feeling and – as an
important ethnographic heritage – a sense
of exaltation.

①

Ilze Grīnberga. *Meadow Crown*
2022. Original technique, metal wire,
polyester thread

A crown grown into a meadow symbolizes
a culture of an ancient folk that shares
with a meadow its ability to regenerate
and strive upwards. The crown is a part of
the meadow; like folk culture, it is rooted in
our nature.

The image of the bentgrass growing from
the crown creates associations with
an ancient culture and its mythical
sunken castle, burdened by time and
abandonment. However, like all things
alive, also folk culture is cyclical.

There is a sense of the return of the light,
for such peace can only precede a new
birth.

The Light was summoned
And the Light dawned –
The Castle of Light rose up!

②

Rūta Briede, Evija Stukle-Zuitiņa.
My Soup Bride
2023. Bones, copper and brass wire

Eat up the meat, wedding guests,
Pour the soup into your bosom.
May the soup flow merrily,
Along your belly and into your boots.

Times come and go, but a proper beef
soup is always a good value; a decent wife
knows how to feed the whole family. The
crown, made of bones left over from beef
broth, is an ironic message about cooking,
one of the most stereotypical duties that
are associated with wives-to-be.

The bones are held together with gold-
and silver-plated wires, the ends of which
are decoratively curled; its volume and
metallic elements are a reference to the
traditional tinsel wedding crown, the most
sumptuous adornment of the future soup
cook.

③

Kaspars Gobiņš. *Prison of Thought*
2022. Mixed media, concrete, wire

The crown as a symbol of mental health.
This work reflects the frequent sensations
of being trapped in our thoughts, stuck
in a routine that can turn into a self-
made prison. The crown creates a feeling
of depression and isolation. Wearing it
isolates the wearer from the outside world,
makes the person unable to think and see
beyond the walls of the crown, and leaves
them feeling weighed down by the walls of
this self-made prison of thought.

④

Ginta Kristjansone. *Spīters Crown*
2023. Mixed media, peat, metal

A Spīters crown is declared missing. Its exact appearance is unknown. Based on the evidence, the Spīters might be found in Kurzeme, Gavieze. According to witness statements, it might have similarities with the tinsel crown of Southern Kurzeme. So far, the investigation has resulted in only one indisputable piece of evidence: a brocade ribbon used in the Spīters. The investigation is ongoing. The artist offers her version of the Spīters crown, a fragment of which – a brocade ribbon – was possibly found in a block of peat. Peat is a metaphor for something forgotten, long-preserved and precious, while staples hold together the evidence from which assumptions, theories and narratives are born. The layers of peat are perpendicular to the Spīters' fragment. The modern-day people are relentless; they want to conclude from the past what is there to be concluded and find what is still to be found.

Inguna Sīmansone. *Go Get Some Dill!*
2019. Original technique, dried broadleaf chervil

"Go get some dill!" they said. And so I did because I like dill; I stayed a long time in the dill patch. This summer, I don't have any dill. I will tell them to say: "Go get some chervil!" And I will go because chervils have such a sweet smell. I say this because I really don't have any dill, I haven't planted them this year. And when there is no dill, I might have to go get some chervil instead. It will be the right time to taste them.

⑤

Kristiāns Zvonkovs. *Pain of the Forest*
2023. TIG welding, chainsaw chain

If one tree is felled, it has no particular impact. If a whole forest is cut down, nature freezes and in an instant, a hundred years' worth of value is turned into money. Is it worth it? This crown shows a tree's feelings when a saw touches its flesh. When worn, the touch of the crown draws attention to the responsibility of each wearer to preserve and protect trees. It encourages people to consider their role in preserving nature, urging them to become advocates of sustainable practices and guardians of the environment.

⑥

Kate Putniņa. *Stranger*
2023. Mixed media, beads, velvet, cardboard

When emigrating, Latvians took with them ethnographic textiles, national costumes, and crowns. They keep them and try to maintain the Latvian spirit, sometimes even in a country whose culture is very different. But how realistic is it not to get overwhelmed by foreign experiences? How much does the new environment influence and weave into everyday life and ethnography? The work was inspired by the Latvian colony Vārpa, established in the Brazilian jungle by several thousand Latvian settlers at the beginning of the 20th century. The new environment had a very different climate, flora and, of course, culture. The crown depicts the artist's feeling of emigrants trying to preserve their roots in the face of the inevitable change.

Laura Dzērve. *Crown of Responsibility*
2022. Bullet casings, brass wire

Nowadays, women take on a lot of responsibility, whereas men tend to avoid it. At times, this responsibility becomes a heavy burden. Women even go to war to protect their country. However heavy the burden of responsibilities, a woman's strength is incredible – she holds her head up and her back straight.

⑦

Ilona Valaine-Blekte. *Crown of Mother's Mother*
2023. Mixed weaving and embroidery techniques, linen, cotton, acrylic

There goes our sister, all white
As if covered in snow.
It's not the white snow,
It's our sister's virtue.

The wisdom of mothers and wives, their experience and knowledge, wordless heritage, feelings and power – the crown of mother's mother is a fragile testimony to the weight of ancient knowledge whose application is eternal; it is the power and strength of the ancient heritage, the synergy of knowledge and skills. The crown of mother's mother perpetuates the memory of the radiant and wise women we meet on our life's path and the value of these interactions. Making a bright crown brings more light; wearing a white crown brings light to myself and others.

⑧

Daniels Treimanis. *Undying Flowers*
2023. Mixed media

A significant part of our society doesn't even realise how many disposable plastic items we use daily. Our fast-paced life forces people to ignore the impact on the future. The widespread and increasing presence of plastics in almost every aspect of our lives has had profound and far-reaching consequences, affecting our environment, nature and even our health. This work urges us to think about the future of contemporary lifestyle by symbolically showing the ancient floral crown transformed into a crown of plastic waste.

Jelizaveta Hmeļova. *Prayer*
2023. Digital tapestry, woven on TC2 loom (digital manually-operated Jacquard loom), cotton, polyester

The combination of the Virgin Mary and the traditional maiden speaks of two equally important images in Latvian culture: a symbol representing Christianity and the image of a woman we recognize from the traditional culture. By combining both these images with her self-portrait, the artist reflects on the multi-layered nature of our culture that encompasses religions, traditions and contemporary selfies. Weaving adds significant semantic meaning as this craft has been important to Latvian culture.

Anna Dace Kamaldiņa. *Centre of Attention*
2023. Mosaic, mirror, styrofoam

As an element of beautification, a crown attracts attention. It mirrors itself and reflects us. When asking someone "How are you?" we often just want to tell them about ourselves. This crown of mirrors lives within each one of us – it is important to acknowledge to what extent we are only interested in ourselves when we are seemingly interested in others. The Centre of Attention crown literally and figuratively reflects on the egocentric nature of the modern age of selfies.

Elizabete Cukura. *Heaviness*
2023. Stainless steel

It often feels that one can't change what has been done. When you're not happy with what you did a while ago, remember that there's always a chance to do things differently. The crown symbolizes the burdens we carry in our life. Not only the choices we make but also the collective decisions of our society and humanity as a whole. When you put this crown on your head, your face is slightly covered, although the visibility is still good. This openwork and delicate yet weighty metal crown depicts the positive view of the future in every human being as a chance to see further, while at the same time feeling the weight of daily decisions. We usually perceive heaviness as something negative, but in this case, it points to the ambiguity of what has already been accomplished and accumulated, it urges us to realise how much we already carry, both collectively and individually, and how much more we dare to carry.

Inguna Sīmansone. *Hello, Melancholy...*
2023. Embroidery, fish trap

It's a trap for oneself. The glittering crown is just imaginary happiness, sometimes imposed by society's norms; it's an ostentatious beauty. Chasing this fantasy, you find yourself entangled in nets. Disappointment, doubt, inferiority and depression are a trap created by one's fantasies and delusions.

Laima Grasmane. *You Can't Run Away from Us*
2022. Knitted fabric, bobbin thread

The work tells of a woman's fate. The ethnographic mask is a tribute to emancipation and the progress that has been made towards women's rights. The fate of the woman with a crown is already sealed. She will become a wife and a mother; she will be taking care of a farm and wearing the crown of her native region. But what if she wants to determine her own destiny and choose what kind of woman she wants to be? This path is hard and full of sacrifices – she will lose the wealth that life had already promised her and she will lose her good reputation.

Liene Lauriņa. *A One-Off Crown*
2022. Original technique, disposable paper plates

This work reflects the transience of today's relationships and the modern notion of marriage. Today, one gets married many times; a wedding crown is a disposable object. You take a paper plate, fold it quickly and have your wedding, but if the marriage fails, you throw the old crown away and make a new one. This crown is made of disposable paper plates, which embody the superficiality and "fast food flavour" of modern relationships. Like picnic plates still unstained, this wedding crown has the white colour of purity and promise.

Marta Cīrule. *Crown of Stagnation*
2023. Mixed media

The rusty bucket for one's head with the narrow openings for eyes symbolises stagnation caused by the unwillingness to leave the comfort zone and the limitations to one's perspective. Rust represents the corrosion and decay that occur when we resist growth and change. This crown-like object in the form of a reversed bucket shows the wearer's outside world in a narrow and fragmented way.

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Kristina Melņika. *Head Full of Beads*
2023. Embroidery, glass beads, velvet

When a Latvian woman's wisdom shines like glittering glass beads, a sumptuous crown is superfluous. The woman's head, lavishly embroidered with beads, symbolises the wisdom and wealth of spiritual knowledge that a sage Latvian woman radiates. Wisdom is the wealth and luxury of our people. The crown with no beads depicts the urge of intellectually rich people to be modest and not to show off with flashy trinkets. The glass bead embroidery was inspired by the sumptuous crowns of Nīgrande and Krūte.

Grieta Siliņa. *Stork's Nest*
2023. Mixed media, steel, aluminium, honeysuckle branches

This crown is a stylised stork's nest featuring birds' leg bands engraved with various messages. For a migratory bird, the nest is only a temporary home since it spends its entire life on the move. Reflecting on the aspiration to go to a different place, bird banding is a human way of intervening in natural processes by tracking and studying the migration of birds. Texts on the leg bands include: holy bird; not holy; storks eat children; home sweet home; this is not Africa; nowhere better than home; frost will come and frost will bite; snow will come and snow; storks don't deliver babies; St. Stork; let's fly home etc.

Ilona Valaine-Blekte. *I Grew up Strong*
2023. Embroidery, wool, cardboard

White came the maiden,
As if covered in snow.
She is not covered in snow,
It's the white of her virtues.

Against the white background, the black descriptions of virtues stand out – it is the modern view of morality. The crown symbolises the ideal which contemporary humans would like to see in perfect whiteness. As the neon confession states, the aspiration for the white ideal unites us; however, everyone always has the opportunity to be as they really are.

Agnese Kantiševa. *Mother Wept and Daughter Wept*
2023. Disposable paper tissues, marker, cardboard box

In traditional Latvian culture, a maiden's greatest pride is her crown. A lot of effort has gone into making the crown; it represents a maiden's dignity, virtue and good reputation. At the same time, she is no stranger to the desire to be seen and chosen.

However, research and compilation of Latvian folk songs about the crown reveal that it is also a trap, which most likely guarantees a life of endless tears, hard work and disappointment. The songs also tell about young lads' trickery in stealing a girl's crown*. If unguarded, the crown ends up shamed by gossiping people – like the unwed girls whose crowns are never taken.

This crown is an installation of tissues wet with tears; the tissues feature folk song lyrics about weeping after parting with one's crown.

* In Latvian folklore, the crown symbolises the maiden's reputation and virginity.

Gundega Pētersone. *Sock Who Climbed to Heaven*
2023. Knitted fabric, wool

The work reflects the artist's passion for knitting socks – from monochrome items to socks with delicate patterns, to 21st-century interpretations. This time, the sock that traditionally warms our feet has jumped up a notch: inspired by the 19th-century Kurzeme sock patterns and knitting traditions, it has grown into an interpretation of the Kurzeme crown. The crown invites us to think about roots, continuity and knitting as an expression of our power.

Zane Ulmane. *Try on the Crown, Don't Step on the Rake*
2023. Mixed media, readymade objects, six crowns on stands

They say it's hard not to step on the rake in a relationship. Would it make things easier if the potential bride had her true character all laid out on her forehead or if she wore a crown that defined her? What is it really like? Does marrying a wealthy bride necessarily mean a rich and old wife? A spoilt rich mummy's daughter? Or maybe she can be a self-sufficient woman? Who is this ever-present female? A helpful dimwit, someone longing for a sugar daddy, a nurse, or perhaps a true serotonin provider? What does it mean, she lifts you up? Does it imply that life will be easy and uplifting with her, or maybe that she, like a true country girl, knows how to slaughter a chicken and stuff a pillow with its feathers, but beyond all that she is just a silly goose? If she's a scatterbrain, does it mean all dresses and flowers? Perhaps she's a real fashion connoisseur or even an artist? Will a light bearer inspire and support you, or on the contrary – demand a regular recharge? While the screwed-up one... yep, well, just as you thought...

Ella Mihailova. *Blow, Wind!*
2023. Mixed media, linen, plastic, bottle caps, yoga mat

The crown in the form of a bottle cap is a reference to the Latvians' relationship with alcohol. This is illustrated not only by European statistics on alcohol consumption, where Latvia ranks first, but also by well-known male images in our culture, such as Uldis in Rainis' drama *Blow, Wind!* or Edgars in Blaumanis' short story *Wader in the Bog*. The day after a good dose of liquor is hard and filled with remorse; therefore the artist invites us to rest our aching backs on the yoga mat and reflect.

Charlotte Mia Holke. *Let's Crown Latvians' Diversity – Join in!*
2022. RealityCapture software

The crowns in the museum belong to the nation and its tradition. In folk costume, they represent the origin and expressions of identity and culture. Historically, crowns were worn on specific occasions and according to the custom: they were worn by unmarried women and brides during their weddings. The traditional crown undeniably represents the wearer's place of origin, material wealth, national identity and gender. In the form of digital filters, this work calls us to deconstruct traditional preconceptions and role models by crowning everyone, regardless of age, gender, skin colour or creed. The work shows Latvia as a country of diversity worth being proud of.

Crowns in Poetry

How is a crown relevant today? It is still worn by women: they weave floral wreaths at Midsummer, wear crowns at Song Festivals, use them with their stage costumes as statements and create them in workshops for their own enjoyment. But what do men think? Do they even notice those crowns? Do they see them just as echoes of another era and another system of values? Do crowns still mark a specific area in the male-female relationship? In preparation for the exhibition, the National History Museum of Latvia invited five poets of different generations to seek answers to these questions and dedicate a poem to the crown. After looking at collections of archaeological and ethnographic crowns, reading records of ethnographic expeditions and hearing the researchers' stories and explanations,

several poets exclaimed: "How interesting, I had never come to think of that!" And we thought, "Of course! It would be unusual if you had already been pondering about it!" Five poets' impressions after viewing the museum's collection have transformed into lines of poetry. These poems do not speak of the crown as a tangible reality, neither in the form of the Midsummer floral wreath, the Song Festival crown, nor in any other material form. This poetry reveals the crown in its abstract and symbolic form. In five different ways, it demonstrates that archaic layers of meaning still permeate our perspective and evaluation of the world. The male voice in this exhibition is represented by Eduards Aivars, Andris Kalnozols, Ilmārs Šlāpins, Ivars Šteinbergs and Krišjānis Zeļģis.