

Monuments by the Sculptor Kārlis Zemdega (1894–1963). The 1930s.

Laila Bremša, *Latvian Academy of Art*

Abstract. The article deals with the most important monuments by the sculptor Kārlis Zemdega (1894–1963) created in the 1930s, commemorating the victims of World War I and Independence Battles. Monuments are found in urban space of the following Latvian towns – Rauna (1933), Džūkste (1935), Rūjiena (1937), Talsi (1938–1996) and Dobeles (1940–1996). The monuments are analysed with the comparative method, including them in the context of Western European and Latvian sculpture's development. Symbolic and allegoric message, laconic compositions and formal qualities inscribe these monuments in the neo-classicist trend of the 1st half of the 20th century; there are also neo-romantic elements and possibly some modernist impulses from the 1930s. Monuments are situated in the spatial environment for which they have been conceived, allowing a view from different perspectives in line with the artist's initial idea.

Keywords: monument, sculpture, Zemdega.

Monumental sculpture is a kind of art that allows artists and their contemporaries – commissioners of public works – to immortalise socially important ideas in compositions of artistic forms based on personal experience and situated in public space. In Latvian art history, the first flourishing of monumental sculpture is related to the 1920s and 1930s when monuments and memorial sites were arranged to commemorate the victims of World War I and Independence Battles. Already in 1919 Riga Brethren Cemetery Committee was established; later it also organised design and construction works of the memorial ensemble, completed in 1936 [1]. Project competitions for Riga Freedom Monument organised from 1922 to 1930 as well as the construction of the Monument itself (finished in 1935) had a wide public resonance and greatly influenced the development of monumental sculpture [2]. Over two decades, many monuments dedicated to the victims of World War I and Independence Battles were set up throughout Latvia; they were initiated by various non-governmental organisations and largely funded by donations of the people.

Many of these monuments were created by the sculptor Kārlis Zemdega (Cīrava Parish, 7 April 1894 – 9 November 1963, Riga) during a decade of intensive creative work. One should note that another large-scale, significant work by Zemdega – the poet Rainis' Memorial in Rainis Cemetery (1934) that could be regarded as his masterpiece, was also made during this period. The sculptor emerged as the most pronounced representative of neo-classicism in the Latvian sculpture of the time, sometimes including the formal elements of Art Déco and romantic overtones in his sculptures. The artist graduated from the Sculpture Master Studio headed by Konstantīns Rončevskis (1875–1935) at the Latvian

Academy of Art in 1927 and then perfected his granite working skills with the sculptor Burkards Dzenis (1879–1966), also making study trips to France, Italy, Finland, Sweden, Egypt and Greece. He worked in monumental sculpture, made also privately commissioned tombstones, figural compositions and portraits. Zemdega's pedagogical work at the Latvian Academy of Art after World War II (1947–1962) was also very significant.

The first attempt at monumental sculpture was his participation in the Riga Freedom Monument project competition in 1930. Zemdega's project „Es-dur” or „Kokle” was awarded the 3rd prize. Back then, the initial idea was to erect the Freedom Monument on the bank of Daugava River and Zemdega's design envisaged an architectonic base with a girl in a national costume with kokle (Latvian national musical instrument similar to harp/zither); the overall form could also be perceived as a sword embedded in earth. The sculptor's talent was noticed; he gained public recognition and received several important commissions in monumental and memorial sculpture.

Shortly after the competition representatives of Rauna Freedom Monument Committee approached the sculptor, and the upper part of the project was realised as a 9 m high sculpture carved of the local grey granite and placed in the centre of Rauna next to castle ruins (Fig. 1, 2) [3]. Initially the monument stood on a wide three-stepped terrace that was reduced later. Behind the monument on the side of the castle moat, a lane of 60 oaks was planted in 1932, commemorating the Rauna people who died in Independence Battles [5].

The shape of kokle is abstracted, enlarged and geometrical in Zemdega's composition; the girl's flattened figure and simplified volumes point towards the stylistics of archaic sculptures.



Fig. 1. Monument in Rauna (1933)
[Source: Photo by the author]



Fig. 2. Monument in Rauna (1933)
[Source: Photo by the author]

In 1936 art critic Jēkabs Strazdiņš wrote: “The symbolic Latvian maiden – embodiment on the spirit of Latvian folksongs, desires and dreams. The monument has the second meaning as well – in the times of war kokle transforms into a spear” [4]. The round sculpture in this case is meant largely for the frontal viewing, castle ruins and oaks serving as a background.

Two years later in 1935, the Džūkste monument to the victims of Independence Battles was opened in the park opposite the cemetery and church (Fig. 3–6) [6]. The church has been destroyed during World War II. The original composition of the monument consists of three major elements – the upper part of the three-stepped pedestal features a nude male figure, the middle part – an oval urn decorated with stars but the lower step – a female figure in the national costume. Zemdega’s idea envisaged the Genius of Glory with a sword and oak branch in his hand, standing next to the urn with the ashes of fallen heroes complemented with the allegorical image of Latvia mourning the victims. The monument stands on a small artificial mound and is meant to be viewed from all sides; this is important for the spatial conception of Zemdega’s monuments and he would develop this general scheme in the Dobeles monument to freedom.

From the stylistic viewpoint, the tendency towards maximum simplicity and geometry is important; the pedestal of sculptures consists of pure prism-shaped forms. The overall character of composition is very static; the Genius of Glory is spatially situated above the allegory of Latvia, thus expressing the idea of trans-historical glory and Latvia’s links with the earth. Volumes carved in grey granite are mutually contrasting, such as the simple motif of the classical urn against figural images. But the style of sculptures reveals a severe archaisation of the ideal-type figure – simplified forms, rough surfaces and emphatically decorative details. The allegorical figure of Latvia, similar to the „Kokle” girl in national costume, features generalised details of ethnographic garment; thus it is possible to state that Zemdega’s neo-classical style has been influenced also by the romantic note typical of the art of the 1930s.

Still the overall impression of the monument is that of harmony and good proportions, the size is also reasonable; relationships of the volume heights could possibly be disputed as well as the allegorical idea itself that has partly reduced the chance to see the object as harmonious from all points of observation.

In the Rūjiena monument to freedom opened in 1937 (later named as „The Tālava Trumpeter”; Fig. 7–8) the neo-classicist tendency towards simplicity is evident in the laconic single-figure



Fig. 3. Monument in Džūkste (1935)
[Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 5. Monument in Džūkste (1935)
[Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 4. Monument in Džūkste (1935)
[Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 6. Monument in Džūkste (1935)
[Source: photo by the author]

composition standing on a proportionate, prism-shaped pedestal of middle height. The height of the figure is 3 m, the overall height of the monument – 7.5 m. On the base there is inscription by the poet F. Mieriņš: “The Trumpeter had to die but Latvians did hear the message”. Initiators of this monument were the Naukšēni branch of the paramilitary organisation “Aizsargi” (Guardians) [3].

In this case, the romantic element takes over – the sculptor has given up the neo-classicist nude figure carrying symbolic or allegorical message,

replacing it with a sentinel in a dynamic position; the image is focused, attentive and purposeful in details (costume, shoes, thick hair, hands uneasily closed over the trumpet), creating a generalised, but still recognisably ancient image. With the elbows tightly pressed against the body and a cloth put over the right knee, the sculpture’s volume is made closed and compact; the smooth granite masses create a calm and resolute linear rhythm. As seen from the photographs of the time, the monument had initially stood out against a background of several small buildings.



Fig. 7. Monument in Rūjiena (1937)
„The Tālava trumpeter” [Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 8. Monument in Rūjiena (1937)
„The Tālava Trumpeter” [Source: photo by the author]

Freedom monument in Talsi created by Zemdega in 1938 was also a single-figure composition (Fig. 9). Laconic composition and compact masses are found here as well; the kneeling nude male figure with a kokle leaning against the pedestal can be interpreted as “a symbolic image expressing man’s eternal longing for freedom and independence” [4].



Fig. 9. Monument in Talsi (1938–1996)
“Kokle Player” [Source: <http://panoramio.com>]



Fig. 10. Monument in the forest
cemetery in Tukums (1940)
[Source: <http://zudusilatvija.lv/objects/object/5513>]

In 1938 the plaster model was created and the place was prepared in Leči hill where a capsule containing memorial message was buried according to traditions. In 1980 the monument commemorating the revolution of 1905–1907 by Olita Nigule emerged in this place, and decision was made to leave it where it stood. Till 1982 the model was kept in the sculptor’s studio; then it was moved to Talsi



Fig. 11. Monument in Dobele (1940)
[Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 13. Monument in Dobele (1940)
[Source: photo by the author]



Fig. 12. Monument in Dobele (1940)
[Source: www.dobele24.lv/zinas/48/105966]



Fig. 14. Monument in Dobele (1940)
[Source: photo by the author]

and carved in stone by the sculptor Vilnis Titāns only in 1996 and placed next to Ķēniņkalns (architect A. Lācis, gardener I. Metuzāle) [7].

Compositionally similar to Talsi monument is also Zemdega's monument in Tukums (Fig. 10), situated in the Forest Cemetery and dedicated to the victims of World War I. The soldier's figure is clothed in a uniform coat, not typical of Zemdega's interest in generalised, abstracted, seemingly trans-historical solutions but coincides with the tendency of concreteness characteristic of the time.

In 1940 the last of Zemdega's monuments to Independence Battles was opened – in the town of (Fig.11–14) Dobele.

According to the author, he wanted to develop the composition to be viewed from all sides evident in the Džūkste monument. Composition in Dobele is more laconic and compact, it consists of just two figures; additionally, in this case female figures are situated higher, and their backs are joint without any plastic intermediate element. The monument was blown up in 1950, restored in 1996 and the model was created by the sculptor Inta Berga. The monument should be considered a free interpretation of Zemdega's idea, as all the original parts had not survived. The placement has also been changed – after long public debates and discussions the place was chosen where a Soviet military monument (tank) had stood before.

The location of monuments in landscape largely conforms to Zemdega's opinions:

"To gain full expressive power, the monument should be harmonised with its surroundings and live in unison with them, the monument's power resounds in the harmony with nature that makes spectators to feel and understand the embodied idea more clearly" [8]. Both the monuments erected in the 1930s and those restored are placed in the chosen spatial environment that emphasises monuments' plastic qualities and offer the possibilities of perfect contemplation.

Monuments by Zemdega are simple and laconic; human figure dominates in the composition standing on a pedestal of reserved, geometric and pure forms. Material has been important for the artist, as he chose and considered it very carefully. Sculptures are carved in granite, with compact, closed volumes featuring modest, purposeful details. Forms are

mainly rounded and smoothed, arranged in clear and calm linear rhythms. The task of commemorating the victims of World War I and Independence Battles is realised mostly in allegorical or symbolic images with reserved, serious and focused emotional mood. The sculptor has created ideal-type images, either romanticised ones with freely interpreted ethnographic garments and décor or classical nude figures. The only exception is the Tukums soldier that has been made more specific in respect to the historical period. The artist's interest in symbolic and allegorical messages, the principle of idealisation and overall formal traits allow to include his output in the stylistic tendency of the 20th century neo-classicism. But certain formal features, like interest in abstracted, strong, rounded and even geometrical forms indicate points of intersection with the modernist trends of the 1930s, like New Objectivity.

References

1. **Apsītis, V.** *Brāļu kapi*. Rīga: Zinātne, 1995. p. 198.
2. **Apsītis, V.** *Kārlis Zāle*. Rīga: Liesma, 1988. p. 152.
3. **Likerts, V.** *Brīvības un kritušo pieminēkli 1920–1938*. Rīga: autora izdevums, 1938. p. 137.
4. **Strazdiņš, J.** Atbrīvošanas pieminēkli Latvijas laukos. *Brīvības pieminēkla gada grāmata / Brīvības pieminēkla komiteja*. Rīga: Brīvības pieminēkla komiteja, 1936. p. 169.
5. *Koklētāja* [tiešsaiste 09.02.2012.]. <http://www.raunai.lv/content/skatvietas/kokletaaja/>
6. **Zemdega, K.** *Letter of Kārlis Zemdega to art historian Svetlana Chervonnaya*. Information Centre of the Latvian Academy of Art, Z8–1, No. 77.
7. **Malēja, V.** *Koklētājs* [tiešsaiste 11.02.2012.]. http://www.talsitourism.lv/public/.../TIC/Talsi_pieminēklis%20Kokletajs.doc
8. Mūsu meistaru domas par monumentālo. *Māksla*, 1959, Nr. 3, p. 11.

INFORMATION ABOUT AUTHOR:

Laila Bremša, Dr. art., (b. 1956) is Associate Professor at the Art History Department of the Latvian Academy of Art. Teaches general course of Western European history of visual art and architecture in the 17th–19th century. Research work related to the history of Latvian professional sculpture.

Kopsavilkums. Raksts veltīts tēlnieka Kārļa Zemdegas (1894–1963) nozīmīgākajiem monumentālajiem pieminēkliem, kas tapuši 1930. gados un veltīti I. Pasaules karā un atbrīvošanās cīņās kritušo piemiņas iemūžināšanai un atrodas pilsētas vidē – Raunā (1933), Džūkstē (1935), Rūjienā (1937), Talsos (1938–1996), Dobelē (1940–1996). Pieminēkli tiek pētīti ar salīdzinošās metodes palīdzību, iekļaujot tos Rietumeiropas un Latvijas tēlniecības attīstības kontekstā. Simboliskais un alegoriskais vēstījums, kompozīciju lakoniskums un skulptūru formālās kvalitātes raksturo pieminēklus kā 20. gadsimta 1. puses neoklasicisma stilam atbilstošus, ar sava laika neoromantisma elementiem un, iespējams, ietekmēm no 1930. gadu modernisma atsevišķu virzienu principiem. Pieminēkli novietoti tiem paredzētā telpiskajā vidē, kas ļauj tos vispusīgi aplūkot, atbilstoši to autora sākotnējai iecerei.