

Capriccios by Laurent de Communes in the Scope of Emblematics of the Twenty-First Century

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At the very beginning of my article I wish to ask myself as well as my colleagues – researchers of emblems and developers of the field of emblematics – a rhetorical question: how long will the edifice of emblem-creation and emblem-deciphering, carefully built over the previous centuries on the foundations of Renaissance humanism, continue to be in existence? To what extent will it survive as a fruitful and rich field for research and how long will the synthesis of philosophical poetry, metaphor, paradox and miniature graphics keep urging us to meet for a creative exchange of ideas and discussion? My own observations made me entertain the idea of the modern society's ability, within a certain future timeframe, to think in the structural, morphological, semantic and artistic categories of classical emblems, to comprehend the interrelations between their components and to appreciate the philosophical capaciousness or situational precision of emblems.

Modern society is in constant intellectual development, but I am certain that I am not alone in my misgivings and worries about the humanities and a person's education heading towards a dead end or a crisis. With specialisation narrowing down, the angle of vision is reduced and so is the scope of the view; "homo universalis", whose greatest treasure was the awareness of European cultural values and the skills to handle them, belongs to the past. It is true that on our meetings special sections are set up to discuss the changing nature of the genre of emblems in the twentieth century because changes in life cause changes in the metalanguage of emblems. However, I am sure that many of us see the Lisbon treaty and similar treaties resulting in threat to classical education and inevitable decline of emblem culture. Extraction of individual elements from the classical emblem composition, subjectivism in derivation of emblems, as well as transformations of their graphical design give us the grounds to consider all of the above as operations with morphological artefacts in the methodology of the present-day postmodern culture. Yet, the newly created quality can hardly be compared to the attempt to revive the phoenix from the ashes, never rising to its former glory.

My subjective pessimistic evaluation may be fallacious and my article will manage to prove the opposite. However, to my great regret, the exception that I found myself and will analyse here is a one-off example of intellectualism in the general education levelling process. To our delight, this case demonstrates an educated individual's desire to regard transient values of society and the cultural and historical heritage with nostalgia, at the same time this individual masterfully synthesizes the components of the artistic content and form of emblems as well as literary text and creativity of a person who has enjoyed classical education.

My theme allows me to turn to the creativity of the modern French artist Laurent de Commynes (b. 1960, in Paris). A representative of an ancient French aristocratic family, he has the education of an artist and an architect. Over the last years he has mostly devoted himself to painting, design and applied art. When reading about the lives of famous French historical persons, he yielded to the fascination of historical place names and proper names that he found in books and other sources about the Baltics, Livonia and the Duchy of Courland (1561–1795). The temporal and geographical distance excited the artist's imagination. It was by sheer accident that L. de Commynes met Violette Palewski, Duchess of Sagan, descendant of the Talleyrand-Périgord family and the dukes of Courland. She was the last of this famous name, acquired by her ancestors through the marriage of the last reigning Duke of Courland Peter Biron's youngest daughter Dorothy to Edmond de Talleyrand, nephew of the prominent French diplomat Charles Maurice Talleyrand. After her retirement the venerable lady lived in an elegant Neoclassical palace – Chateau du Marais – near Paris and had invited the young artist to visit her on a spring day in 1999. They met in the Blue Salon, surrounded by the portraits of her aristocratic Courland ancestors, among them the most distinguished being the pictures of Duchess Dorothy and her daughter Dino. Duchess's talk had inflamed the artistic imagination so much that he was ready to go to the totally unknown Latvia in search of a glow of its lost glory.

On 23 February 2002, in a private letter to the author of the present article L. de Commynes wrote: 'I am a French painter who has made several trips in Courland, Livland and Estonia...to look for the remembrance of the Baltic barons and their lost world.'¹ The key to his speculations about the lost era and lost countries L. de Commynes had found in the novels by the Baltic German writer Hermann Keiserling and in *Le Coup de Grâce* by the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar. In the same letter the artist admits that during his travels around the Baltic states and visiting palaces, manors and historical ruins in shady parks he 'drew them in a lot of water colour sketches like a "Carnet de Voyage" of the "Grand Tour" time.'² Indeed, L. de Commynes's sensitive heart and artistic talent had opened the door for him to the life and conditions of the Baltic aristocracy so that he could admire it as an irrevocably gone and forgotten romantic world. His brush has created several tens of skilful and realistic water-colours with the images of Latvian and Estonian manor houses and parks, which give away an intellectual's nostalgic sadness over the pernicious nature of the twentieth century. Although it had democratised society, it had also irreversibly destroyed both the centuries-old class of aristocracy and the symbols of their material culture.

The artist describes his travel impressions in a literary imaginative form, capturing the fragments of bygone time and culture that had excited his artistic associations and metaphors. He writes: 'I have imagined some piranesian "Caprices" inspired by these ruined or neglected houses which prolong in the imaginary this memory travel. In fact, on these "caprices" I dreamed pictorially about the atmosphere of places, tragic substance of their history or the fantasy of a personage who lived here ... These exploratory trips were for me a kind of "pilgrimage to the ruins" in time and space of a post-soviet Europe who is re-discovering its past. On the same way as architects and painters on the "Grand Tour" reinvented by brush a mythic Italy. Built by Latvian and Estonian paysans for German

barons these vestiges of old Baltikum are interpreted by my French nostalgic – and I hope creative sensibility’.³ L. de Commynes started his trip to ancient Livonia and legendary Courland in July 1999, the dramatic final year of the twentieth century, visiting Latvia’s countryside and discovering ever new manors and carefully built castles. For centuries having been managed by the Baltic nobility, they were confiscated as a result of the agrarian reform of 1920 and survived to our day in different states of preservation. Coming across these witnesses of past glory and painting them, L. de Commynes can only exclaim: ‘Porticoes with flanking columns, overgrown gardens, and chipped cornices and coats-of-arms, I could only guess at this lost world when examining the photographs and trying to read between the lines. I had found it at last! I could feel it in my bones! This was the world that appealed to me, it was calling to me, it was waiting for me!’⁴

Where are the emblems or manifestation of a related genre? They appear in the next cycle of L. de Commynes’s works, dedicated to Courland and the Baltics, under a new, untraditional, Italian name: *capriccio*. Borrowed from the Latin word *capra* – goat (chamois), the genre designation was used in the Renaissance Italy for a lively, unexpected, surprising literary or musical composition, rich in fantastical elements. L. de Commynes had consciously chosen the name for the genre, on the basis of the similarity between the unforeseeably capricious behaviour of a sheep and the unceasingly changing nature of art. His distanced ironic reaction to the past, which reveals only violence and scars, is the only method of artistic creativity that an artist-romantic, disposed to melancholy and intellectually dramatized perception, will eventually arrive at. For the exhibition at the Latvian Museum of Architecture in Riga the author had chosen to call his *capriccio* cycle of emblems ‘Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary’ (2004), specially designed, rich in water-colours and literary essays.

This work, remarkable for the images and the text, revives centuries’ old traditions of *capriccio* series. Because of the closeness in terms of the genre, emotionality and stylistics, it can be associated with the names of such outstanding painters and graphical artists as Jacques Callot, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Francisco Goya. And, since L. de Commynes’s *capriccios* are virtuoso water-colour miniatures, their excellent quality and exquisite details with a bias towards creating subjective symbols remind of the grand master Salvatore Dali’s style, packed with caprices and extravagance.

As for composition, L. de Commynes’s emblematic water-colour drawings present ornamented squares with a circle inside it. That is, each drawing consists of a decorative frame and the conceptual, thematic centre. By the encircled main thematic carrier – concentration of symbolic details – the artist nurtures the *tondo* form, which is rarely used today. It helps the viewer to concentrate on the essential, gain an insight of the composition and focus on meaningful details: heraldry, grotesquely transformed fragments of architecture and expressive aristocracy everyday objects and manor environment. This peculiarity makes L. de Commynes’s drawings look even more like traditional emblems.

Colour-wise, the poignant miniatures elegize the disintegration of the Baltic nobility and their manors in the twentieth century, just like the popular Renaissance and Baroque *vanitas* genre works, which reflected life, nature and all that exists in a melancholic key of the philosophy of imminent extinction. Basically, the stylistics and emotionality of L. de Commynes’s *capriccio* is comparable to the sombre mood of Albrecht Dürer’s copper engraving *Melancholia I* (1515) when at the very end of the cycle the bygone Duchy of Courland is compared to Arcadia: *Et in Courlandia ego*, whose past charm he, like a pilgrim, had tried to divine and capture during his ‘Grand Tour’. L. de Commynes describes his attitude in the following way: ‘Pilgrimage, yes, that is exactly the right word! I had, in fact, devoted three or four successive summers of my life to making a pilgrimage to the ruins and sorrows of a sunken

world. And with each return, I had the feeling of plunging even deeper into melancholy, of exploring its complexity and the power of transformation it can have on one's own personal development.⁵

On the occasion of Latvia's joining the European Union, in June-September 2004 the artist entertained Latvia's audience with his exhibition of his extraordinary compositions in the Museum of Architecture. Let us turn to the thematically most important emblematic *capriccios* by L. de Commynes, comprising a cycle of 17 water-colours and entitled 'Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary' (2004). All of the drawings display the parts that are characteristic of classical emblem



Fig. 1. Guard Pavilion at Ungurmuiža.

composition: *Motto*, *Pittura* and *Epigramm*. The motto on a separate page of literary commentary performs the defining function by naming the object, indicating the toponym (e.g. *Guard Pavilion at Ungurmuiža*, Fig. 1), or hinting at a certain historical event or a metaphorical situation (e.g. *A Night of War at Mežotne* or *Winter's Tale at Rundāle*, Fig. 3). The motto encourages the reader to mentally create a bridge to the particular historical situation, imagine the life stories of the former owners, or yield to meditative associations about the sad decline of bygone glory. The epigram text is usually offered in the form of a philosophical essay with an unpretentious didactic résumé or an invitation for the reader to make the suggested elegiac conclusion. In his talk with L. de Commynes the author of the present article found out that the order of texts and the respective emblematic drawings in the collection

partly reflects the geography of the artist's travels and also forms a subjective mosaic of the twentieth century cataclysms.

By sorting and selecting L. de Commynes's emblematic drawings, the author of the article creates his own row of thematic hierarchy which he considers necessary for the observation of the principles of visibility, inner logical structure as well as evolution of form and content in this publication. This is why the first under consideration is the emblem of the Eleja manor and the historical associations that it evokes: *Project for Tea Pavilion in Elley* (Fig. 2). The French artist has found it a rich source for contemplation.

Its title *Project for Tea Pavilion in Elley* is placed in the capriccio's angle, like a crumpled sheet of paper caught in the decorative metal-forged gate of the park. The epigram provides information on the educated Count Christof Johann Friedrich von Medem, called Jeanneau, and his skills and devotion to drawing and collecting architectural designs of manors and parks. This is why the short literary miniature, by its imaginary oriental, Crimean or some other southern atmosphere which the owners of the manor would have wished to transport to their humid and shady northern country, epitomizes the very same longing that used to urge the wealthy North-Europeans to make their once-in-a-lifetime 'Grand Tour' to Italy, Greece or Switzerland for the sake of their love to ancient culture and desire of knowledge. The model of the Tea Pavilion, placed on a pedestal and among the artist's brushes, sketches and objects of the tea ceremony, hints at the unlimited possibilities of the aristocracy to form their environment and, in an elegiac form, contemplates the end of the Birons, dukes of



Fig. 2. Project for Tea Pavilion in Elley.

Courland, when the Russian Empress Catherine II's policy resulted in the integration of the independent duchy in the Russian Empire in 1795 and the Duke's family had to emigrate. Since Duke Peter Biron's wife, Duchess Dorothea von Medem, came from the owners of the Eleja manor, the Tea Pavilion's function was changed to commemorate this connection. It was rebuilt as Duchess Dorothea's memorial pavilion and the marble sculpture of Dorothea was transferred in 1863 from the Jelgava Villa Medem park to the pavilion. During World War I the witnesses of the duchy's glory suffered the next backblow of fortune when the Eleja palace was burnt down, the pavilion and the artwork, the duchess's sculpture, were damaged.

Today the ruins of the palace and the pavilion testify to the past events, and the artist makes an exalted entry in his diary which serves as a foreword to the poetic *capriccio* collection: 'The gap in the oak trees leading to the ruined pavilion of Eleja ... all relate the same story. The obsessive presence of the past already lurks in the shade of the branches, and it permeates the pilgrim walking through the grove.'⁶ The same mood reigns in the epigram: 'The castle has vanished and in the park, the breach in the oak trees only leads to a single but moving fragment of the former splendour of Elley – the sumptuous estate of the Medem family. It is precisely because neglect and humidity has almost turned it into a corpse that I wanted to travel back in time and imagine what the atmosphere was like during the period when this fragment was an attractive Project submitted to the owners of the domain. The architect drew up plans and elevations, produced a model, and studied every detail, even designing the porcelain tea service. The atmosphere of a light and sunny Orient, perhaps the souvenir of a trip to Crimea, once bathed this corner of the park. Here, during summer evenings in 1860, in the warm, balmy air smelling pleasantly of cigar smoke, the latest news would be discussed: the recent appointments at the court, the next ball to be hosted by the neighbours, the Schuwalows and – at this point, voices would be lowered – that unfortunate duel fought by an officer, a nephew, in Saint Petersburg. It would gradually grow darker and the air would become cooler, it was time to go back inside the house. Another night fell over the tea pavilion. And everyone felt confident that the season for drinking tea under the trees would always return.'⁷

L. de Communes's *capriccio* epigram texts are charged with hints at literary associations and form a poetic picture, like Claude Debussy's impressionistic music. In this aspect the modern French artist's literary commentary as a supplement to his emblem-type *capriccio* differs from the sixteenth-seventeenth-century epigrams in which the principal role was assigned to antique literature, religious parallels and didactic Christian allegories. The subjective literary fable, excerpted from historical and biographical episodes of the Baltic nobility lives, creates the twenty-first-century language of emblems.

This can be seen in another emblem-*capriccio* of the cycle, dedicated to the historical associations inspired by the Rundāle palace, summer residence of the dukes of Courland. Its motto is *Winter's Tale in Rundale*, while the *capriccio* composition includes metaphorical 'frozen' fragments of the gate, the garden and interior sculptural elements above which rises a grotesquely transformed



Fig. 3. Winter's Tale in Rundale.

the same way of climbing up peaks, suddenly plunging down into an abyss, and finally re-conquering the summit! ... During this long winter of ambition, his tenacious energy and determination to seek revenge might have inspired him to invent projects for monuments glorifying his return: "The lion of Courland has not finished with roaring!" ... he probably swore when drawing this sculpted cascade. He roared again in 1762 when Catherine the Great gave him back his throne. He seized the sceptre firmly and completed the palaces he had started building thirty years earlier. In Rundale – formerly – Ruhental – a fountain cracked by time illustrates this fierce persistence in surviving and reigning.⁹

Still another *capriccio* is dedicated to one of Courland's most romantic palaces, Ēdole, and its motto announces a new theme: *Family Vault at Ēdole*, while the structure of the grotesquely transformed family mausoleum in the centre of the composition ironically interprets the meaning of the family name (Fig. 4). Having visited Courland's prominent cultural monuments, the artist is moved by the devastation at the country noblemen's burial hill. The drawing that has been inspired by these impressions shows a dilapidated mausoleum whose roof is supported by the bears, heraldic animals of the von Behr family. By means of a witty paradox and the pun (*Behr* – bear) they manifest helplessness in face of ravages of time. The epigram relates: 'At Ēdole, bears, the emblem of their coat-of-arms, seem to watch over the dynasty and uphold the memory of its lineage in the midst of ruined tombs. ... Their damaged sepulchre, now eaten away by ivy, is gradually becoming a ghost

image of a Moor with a parasol and the monarch's crown (Fig. 3). Thus the official iconography of the Duchess's bedroom and the palace breathe a distanced and ironical attitude.⁸ The image of cold and 'frost' as an expression- and iconography-affecting emotional metaphor has been introduced both in the epigram and the iconography with a political subtext. It highlights the 'ice-cold' and hostile attitude, cultivated in the Russian court by Tsarina Anna Ioanovna against Duke Biron of Courland and his family. It was on her orders that the Duke's family was exiled to Siberia where the Birones spent twenty long years. The epigram text speaks the language of allegory and, according to the iconography, expresses the inhuman scale of the political and personal tragedy. I quote: 'There is a touch of "Münchhausen" in the destiny of Ernst Johann Biron, Duke of Courland. He had



Fig. 4. Family Vault at Ēdole.



Fig. 5. Casino at Blankenfelde.



Fig. 6. A Night of War at Mežotne.

in the moonlight.¹⁰ The epigram text rescues the most distinguished bearers of the family name from oblivion. Set against the background of the mausoleum, they are personified by the images of bears: the brave cavalry officer who excelled in the 1683 battles at Vienna, still another who fell in 1812 at Moscow, and a third one who died in the Russo-Turkish war, defending Sevastopol.

After the agrarian reform of 1920, the manor and the palace went through a period of desertion; later it was occupied by the old people's home, the community house, the summer workshops and lodgings for art students until, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, the nobility abode again passed into private ownership. It remains to hope that the pessimistic stagnation has finally come to an end. The contemplation of such process of degrading cultural environment and achievements of civilization leads the capriccio author to regard the 'old Europe' as a field of new economic colonization and trace a similarity with the thirteenth century when Christianity initiators opened for Europeans the door to Courland. Seen from L. de Communes's perspective, the only subjectively and artistically justifiable reaction to the once colonized and Europeanized territory, now destroyed, forgotten and overgrown with osier, is a melancholy-permeated work of art. From the subjective humanistic angle, the ruins of past culture betray the deformed features of Western civilization and its symbols: manors with their parks, gardens, sculptures and paintings, the aristocracy and its mode of life, the bygone monarchies, Christianity and other spiritual values. With his *capriccios* L. de Communes shows to us, Europeans, the withering face of European

culture, just like art connoisseurs can detect it in Giovanni Batista Piranesi's etchings with the ruins of Rome, which were created 1500 years after the collapse of the empire.

Another capriccio, painted in 2002, *Casino at Blankenfelde* brings back the exile of King Louis XVIII when after the French Revolution he and his court spent several years in Jelgava, the capital of the Duchy of Courland, a remote corner of Europe (Fig. 5). It was here, in Courland, that he often visited the Blankenfelde manor, estate of the von Königsfels, playing cards for hours on end. The composition that is included in the *capriccio* iconography ironically regards Louis XVIII's fallacious card-stacked belief in the possibility of the re-establishment of monarchy. However, fate intervened like an accidental roll of the dice, and the king returned to his native country and regained the throne. The epigram, too,

relates this extraordinary historical episode with a happy end for both the monarch and his host: 'In 1818, when he ascended back on his throne, remembering his happy hours at Blankenfelde, the king expressed his gratitude to the Königsfels by making them French counts. Today their descendants are once again in possession of Blankenfelde, and have started to restore it. After a long and deep slumber, destiny has finally come up with the trump card for this place too,' moralises L. de Commynes.¹¹

In the emblem-*capriccio* *A Night of War at Mežotne* L. de Commynes has used verbal and iconographic elements of modernity to create a characteristic expression of the twentieth century (Fig. 6). Its compositional centre – *tondo* – is supported by four atlantes, crumbling under the weight of political cataclysms. On their shoulders they struggle to hold the disintegrating cupola of the Festive Hall at the Mežotne castle. It is their Terrestrial Globe and their Universe, reflecting, like in a Microcosm, the human catastrophe of the world. In his literary poetic epigram the author tells that 'In September 1944, the front line separating the Red Army from Hitler's troops included Mežotne within the firing range of its canons. The night of the 14th turned out to be fatal for this refined castle in Courland! ... After the bombardments in 1944 by the Red Army, this rotunda was left with a gaping hole for about twenty years. Cows would come to graze up to the edge of the gravel, depicting a scene similar to a painting by Panini in the antique style.'¹²

One may ask – what exactly appeared so moving and inspiring for the artist in an 'ordinary' wartime story about the destruction of the manor house at Mežotne? Knowing the artist's life philosophy, his humanistic views speak for themselves, accusing totalitarian regimes and their cynicism, which appears even meaner if compared to the countless cultural treasures that these regimes exposed to peril. The Mežotne castle as an excellent Classicism ensemble was created by the genius of Italian architecture, Giacomo Quarenghi, for Countess Charlotte von Lieven. The prominent gentlewoman of Courland had been granted the Russian Tsar's favour in the form of a huge landed property as a token of gratitude for bringing up Grand Dukes Alexander and Constantine, grandsons of Catherine II. Life in St Petersburg and the Tsar's court enabled her to commission the celebrated architect, who designed theatres, banks, universities and palaces in the capital city, for the castle project. On his design, in 1800–1802 Charlotte von Lieven accomplished the large-scale construction of the Mežotne castle,

which fell victim to two warring armies whose native countries lay elsewhere but they met in Courland with the purpose to exterminate some of European civilization and culture. Thus, the Greek mythology images of atlantes in the 1974 restored paintings on the Mežotne castle cupola help to throw a bridge between distant countries and epochs, once split by military confrontation.

Predominant in the artist's elegiac meditations on the fate of symbols and cultural heritage are resignation-permeated observations and sceptical conclusions. Far from every cultural artefact of the Duchy of Courland can boast of a success story of rebirth like that of the Mežotne castle. The emblem-*capriccio* *Hortus Petrinus at Luste* overflows with symbols of destruction to create artistic contrast (Fig. 7). When depicting the park view full of broken sculpture, L. de Commynes has



Fig. 7. Hortus Petrinus at Luste.

played both with the compound name of 'Lustschloss Friedrichlust' and symbols of destruction. The vignette of the *tondo*-composition capriccio includes motifs of architectural ruins, mourning-type drapery, night-personifying owls and bats, and extinguished lamps. The hopelessness evoked by the visit to the Duke's entertainment park has prompted the artist's imagination to draw a distinctly pessimistic vision in which each symbolic image is subtly eloquent: the broken obelisk, the classical sculpture with the motif of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, the shattered Sphinx and, in the centre of all that, Chronos with a snapped-off scythe. At the moment when Peter Biron, the last Duke of Courland, under Russia's pressure was forced to leave his country in 1795, even time stopped at this place of gaiety and the Muses.

The author of the picture and its epigram writes: 'Is there a languor that belongs specifically to the North? A kind of "melancholia Baltica" affecting the inhabitants of the shores of this sea and travellers who venture to this land? If not,

why did Jean Laurent Legeay, an architect at the court of Mecklenburg and later Prussia, start to sketch ruins and mausoleums so compulsively in the 18th century? The Pomeranian artists, Kersting and Friedrich, turned the Nordic lands and their endless nights into emblems of silence and solitude. And this tradition continued with the painter Desprez, the scenographer of Gustav III who drew, during his stay in Sweden, so many shadowy crypts and disquieting tombs. Approaching the shores of Courland, this epidemic may have infected its Duke, marking the neo-classical years of Peter of Courland with the imprints of Piranesi. Being solitary and over-sensitive, this misanthropic sovereign preferred the company of the statues he had brought over from Italy to that of his ministers. If the ravages of time had been less cruel to the ruins of his villa in Friedrichlust – renamed Luste – it would still be possible to see in a corner of the park a few vestiges forgotten by Peter when he left for exile. After he abdicated, he transported his pre-Romantic temperament to the castles of Bohemia and Silesia, where he died one winter's day in 1800.'¹³

L. de Commynes's nostalgia-permeated life perception and reflection on the miraculous past of the phenomenon of the Duchy of Courland in modern Latvia constantly relate to the amorphous though infinitely capacious aesthetics of *vanitas vanitatum*, cultivated in the Renaissance and Baroque art, emblematics and literary fiction. Looking from the window of his Paris flat onto world civilization conflicts, the artist, in a manner of a refined intellectual, yields to sorrowful contemplation of the irrational clash of 'the East' and 'the West' as a result of which the once harmonious and idyllic corner



Fig. 8. Cabinet of Ruins.

of European culture – Latvia and Estonia – in his opinion turned into a collection of shivers: ‘Cabinet of Ruins’ (Fig. 8). The last emblematic *capriccio* composition in the cycle “Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary” only in its form differs from the other *tondo* drawings. It is a vertically elongated rectangular work with its composition divided into horizontal bands whose essential idea is to create an image of a closet or a bookshelf. Inspired by Renaissance and Baroque culture, particularly in the world of scientifically systematized fossils, like exotic relics in *Kunstkammer*, ‘curiosity cabinets’, collection showcases, L. de Commynes has found an appropriate general label for the multitude of memories and history shivers that have piled up like curious fragments of the mosaicked history on the shelves of his memories and impressions. Immortalised in the painting are the ruins of Classicism architecture wherein connoisseurs will recognize generalised symbols of the Baltic nobility’s economic and political might fatefully and ironically reduced to artefacts of the ‘shivers of history’ or ruins.

Precisely such a motto – *Cabinet of Ruins* – introduces the last *capriccio*. In its epigram L. de Commynes the aesthete cannot but cry out in despair: ‘None of these castles exist any longer! Burnt down or destroyed by bombs during the two world wars, they now belong to the world of phantoms. These jewels of Baltic heritage still bore their German names when most of them fell. And it is by these names that they should be remembered today: Zehnhoff, Würzau, Zarnikau, Diensdorff, Lennewarden, Gross-Eckau... A connoisseur of architecture and history may have gathered these vanished manors in the form of a collection of maimed models. Around the altar of his fervour, he may have collected these vestiges and relics to create an imaginary museum dedicated to the lost Balticum.’¹⁴ To conclude the ring of both literary and artistic conception of his *capriccios*, L. de Commynes adds his personal judgement: ‘For me, too, this corner of Europe, situated between Samogitia and Lake Peipus, was for several years an alchemic engraving of human eternity. Our different temperaments are incorporated in it, from the insouciance of Eleja and the lucidity of Stameriena to the state of despondency of Mezotne. Despondency and fervour finally come together in the *Cabinet of Ruins*, pious tabernacle of our remorse.’ As the artist addresses his readers he does not shun the traditional moral common for all collections of emblems. In the given context the sad statement leaves space for hope as well: ‘Hopefully, this “cabinet of ruins” will give sensitive readers a taste for the past and desire to protect those Baltic manors that are still standing!’¹⁵

On the basis of the present treatment of the topic that is unusual for the research of modern culture the author of the article ventures to predict the further evolution of the emblem genre. Nearly all seventeenth-eighteenth-century artists’ fantasies on the topic of architecture, called by their creators *capriccio*, were morphologically structured so as to contrast the hopeless desolation of the really existing or imaginary place and the remarkably rich layer of cultural and historical memory. In these emblematic *capriccios*, flooded with cold moonlight, emotional necromancy is neither sick nor deathly; it is just the artist’s consciously cultivated quality of theatrical expression. It fills the imagination-construed ‘Theatrum Mundi’ with stories of the past in which Chronos, the category of time, has two roles: that of the dramatist and that of the director of the performance. The chain of the treated twenty-first-century *capriccios* does not fit in and does not comprise the mainstream research of our favourite object – emblems. Owing to its peculiar mental construction, Laurent de Commynes’s poetic and pictorial creativity remains an exotic exception and a marginal phenomenon of intellectual constructions in the modern era of the graphical design of trade marks, symbols and logotypes. The author of the article is partial to these creative individualists with a gift of retrospective perception. The personalities like L. de Commynes should proceed with their lonely travel into the

world of romantic images to kindle their imagination with erudition that is rooted in classical studies, which becomes progressively rare in our pragmatic modern world.

Two years later, after the 2004 exhibition in Riga, the New York public also became acquainted with L. de Commine's watercolor cycle 'Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary'. Since 18 December 2006, the artist's watercolor drawings of Baltic manors have been in the possession of the Carl Schirren Society (Carl Schirren Gesellschaft e. V.) in Lüneburg, Germany, and can be viewed at the headquarters of this public organization, Brömsehaus, Am Berge 35, D-21335, Lüneburg, Deutschland.

Photo by Laurent de Commine

¹ L. de Commine's letter from Paris, 23 February 2002, to O. Spārītis.

² *ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ Commine, L. de. Why Courland? – manuscript of the literary diary, p. 3.

⁵ Commine, L. de. Why Courland? – manuscript of the literary diary, p. 6.

⁶ Commine, L. de. Why Courland? – manuscript of the literary diary, p. 6.

⁷ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, p. 55.
Original in the Latvian Museum of Architecture, Riga, Mazā Pils iela 19.

⁸ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 42–43.

⁹ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 42–43.

¹⁰ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 22–23.

¹¹ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 58–59.

¹² Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 2–3.

¹³ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 46–47.

¹⁴ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 66–67.

¹⁵ Commine, L. de. Baltic Manors by Drawings. Memory and Imaginary. Riga, 2004, pp. 67–68.

