Fifty Year Eclipse:
Illuminating the Forgotten Legacy of Photographer Vilis Rīdzenieks

Alise Tifentale

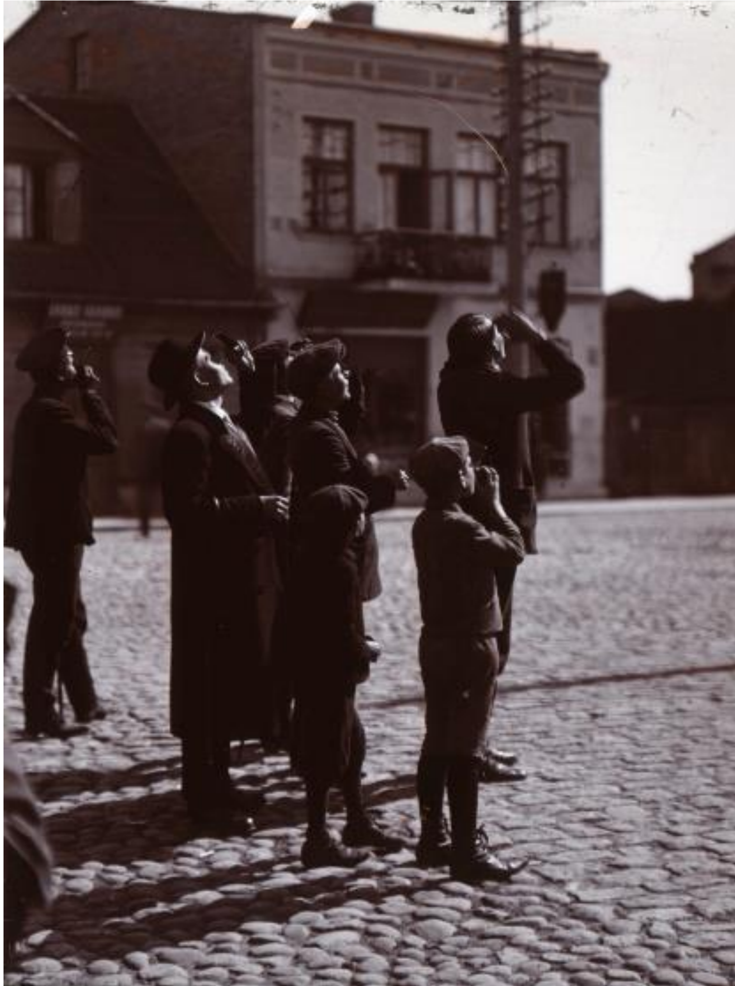

Figure 1

It is Wednesday, April 17, 1912. Partial solar eclipse has attracted onlookers to gather in city streets throughout Europe and observe the unusual celestial event through pieces of smoked glass. Latvian photographer Vilis Rīdzenieks (1884–1962) is out in the streets of Ventspils, an important sea port city on the Baltic Sea coast of the present-day Latvia, then the Governorate of

Kurland, part of the Russian Empire. Among else, Rīdzenieks captures a group of five men and two boys standing on a cobbled plaza and looking upward, toward the upper right corner of the frame (figure 1). All are holding small pieces of glass in front of their faces. Their identical gestures, the long, sharp shadows they cast behind them, and the absence of the subject of their interest all create an eerie atmosphere.[1]

Figure 2

The same solar eclipse is visible also in France. On the same day, around the same time, French photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927) is out in the streets of Paris, the capital city of modern art. Among else, Atget captures a group of women, men, and a few children standing on

a side of Place de la Bastille and looking upward, toward the upper left corner of the frame (figure 2). All are holding small pieces of glass in front of their faces. Their identical gestures, the repetitive advertising on the building behind them, and the absence of the subject of their interest all create an eerie atmosphere.

From here onward, we could embark on a success story of two early-twentieth-century photographers whose work has been recognized and appreciated by the art and photography historians. Yet it is not the case. Ventspils and Paris offered quite different treatment to these two equally talented photographers working in the two cities. It happened so that one of Atget's neighbors in Paris was Man Ray (1890–1976), the notable American avant-garde artist and photographer. In 1923, Ray purchased the solar eclipse photograph from Atget, and the image was reproduced on the June 15, 1926 cover of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, one of the most artistically radical publications of its time.[2] After Atget's death the following year, another American photographer, Berenice Abbott (1898–1991) purchased what was left of his legacy—more than 1,000 glass negatives and more than 7,000 prints, and brought it back to the U.S. The collection of Atget's work ended up in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, arguably one of the world's most powerful institutions shaping the mainstream histories of art and photography. Atget's work since then has been praised, admired, and firmly established as one of the most important sources of modern photography.

Ventspils, or Rīdzenieks' later hometown Riga, however, did not offer such a springboard for the recognition of a photographer's work. No avant-garde artist was nearby to see and appreciate Rīdzenieks' images, no notable collector purchased his works, and no powerful institution such as MoMA was around to popularize his legacy. No doubt, after his passing in 1962, Rīdzenieks' name has been generally known among photography enthusiasts in

Latvia, he has been mentioned in a few books and articles, and few random samples of his work have been reproduced here and there. But his diverse output has never been acknowledged, exhibited, and discussed in its entirety. Instead of being studied and venerated as the classic of Latvian photography, most of his images were quietly set aside and remained outside the public view until now. His legacy has been totally eclipsed for the duration of the second half of the twentieth century.

In 2018, when we celebrate the centenary of Latvia's independence, we recognize the significance of Rīdzenieks as the author of the only photograph that documents the Proclamation of Independence of Latvia by the People's Council on November 18, 1918 in Riga. For this accomplishment, he was awarded and highly respected throughout the years of the first Republic (1918–1940). These years also were the most prolific period in the photographer's career. But after the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia in 1944, which lasted until 1991, visual evidence of the independent Latvia had to be erased from public spaces. Exhibiting or reproducing photographs that documented life in the 1920s and 1930s could be interpreted as praising the achievements of the now condemned "bourgeois" republic and criminalized as anti-Soviet propaganda. A small and careful selection of Rīdzenieks' work was exhibited posthumously, in 1965. A soft-cover, miniature thirty-page catalogue featuring sixteen reproductions accompanied this exhibition.[3] This remained the single most substantial publication about Rīdzenieks until 2008 when his unique Proclamation of Independence photograph was commemorated in a book.[4]

Rīdzenieks, however, did much more than make that one photograph. His life and career spans multiple political regimes ruling the territory of present-day Latvia, two major social and political revolutions, and two world wars. Rīdzenieks has left a rich legacy which remains

unexplored and full of surprises. This essay will outline the main genres and thematic groups in Rīdzenieks' diverse oeuvre and place it on the world map.

Reporter

Rīdzenieks belongs to the same generation as American photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973). The First World War dragged in both photographers alike and changed their lives. The ways in which Rīdzenieks and Steichen experienced and documented the events of the war, however, differed profoundly. Comparing their experiences is helpful in our quest to comprehend the uniqueness of Latvian photographer's work in relationship to the more well-known names in the history of photography.

Rīdzenieks was a skilled reporter from the hot-spots of the current events taking place in the territory of present-day Latvia before, during, and after the First World War. Here, the war triggered a series of events that totally transformed the political geography of the region and had a direct impact on everybody's life: the collapse of the Russian Empire, the establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1918, and the ensuing battles—The Latvian War of Independence—to defend the independence from the Soviet Russian army and the remaining White Russian military formations that lasted until 1920. Rīdzenieks was there to document the aftermath of the battles, the refugees, the ruins, and the political demonstrations. From today's perspective, his documentary work is one of the most valuable parts of his legacy.

Steichen enlisted in the U.S. army in 1917, when the country entered the war. Steichen was assigned to an aerial reconnaissance unit, and, as historians have observed, "became a key figure in adapting the camera for surveillance and intelligence purposes. The radical new technology was destined to make a powerful and enduring impact on the conduct of modern

warfare."[5] Steichen experienced—and photographed—the war from above. His war photography was highly skilled, technologically advanced pursuit.

The war and its aftermath, as Rīdzenieks experienced it, was much more brutal, unsophisticated, and low-tech. One especially unforgettable photograph stands out in a larger series of images depicting the aftermath of the Latvian War of Independence, won on November 11, 1919. This photograph captures a deep mass grave with a long row of plain wooden coffins (figure 3). This is the Military Cemetery (now known as The Brothers' Cemetery) in the outskirts of Riga in preparation for the burial of the soldiers killed in the Latvian War of Independence in 1919. The coffins are decorated with identical funerary wreaths and narrow ribbons in the colors of the flag of Latvia. In the foreground, two men are standing inside the grave. One of them is holding a large view camera and is leaning over one of the coffins whose lid is removed. He is taking a close-up photograph of the fallen soldier. Another photograph in this series depicts the face a young man in an open coffin, revealing that Rīdzenieks as well was making portraits of the soldiers before they were buried in this immense mass grave.

The mass grave photograph transports us right into the center of the dreadful reality of death and suffering. It is one of the most heartbreaking images of the war machine. This is not a metaphor of war, this is the harsh and unheroic reality of a great historical turn, skillfully captured as it evolved in front of the eyes of the photographer. Furthermore, it is symbolic on other levels too. The figure of the photographer standing at the bottom of a deep grave, leaning over an open casket, illustrates an aspect of what being a photographer entailed at that time. It also points out how different were the experiences of two photographers working at approximately the same time. While Rīdzenieks worked at the bottom of a deep, cold mass grave, Steichen was taking photographs from the reconnaissance plane flying high above.

Figure 3

Chronicler of Daily Life

Another notable contemporary of Rīdzenieks was Hungarian artist and photographer László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) who arrived in Berlin in early 1920. Within a few years, he became a leading figure at the Bauhaus school in Weimar (1923) and published *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), the seminal modernist claim on photography's role in the modern society. Moholy-Nagy's work became the foundation of the New Vision, the approach to photography that embraced the dynamism of the modern urban environment, unusual points of view, oblique angles, and unexpected close-ups.

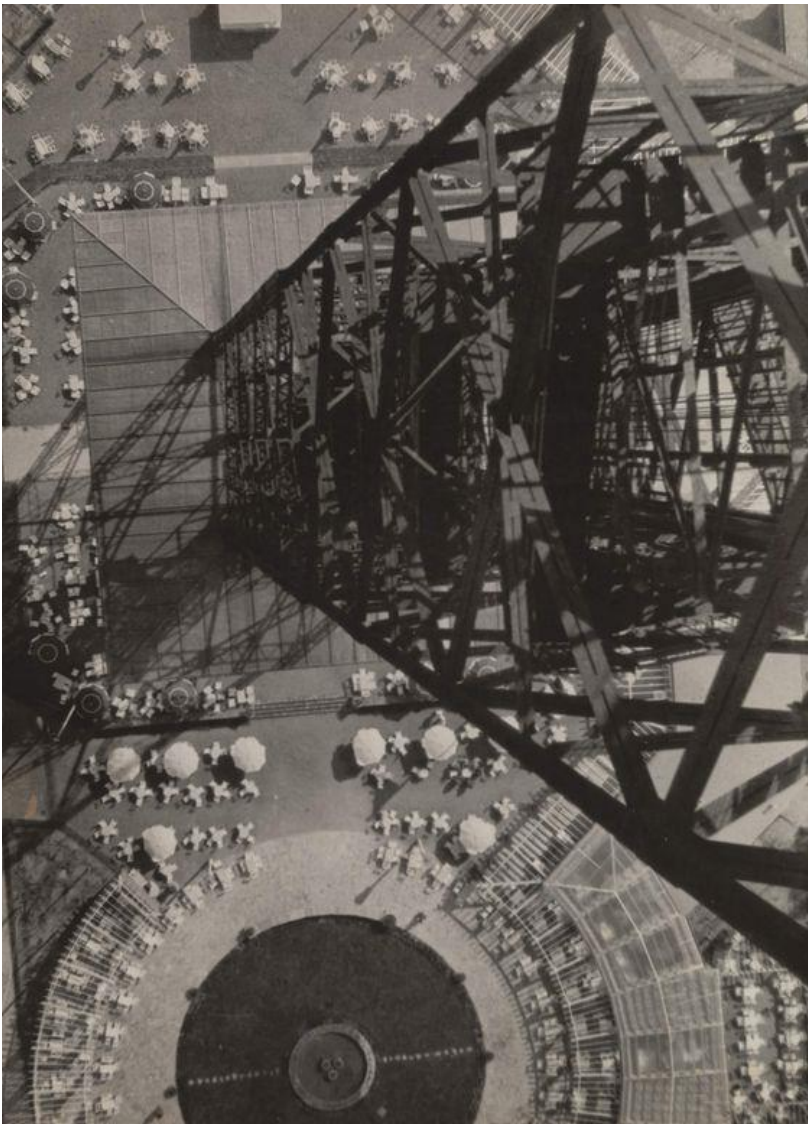

Figure 4

Moholy-Nagy's *Berlin Radio Tower* (1928) exemplifies one of the main principles of his teaching—the point of view from above, a visual device that soon became "one of the clichés of the New Vision," according to photography historian Michel Frizot (figure 4).[6] The view from above per se, however, was not an invention of the interwar avant-garde. When tall buildings emerged in the modern cityscape, photographers tried to capture the dramatic difference in the height of these new structures. Skyscrapers evolved in the U.S. in the 1880s and 1890s and

became part of the classic pictorialist repertoire. Artists like Moholy-Nagy added a new dynamism to the depiction of high-rises and expanded the range of buildings into functional structures such as a radio tower. The choice of the location accentuates a particular aspect of the modern landscape. Moholy-Nagy's image takes us to the exhibition grounds and trade fair center Messe Berlin, where the Radio Tower was constructed on the occasion of the third Great German Radio Exhibition in 1926 (*Große Deutsche Funkausstellung*). At that time, it was one of the most visible symbols of Berlin's technological advancement and rapid success in recuperating after the war.

Meanwhile, Rīdzenieks was busy documenting daily life in Riga. Here, the rebuilding of the Iron Bridge across the Daugava River was among the most visible reconstruction projects of the 1920s. The bridge had been built in 1872 and was severely damaged in an explosion during the war in 1917. In a photograph dated by 1925, Rīdzenieks has captured an unusual view of the bridge (figure 5). The viewpoint is from the river bank. The rectangular wood and metal structure opens up like a long, straight tunnel only to end abruptly mid-river, revealing a large span of water in front of the camera. Three small figures of workers in the foreground give the scene a sense of scale. To the left, the frame includes part of the more modern Railway Bridge which was built in 1914 and still stands as one of the landmarks of Riga.

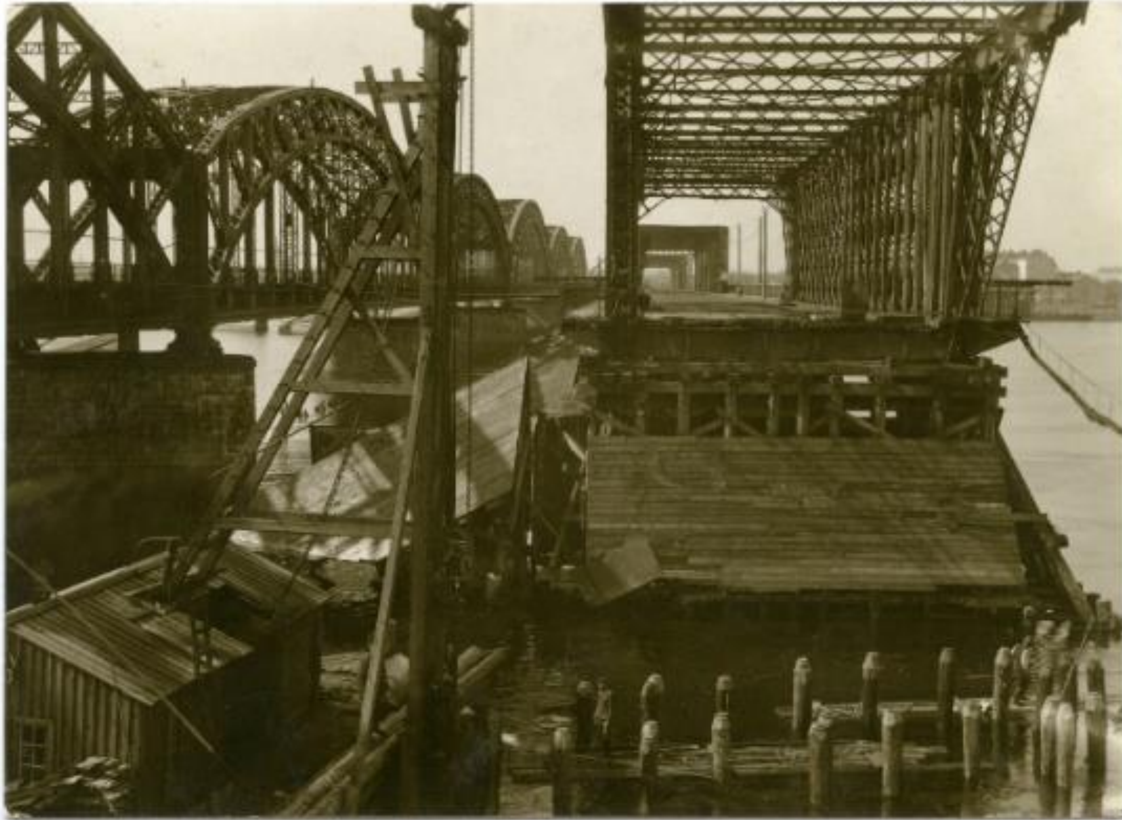

Figure 5

The skillfully chosen composition of the bold rectangular, triangular, and semicircular shapes in Rīdzenieks' photograph conveys a sense of great dynamism and implies a modernist, almost Cubism-like abstraction. This photograph characterizes Riga of the 1920s as accurately as Moholy-Nagy's image of the Radio Tower characterizes Berlin of the 1920s. Both photographers successfully captured what they felt was an important and highly visible construction project of their city, and both did it in a distinctively modern style.

Another photograph, meanwhile, takes us to the Riga Central Market—a new and innovative structure that had just been built in the center of Riga (figure 6). Its five monumental pavilions, built between 1924 and 1930, exemplify the most modern and advanced design and

architecture of interwar Europe. At the time of its opening in 1930, the Riga Central Market was arguably among Europe's largest, most convenient, comfortable, and hygienic marketplaces. As achievements of modern engineering and design, these pavilions were counterparts to the abovementioned Berlin Radio Tower and other, better known landmarks of the 1920s and 1930s European architecture. In this photograph, however, Rīdzenieks chose to focus on human interaction that takes place on the backdrop of architecture.

Figure 6

The photograph shows a section of the marketplace selling many kinds of bread and other baked goods. The abundance of goods, especially food, had a symbolic meaning, as it spoke about the advent of more affluent and peaceful life after the long years of revolutions and war that had brought misery, destitution, and hardship for many. In Latvian culture, bread—and

especially rye bread—has a special significance among all other foods. Latvians have considered rye bread almost sacred for centuries, and in 2008 it was included in the cultural canon of Latvia as one of thirteen most unique traditional cultural values. The photograph depicting an abundance of bread conveyed a powerful message about the thriving nation and its optimistic outlook on the future.

Furthermore, the photograph consists of two distinct mise-en-scènes. In the foreground of the right half of the frame, the most prominent figure is a male vendor standing behind a counter displaying a variety of bread loaves. The man, wearing a white apron over a jacket, poses proudly and looks directly at the camera. His face, however, is slightly out of focus. Instead, the left side of the frame is in clear focus. There, much farther away from the camera and behind the posing bread vendor, we see a female seller at a neighboring bread stand. She is slightly slouched over while counting change in her left hand, and appears to be serving two male customers, one of whom we see only from the back. The other, a youngish man in a long winter coat, meanwhile, has turned his head, noticed the photographer, and is looking directly at the camera with a puzzled expression on his face. After examining this image, we are left with a sense of mystery that is almost surreal.

Rīdzenieks' images of daily life in Riga are as lively, vivid, and elegant as those of his more celebrated peers who worked in Berlin, Paris, or New York. The importance of Rīdzenieks' work stems from the fact that his photographs are unique witnesses of the reconstruction and development of Riga after the war. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Riga did not have a Radio Tower like Berlin had, but modernity nevertheless had entered the city, and Rīdzenieks documented it in photographs whose subtlety and complexity keep surprising us.

Portraitist

Rīdzenieks was a celebrity portraitist, operating a successful photo studio in Riga that produced numerous portraits of the intellectual, political, and artistic elite of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s. His sitters—the most well-known writers, poets, actresses, statesmen, and other notable public figures of the time—often appear otherworldly and ethereal, thanks to the skillful lighting and retouching. His portraits were widely circulated in popular illustrated magazines as well as in postcard format. For a today's viewer, these portraits may appear unimaginative and even standardized. Rīdzenieks himself took great pride in his portraits and even considered them among the highest and most artistic achievements of his career in photography. One of the reasons of the relatively high social status of portraiture among other photographic genres was that it stood the closest to painting.

At that time, painting was still thought as the aspirational ideal for all photographers, the highest form of art which only the most skillful photographers were able to approach. Steichen, for example, early in his career made a *Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette* (1902), a heavily post-processed gum bichromate print where he successfully projected an image of the photographer as a romantic painter under the spell of magical inspiration (figure 7).

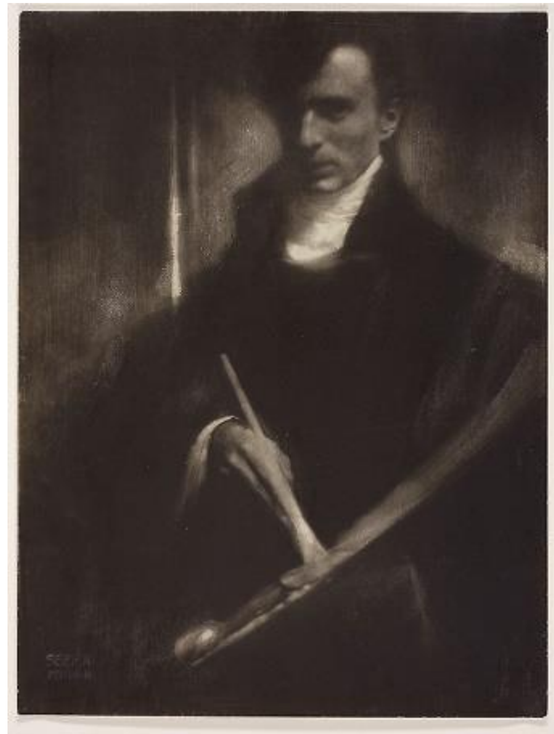

Figure 7

Claiming the much-desired status of "almost" a painter, Rīdzenieks posed as an elegant artist wearing a suit, standing in front of an easel with a photographic enlargement (figure 8). It is a portrait of Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), the authoritarian, self-appointed leader of the Republic of Latvia in power between 1934 and 1940. The photographer is depicted in profile, standing really close to the easel, holding a few pens in the left hand, and touching the print with a delicate brush in his right hand. His pose conveys utmost concentration. The bright lighting in the room and the tidy arrangement of a few tubes and tools on a table with a polished, shiny surface speak of an extremely well-organized, clean, skilled, and sophisticated labor. But above all, the setup makes a photographer look like a painter.

Figure 8

Figure 9

Besides, this photograph hints at another, no less important reason why Rīdzenieks—just like many of his colleagues across the world—valued portraiture so highly. Simply put, being a

popular portrait photographer opened the doors for Rīdzenieks into all levels of society and provided connections among the cultural and political elite of the time. Making portraits of the people of high social status raised the social status of the photographer himself.

A photograph from 1931 depicts Rīdzenieks posing for a notable Latvian artist, Jānis Tillbergs (1880–1972) (figure 9). This image where Rīdzenieks—the "almost" painter—is portrayed in a real painting by a real painter, symbolizes the achievement of the photographer's social mobility. Tillbergs is depicted in profile on the left side of the frame, while Rīdzenieks is striking an intentionally casual pose in the center. The canvas with his portrait is on an easel at the left side of the image. Tillbergs is holding a brush in his extended right hand which, however, remains quite far away from the canvas. The compositional similarities between this image and the photograph of Rīdzenieks working on the portrait of Ulmanis is stunning. It is possible that Rīdzenieks consciously modeled the latter after the former. Only thanks to a successful career in portraiture a photographer could raise to the social circles which otherwise would not be available to him. In the early years of the twentieth century, before becoming a photographer, Rīdzenieks worked as a clerk at duke Dmitry Naryshkin's Žagarė manor farmstead (in present-day Lithuania). If he would have remained there and continued similar line of work into the 1920s and 1930s, it is highly unlikely that he would so easily mingle with the leading artists of the time and even be portrayed by one of them.

Artist

Rīdzenieks was also an artist. His fine art prints made around 1910 feature mostly rural landscapes and a few genre scenes. They demonstrate a great skill to capture nature with an innate sense of composition as well as the photographer's mastery of the "artistic" printing methods such as gum bichromate. Such printing methods were staples of the late nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century Pictorialism. Several notable elements, however, differentiate Rīdzenieks' fine art prints—especially those made around 1910—from the work of better known pictorialists.

In 1904, around the time when young Rīdzenieks began his brief career as a clerk in Žagarė, Steichen in New York made, among else, *The Pond—Moonlight* which became one of the most celebrated examples of Pictorialism (figure 10). Meanwhile in Paris, French pictorialist Robert Demachy (1859–1936) made one of his most well-known landscapes, *Touques Valley* (1906) (figure 11). It features expressive silhouettes of trees on the right side of the print and a barely visible hilltop on the left side. Demachy's *Valley* is based on reductive aesthetics where photographic detail and depth of field are suppressed, and contrast is heightened in order to emphasize few visually interesting details—in this case, the art nouveau pattern of the delicate tree silhouettes. Demachy's and Steichen's landscapes echo the sinister, but intriguing atmosphere of Romanticism and Symbolism, fashionable among the upper-class photography enthusiasts of the early twentieth century.[7] In this aspect, Demachy was a typical pictorialist—he was born in a banker's family, grew up in luxury and comfort, and never had to take a paid job.

Figure 10

Figure 11

While Demachy was busy experimenting with sophisticated printing processes in his magnificent Parisian mansion at 13 Rue François 1er, Rīdzenieks went on to learn the craft of photography in Saint Petersburg, then the capital of the Russian Empire. The fine art prints he made upon his return to Latvia are among the most outstanding examples of his aesthetic sensibilities. Nature and landscape in Rīdzenieks prints from the 1910s is not especially idyllic or romanticized. These images rather emphasize the human hardship and constant fight against the forces of nature. If there is a horse-drawn carriage, like in the image showing a featureless landscape of endless plains (figure 12), then it leaves deep grooves in the soft, muddy surface of the wet, unpaved road, which is almost undistinguishable from the fields that surround it on both sides. If there is an empty road, like in the image of a lonely farmstead amidst vast, empty scenery (figure 13), it is a snow-covered mess, where every step is a struggle to move forward.

Figure 12

Figure 13

These prints show a level of elegance, simplicity, and compositional clarity that is on par with Steichen's or Demachy's works. Yet, at the same time, these images convey incredible heaviness and effort. One will not find such features in the works by the classic pictorialists who came from upper-class urban background. When they visited countryside on their leisurely

outings, they observed nature from a distance. Rīdzenieks, on the contrary, was born and raised deep in the countryside and knew way too well the daily exertion that it required from the poorest people to accomplish even the simplest daily tasks. He had a deeper, more personal understanding of the countryside that was out of reach for those who went into the fields to take romantic pictures and then returned to the luxuries of their townhouses and apartments in Paris, New York, Vienna or other centers of Pictorialism. Serious work needs to be done in order to fully grasp the uniqueness of these works in which Rīdzenieks conveyed both the specificity of his native landscape and his distinctive personal experience growing up in this landscape.

Epilogue

Among the difficulties in comprehending the significance of Rīdzenieks' legacy is the fact that the concept of what constitutes photographic art and how it should be evaluated has been shifting and changing dramatically over time. In the mid-1960s, French sociologist Jean-Claude Chamboredon admitted: "The wish to cultivate photography as an art means condemning oneself to a practice that is uncertain of its legitimacy, preoccupied and insecure, perpetually in search of justification."[8] Photography was—and still is a field struggling for its recognition and status among other, better established arts such as painting. What the photographers of Rīdzenieks' generation believed to be most important among his artistic achievements, turned out to be not so interesting for scholars of subsequent generations, and vice versa. Atget, for example, never thought of himself as an artist, but today he is considered the father of modern photography art and one of the greatest photographic artists. Rīdzenieks took great pride in his heavily retouched celebrity portraits and the sophisticated fine art prints. Today's art and photography theorists, meanwhile, value his previously unpublished documentary work much more highly. I imagine

Rīdzenieks would have laughed with amusement, if someone at that time suggested that later his photographs of the streets, marketplaces, and factories of Riga would be deemed so important not only as historical documentation but also in the context of art. We can only speculate what the art historians in twenty or thirty years' time will find in Rīdzenieks oeuvre. Our most significant contribution is to make it visible again.

References

---

[1] The photograph by Vilis Rīdzenieks is undated. The location is identified as Ventspils. Because Rīdzenieks was working in Ventspils until 1915, the image could document any of the following two events. First, it could depict the partial solar eclipse visible both in the territory of Latvia and France in April 17, 1912. Second, it could depict the total solar eclipse visible in the territory of Latvia, but not France, in August 21, 1914. Only these two solar eclipses have been visible in the territory of Latvia between 1901 and 1940. See: Fred Espenak, *World Atlas of Solar Eclipse Paths* (NASA: 2008), https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEatlas/SEatlas.html.

[2] David Campany, "Eugène Atget's Intelligent Documents," *Atget: Photographe de Paris* (Errata Editions, 2009).

[3] *Viļa Rīdzenieka piemiņas izstāde*. Rīga: Rīgas fotoamatieru klubs pie Poligrāfiķu Centrālā kluba, 1965.

[4] Laima Slava, ed. *First of the State: Vilis Rīdzenieks. The Proclamation of the Latvian State. 18 November 1918* (Riga: Neputns, 2008).

[5] Von Hardesty. "The 'Lost Years' of Edward Steichen, 1914–1919," *Historically Speaking* 14, no. 4 (2013: 20–23), 20.

[6] Michel Frizot, "Another Kind of Photography. New Points of View" in Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1999: 387–397), 394.

[7] For a discussion on the influence of Symbolist painting on European pictorialists, see: Ulrich Pohlmann, "Symbolism and Pictorialism," in Patrick Daum, F. Ribemont, and Phillip Prodger, eds. *Impressionist Camera: Pictorial Photography in Europe, 1888-1918* (London: Merrell, 2006), 87–106.

[8] Jean-Claude Chamboredon, "Mechanical Art, Natural Art: Photographic Artists," in Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990: 129–149), 129. The book was published in French in 1965 as *Un art moyen; essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965).