

# Lithuania



## a Cultural Guide

The foundations of modern Lithuanian culture began to be formed in the 16th-17th centuries, when the Reformation stimulated the beginning of publishing in Lithuanian and European fashions in the arts were introduced into the country by its Catholic rulers and nobility. The first Lithuanian book was published in the middle of the 16th century, baroque architecture began to flourish (today the Vilnius old town is a UNESCO World Heritage site) and popular Italian operas were being put on in Vilnius in the middle of the 17th century at the same time as the first opera theatres were being founded in Italy. In the middle of the 18th century **Kristijonas Donelaitis** (b.1714-d.1780) wrote the most important monument of early Lithuanian literature, "The Seasons", a long poem written in hexameters.

In 1795 Lithuania was incorporated into the Russian empire and the process of cultural growth was brought to a halt. From the middle of the 19th century to 1904 education in the Lithuanian language was prohibited and a ban on the use of the Latin alphabet was put in place (Lithuanian is a Baltic, and not a Slavonic language in the Indo-European family with a Latin and not a Cyrillic alphabet). Both the prohibitions and the general tendencies in Central Europe inspired the Lithuanian national revival in second half of the 19th century.

**Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis** (1875-1911), a composer and artist, one of the pioneers of symbolist abstractionism, was active during the years of the revival. In 1909 **Vladislovas Starevičius** (b.1882-d.1965) made his first ambitious and innovative animation films in Kaunas. In the same year the Litvak artists **Jacques Lipchitz** (1891-1973) and **Chaim Soutine** (1893-1943), as well as the violinist **Jascha Heifetz** (1901-1987), began their careers.

From 1918 on, after Lithuania became an independent country, an intensive cultural life was set in train,

covering various artistic genres, trends and fashions – from constructivist architecture and figurative cubism in painting through to futurist poetry and critical realism in literature. This period ended in 1940 when Lithuania was pulled into the meat grinder that was World War II. She was to be a country under occupation for the next five decades, occupied first by the Soviet Union 1940-1941, then Nazi Germany 1941-1944 and again by the Soviet Union in 1944 until it declared the reinstatement of its independence in 1990.

Over this period Lithuanian culture developed along two paths – Soviet and émigré. The most important émigrés working in the field of culture were the founder of the Fluxus movement **Jurgis (George) Mačiūnas** (b.1931 in Kaunas-d.1978 in Boston) and the godfather of American avant-garde cinema **Jonas Mekas** (b.1922 in Semeniškiai). The Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner **Czesław Miłosz** (b.1911 in Šeteiniai-d.2004 in Kraków), who was of Lithuanian descent, wrote in emigration.

Soviet Lithuanian culture recovered relatively speaking only after a softening in official attitudes in the decade or so after Stalin's death in 1953. Lithuanian actors in particular became very well known throughout the Soviet Union and examples of Lithuanian architecture were widely published in Soviet design and architecture journals. During this time a very strong musical education system was formed – from primary school through to the conservatory. It was also during the Soviet period that very strong schools of photography, jazz and theatre were formed.

There was a very strong dissident movement in Soviet Lithuania which also had an important influence on cultural life. One of the founder members of the Lithuanian Helsinki group, **Tomas Venclova** (b.1937), was forced to emigrate. He settled in the USA and became a professor at Yale University. To this day he remains the

most translated Lithuanian poet and essayist.

In 1990 when Lithuania declared the reestablishment of its independence for the second time in the 20th century the different strands of Lithuanian culture, émigré and domestic, came together again. Well-known Lithuanian intellectuals and artists from the USA, Germany, France, and Great Britain came to our universities to lecture. With the lifting of the iron curtain young Lithuanian artists were able to travel and study abroad.

Today in the world of visual arts the best known video artist is **Deimantas Narkevičius** (b.1964), who won the Vincent van Gogh Biennial Award for Contemporary Art in 2008. In his films he demonstrates his experience of life under the Soviets in an emotionally precise way. Another artist who has received international acclaim is **Žilvinas Kempinas** (b.1969), who in 2007 was featured by *Art Review Magazine* as one of its 'Future Greats' and won the Calder Prize the same year. The work of the young conceptual artist **Darius Mikšys** (b.1969) has become widely shown and in 2011 his project for the Lithuanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale was considered to be one of the best.

Music culture in Lithuania is very varied. The traditional *sutartinės*, polyphonic folk songs, are on the UNESCO cultural heritage list. They can be heard in clubs and every four years at the huge Song Festival at which majority of Lithuanian choirs take part. In contemporary music minimalism is particularly strong and the Lithuanian music best known and most frequently performed outside of Lithuania is the choral work by the composer and choir director **Vytautas Miškinis** (b.1954). Lithuanian voices are best represented by the soprano **Violeta Urmana** (b.1961) who enjoys a very successful international career singing in opera houses all over the world.

In Lithuania theatre culture has always been very strong and popular. The