

Applied Artists as Creators of Ceramic Monumental Art in Soviet Estonia: The Past and the Future

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—— The article introduces the usage of ceramics in Estonian monumental art in the post-war modernist era by presenting two examples involving artworks created in 1967 and 1978. Both murals have recently undergone conservation by specialists from the Department of Heritage Protection and Conservation of the Estonian Academy of Arts. In both cases, the conservation teams were able to interview and consult the artists who created the compositions.

Keywords: ceramic, de-mounting, Soviet murals, conservation.

The first mural presented in the article is a design by the ceramist Anu Rank-Soans. This artwork, which depicts abstract female and bird figures assembled out of hemisphere-shaped ceramic elements, was Rank-Soans's graduation work for the State Art Institute in 1967. Since the mural was commissioned by the former experimental poultry center in Kurtna to adorn the interior of the center's administrative building, the artist consciously chose egg-shaped modules for the piece.

The second mural is a massive composition constructed of heavy ceramic elements. It was designed and created by the ceramist Leo Rohlin in 1978 to decorate the facade of a planned communist educational institute. It is the largest known ceramic artwork created in Estonia and the first of its kind to blur the borders between applied art and the visual arts in Estonian art.

The examples allow us to examine the participation of ceramists in Estonian monumental art in the post-war era and attempt to answer the question: how did ceramists, as applied artists, have the opportunity to design public space art that was usually available only to visual artists?

In addition, the article offers a conservator's perspective on current problems in the appreciation and protection of post-war modernist architecture and its connected art in Estonia by reviewing the possibilities of preserving artworks that are attached to buildings to be demolished.

Post-War Monumental Art in Estonia

After World War II, almost the entire world suffered from housing shortages due to war damage, migration, and changes in domestic politics. This problem was somewhat alleviated by mass-produced building panels, which permitted whole dwelling estates to be built quickly and at low prices. However, several problems arose regarding the rhetoric of the new architecture. This problem became topical throughout the Soviet Union: sending out a strong message to its citizens by using the aesthetic approach of classicism had been one of the motifs of Stalinist architecture. Yet how would modernist architecture be articulated? Would it be able to communicate at all? This issue found an answer in monumental artworks made to adorn

public spaces all over the Soviet Union, depicting the grand achievements of the Soviet Union and the great contributions of its citizens.

In Soviet Estonia, monumental-decorative art that was made to illuminate modernist architecture developed along a somewhat different path. Being situated near Finland, information concerning what was happening in the art scene of the Western world leaked into Estonia in various ways. Estonian artists were eager to absorb all of the knowledge they came across. Artists experimented with different materials and techniques and sought to attain contemporary levels despite the lack of materials and proper work spaces.¹ There were typically universal motifs, site-specific themes, and an abstractionist approach in monumental-decorative art in Soviet Estonia. Soviet symbols were seldom evident. Artists often succeeded in putting their ideas into practice, as after the Stalinist regime came to an end, ideological supervision was not very obtrusive in Estonia. Perhaps the most influential factor in Soviet Estonian monumental art was the State Committee for Monumental-Decorative Art of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, according to Jutta Matvei, a long-time secretary of the committee. According to Matvei, the committee was officially formed at the end of the 1960s at the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the Artists Union, the Union of Architects, and the State Construction and Architecture Committee.² The committee consisted of professionals in the field who evaluated the most significant projects in order to shape and improve the quality of Estonian monumental art. Soon after the Republic of Estonia regained its independence in 1991, with the new and confusing era, the committee for monumental-decorative art dissolved.³

Ceramics as an output of Monumental Art

In Soviet Estonia, ceramics was considered industrial art rather than fine art, and ceramicists, along with other applied artists, were not members of the Soviet Estonian Artists' Association. For industrial artists,

1 Interview with Riho Kuld on March 18, 2015. Interviewer: Anu Soojärv. Riho Kuld decided to create his piece in fiberglass instead of in the usual bronze. In order to put his idea into practice, he collaborated with the Tallinn sailing boat shipyard, and thus the monumental bird figure adorning the facade of the Tallinn broadcasting building since 1975 is basically a bird-shaped boat.

2 "ENSV Ministrite Nõukogu määrus Riikliku Monumentaal-dekoratiivkunsti Komisjoni moodustamise kohta" [Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR on the Formation of the State Committee for Monumental-Decorative Art of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR].

3 Jutta Matvei, interviewed by Anu Soojärv, November 4, 2015.

this was quite a hindrance in terms of artistic self-assertion.⁴ On the other hand, these circumstances gave applied artists a certain freedom of expression. Although in the post-Stalin era ideological supervision in the field of art was quite insignificant, in Soviet Estonia compared with some of the other Soviet states, visual artists were watched fairly closely. Applied artists, on the contrary, experienced more freedom.⁵ The border between visual art and applied art lingered for decades,⁶ and ceramicists gained the opportunity to join the Estonian Artists' Association only in 1993. Yet clay was used frequently in post-war monumental art. Murals and mosaics made from ceramic tiles were often designed by visual artists. However, some monumental artworks were commissioned directly from ceramicists, perhaps through unclear concurrences rather than the person or body commissioning the work knowingly involving ceramicists.⁷ Either way, quite a few notable examples of artworks in Estonia were created by ceramicists. For example, there are the works in the two case studies this article describes: two quite different cases in terms of both origin and outcome following conservation work carried out at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

CASE STUDIES: HISTORY

A. Mural by the ceramicist Anu Rank-Soans (b. 1941)

The first example of ceramic monumental art presented in this article was created by the well-known Estonian designer and ceramist Anu Rank-Soans.⁸ Her career as an artist began with the creation of this graduation work for the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR in 1967 [fig. 1]: a mural to decorate the interior of a modernist building, the Kurt-na Poultry Breeding Experiment Station, designed by the Estonian architect Valve Pormeister.⁹ The mural consisted of about 1,930 glazed hollow

4 Karin Nugis, "Identity Construction in a Dialogue of Opposing Discourses: Estonian Crafts in the 1960s–1970s", *Studies of Art and Architecture*, no. 22 (2013): 81–97.

5 Leo Rohlin, interviewed by Hilka Hiiop and Anu Soojärvi, February 19, 2020.

6 Nugis, "Identity": 81–97.

7 Gregor Taul, email to Anu Soojärvi, May 25, 2021; Karin Vicente, email to Anu Soojärvi, May 24, 2021.

8 For more, see: *Klassikud. Anu Rank-Soans. Eesti Tarbekunstija. Disainimuuseum [Classics. Anu Rank-Soans. Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design 28.09.2018–31.03.2019]*, ed. Karin Vicente (Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, 2018).

9 Gregor Taul et al., *Notes on Space. Monumental Painting in Estonia 1947–2012* (Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, 2017), 117. [accessed September 2, 2021]: http://media.voog.com/0000/0038/6069/files/Notes_on_Space_220x290mm_lk97%E2%80%9393144_MUST.pdf.



1.
Anu Rank-Soans installing the
artwork, 1967, photo Jüri Varus

Anu Rank-Soans instaliuoja
kūrinių, 1967, Jürjo Varuso
nuotrauka

ceramic semi-spheres forming bird and female figures. The assignment for Rank-Soans, who was a student at the time, was given by her supervisor, the ceramist and pedagogue Helene Kuma, who was in direct communication with the architect of the administrative building of the poultry center. In one of Rank-Soans's interviews recorded and transcribed in 2019 by the students of the Estonian Academy of Arts,¹⁰ the artist said that the task was to create a figurative mural, and her inspiration came directly from the function of the center. She wanted to create something different from what she had seen before in figurative art, and the result came out rather abstract [figs. 2, 3]. Rank-Soans explained in the interview that the starting points for the composition were the spheric egg-shaped modules which she used to create the figures of the bird keepers and the birds depicted in the

¹⁰ Anu Rank-Soans, interviewed by Hilka Hiiop, Siim Hiis and students at the Estonian Academy of Arts Faculty of Cultural Heritage and Conservation, April 2, 2019. Transcription [accessed September 3, 2021]: https://muinas.artun.ee/static/files/045/final_kurtnamunapannootegevuskava_eka2019.pdf.



2.
The mural in 2019 after the restoration works, photo
Siim Hiis

Sienų puošybos kūrinys, 2019 (po restauracijos),
Siimo Hiiso nuotrauka



3.
Schematic drawing showing the abstract bird and
female figures which the mural is depicting, photo
Siim Hiis, 2019

Freskoje vaizduojamų abstrakčių paukščio ir moters
figūrų schematiškas piešinys, Siimo Hiiso nuotrauka,
2019

mural. According to Rank-Soans, “when Helene Kuma showed the design to Valve Pormeister, the architect said she wanted it on the site. And so it was included.”¹¹

B. Ceramic composition by the ceramicist Leo Rohlin (b. 1939)

At the end of the 1970s, in Tallinn, a plan was developed by Moscow to build an educational facility, the Estonian SSR Economic Institute for Raising the Qualifications of Senior Workers and Specialists, informally known as the Communist Party school. The architect of the building decided an abstract mural should be placed at the building entrance. Hence, the representatives of the school contacted the Estonian Soviet Ministry of Culture to find an artist for the job. Without holding the usual competition, the ministry gave this task to the Tallinn Ceramic Factory. A factory employee, the ceramist and technician Leo Rohlin, was chosen by the management to create the artwork [figs. 4, 5].¹²

Leo Rohlin decided to construct a composition inspired by optical illusions typical of Op art. “The idea for the mural was that when the viewer looks directly at it, it will appear plain white. But when they move, the colors blue and red will start to play with them,” Rohlin explained during an interview carried out at the Estonian Academy of Arts during the conservation process. “I had the opportunity to visit the Léger Museum in Paris when I managed to join a group of Estonian cultural figures who were eligible to travel outside of the Soviet Union. And the bold use of color by Léger inspired me to develop the color scheme in my mural.”¹³

Rohlin worked on the project for about two years, choosing fire clay for the body of the mural. Considering that the Estonian climate is not the most suitable for using ceramics on exteriors, even with a more resilient substance like fire clay, Rohlin had to experiment with the material, especially to learn how the material might act during both cold and mild weather.¹⁴

In 1978 the artist finished his work and the mural was installed on the facade. It consisted of 427 elements and its size was approximately 45 square meters. Yet a complication occurred. The idea for the Party school

¹¹ Rank-Soans, interview.

¹² Taul et al., *Notes on Space*, 121.

¹³ Rohlin, interview.

¹⁴ Ibid.



4.
Leo Rohlin with the modules of the mural, 1979,
courtesy of Leo Rohlin

Leo Rohlinas su kūrinio moduliais, 1979, nuotrauka iš
Leo Rohlino archyvo



5.
Mural after the installation in 1979, courtesy of Leo
Rohlin

Leo Rohlino kūrinys po instaliacijos, 1979, nuotrauka
iš Leo Rohlino archyvo

had been dropped. The building was almost finished and the monumental artwork was completed, but the client was not interested any longer and the funding dried up. When Rohlin had started to work on the composition, he had been told that there would be a roof over it for weather protection, but at the last minute he discovered there would be no roof due to the building suddenly having no purpose. The artist knew that without the roof, the ceramic elements of the mural would probably be damaged quickly. Rohlin recalls: “The lack of communication on the matter was the main problem. If I had known about the changes in plans, maybe I could have altered something to keep the mural safe. Eventually I still decided to install it because the mural was complete, I had put effort into it, and that was the original plan.”¹⁵

Since ceramics back then was considered to be mainly an applied art, this particular piece being commissioned for a building as prominent as an educational facility of the Communist Party was something that changed that notion. It seemed to break down the borders between visual arts and applied arts. So it was a notable piece for several reasons.

The position and the prospect of Estonian Soviet Monumental Art in the Republic of Estonia

After the restoration of independence, the architecture of the 1950s, '60s, '70s, and '80s, along with its connected art, acquired the unpleasant connotation of being “Soviet.” Today, Stalinist architecture in Estonia has been accepted to some extent¹⁶ and is seen as visually appealing, comprehensible and, of course, old. Modernist architecture, however, still tends to carry the burden of being a dull remnant of the Soviet era and therefore less valuable. Even though this sentiment is changing, it isn't changing fast enough to keep modernist buildings from being demolished. Unfortunately, this strongly affects the fate of monumental artworks attached to modernist architecture. Monumental art has surrounded people in public space for decades. Even if it no longer represents the foul era of Soviet occupation, it has become invisible and is not generally recognized as art. Only about 20 pieces of this art have been declared independent cultural monuments.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Liina Jänes, “XX sajandi väärtuslik arhitektuur: Vahekokkuvõte” [Valuable architecture of the 20th century. Midterm review], *Sirp*, December 16, 2016, [accessed September 3, 2021]: <https://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/arhitektuur/xx-sajandi-vaartuslik-arhitektuur-vahekokkuvote/>.

For example, there are the fiberglass plastic bird figure on the facade of the Estonian broadcasting building made by the sculptor Riho Kuld in the 1970s,¹⁷ the ceramic mosaic *Youth* in the foyer of the Tallinn University of Technology created by the painter Enn Põldroos in 1969,¹⁸ and the large mosaic *Map of Stars* made of pebbles by the artist Lagle Israel in 1962–1964 for the Tartu Observatory.¹⁹ No extensive listing has been carried out on monumental art. So it's difficult to determine the progress of preserving monumental artworks.²⁰ The survival of these pieces depends greatly on the fate of the buildings they are connected with. The problem becomes even more acute when we are dealing with monumental art structurally attached to buildings to be demolished. Preservation of an artwork separately from the structure is usually technically complicated and expensive, so the destiny of the detached murals, where and how to present monumental art of this kind after its detachment, and how the removal from the original situation will affect the identities and the concepts of the artworks remain unclear. The following case studies illustrate the uncertainty of the fate of these artworks by showing very different outcomes for two equally notable ceramic monumental murals.

CASE STUDIES - CONSERVATION

A. Mural by the ceramicist Anu Rank-Soans

Anu Rank-Soans's mural has been protected because the main building of the former Kurtna Administrative and Research Centre, its interior, and the landscape around it have been listed as a heritage site since September 2001, and the building has remained almost constantly in use.

¹⁷ The sculpture *Dove* in the registry of cultural monuments, National Heritage Board, [accessed August 30, 2021]: <https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=1538>.

¹⁸ The mosaic *Youth* in the registry of cultural monuments, National Heritage Board, [accessed August 30, 2021]: <https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=1573>.

¹⁹ The mosaic *Map of Stars* in the registry of cultural monuments, National Heritage Board, [accessed August 30, 2021]: <https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=21548>.

²⁰ Registry of cultural monuments, National Heritage Board, [accessed August 30, 2021]: https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=list&page=1&_nocache=1623416387. Up to the present, the listing of Soviet area artworks as national monuments has been rather random. Now the Estonian National Heritage Board is starting to compile a full inventory list of Soviet area monumental artworks which have been preserved. If there is a wish to list an artwork as a National Monument, the document could be a factor in the decision making.



6.

Mural before conservation. All together almost 10% of the ceramic elements had to be replaced or repaired – 250 of 3500, photo Siim Hiis, 2019

Anu Rank-Soans kūrinys prieš restaurāciju, īs viso beveik 10 proc. keraminiu elementu – 250 īs 3500 – reikējo pakeisti arba restauruoti, Siimo Hiiso nuotrauka, 2019

This has created support for the preservation of the mural as part of the original interior. Today, the building is used as an event and holiday center and therefore is open to the public.

Our examination of this mural started in 2019 when a student workshop with the aim of carrying out conservation work on the art piece was held.²¹ The main problem was that many of the glazed modules which the mural consisted of had been lost or come loose [fig. 6]. During our background research, we contacted the artist herself to ask her opinion about the restoration of the mural and to discuss the creation process and the materials she had used 52 years before.

The main challenge was how to replace the lost unique handmade modules so as to recreate the visual wholeness of the mural. An interview

²¹ Each year the Estonian Academy of Arts, in collaboration with the National Heritage Board, leads a practical student workshop which contains an examination, documentation and, if necessary, the conservation of a chosen Soviet area monumental artwork. Anu Rank-Soans's mural was part of this workshop series in 2019.



7.
Discussion with the artist (on the left), photo Grete Nilp, 2019

Diskusija su menininke (kairėje),
Gretes Nilp nuotrauka, 2019



8.
Anu Rank-Soans holding the modules,
photo Grete Nilp, 2019

Anu Rank-Soans laiko moduliūs,
Gretes Nilp nuotrauka, 2019

with the artist revealed that she still had some leftover original modules stored away which we could use to replace the lost ones, and that is what we decided to do. As many as possible of the “original” modules were used, and those we could not replace were modelled by using gypsum, which was later painted to match the original color [figs. 7, 8].

In many ways, this project was positive mainly because regular maintenance on the building made it possible to restore the glory of this unique artwork. This shows how the successful preservation of monumental art depends on very simple and basic factors.

B. Ceramic composition by the ceramicist Leo Rohlin

This unlucky building later served as a hotel, as a part of one of the universities in Tallinn, and finally as a hospital unit. In 2019 it was decided



9.
View of the mural from the front, 2019, photo Taavi
Tiidor

Kūrinio vaizdas iš priekio, 2019, Taavio Tiidoro
nuotrauka



10.
View of the mural from the left side, 2019, photo Anu
Soojärvi

Kūrinio vaizdas iš kairės, 2019, Anu Soojärvi
nuotrauka

to demolish the building and replace it with a new hospital building. As the mural by Leo Rohlin was not under national protection, it would have been demolished along with the building.

Thanks to a local resident who brought the possible destruction of the mural to the attention of the public through social media, discussions about preserving the mural began. This attention wiped the 40-year-old dust off of this totally forgotten mural. It also raised the difficult question



11.

Mural during dismantling, 2019, photo Hilikka Hiiop

Kürinio demontavimas, 2019, Hilkkos Hiiop nuotrauka

of what to do with probably the most massive ceramic monumental artwork in Estonia [figs. 9, 10].

The first step was to de-mount the mural, with each element weighing up to 40 kilos. All of the mural's units were attached to the metal skeleton with cement and dowels. After the elements were removed, they were numbered and cleaned. Hundreds of de-mounted elements were placed in an empty warehouse [fig. 11].

Surprisingly, the fire clay truly lived up to its reputation. Although the mural had stood for 40 years totally exposed to weather, it basically had held up well. The glaze was partially gone, but it hadn't lost much in appearance. Very few of the elements were broken.²²

In collaboration with different specialists and Rohlin himself, the idea developed of reusing the composition. When the new hospital building is complete, some of the details of this mural will be exhibited in the foyer

²² H&M Restuudio OÜ, Leo Rohlin, "Keraamiline kompositsioon (1978). Pannoo demonteerimise aruanne" [Leo Rohlin, ceramic composition. Report of the dismantling of the mural], compiled in 2020, [accessed September 3, 2021]: https://muinas.artun.ee/fotod/aruanded/konserveerimine/event_id-4476.



12.

The artist and his mural just before dismantling,
2019, photo Taavi Tiidor

Menininkas ir jo kūrinys prieš demontavimą, 2019,
Taavio Tiidoro nuotrauka

of the hospital – this time, inside. The part that will be chosen for exhibit is a part that will reflect the main rhythm of this piece. The new solution being a kind of homage to the original mural and to the work of Rohlin would perhaps be the best solution. Unfortunately, no one knows what will happen since all of the elements are still in a warehouse waiting for their fate to be decided [fig. 12].

DISCUSSION

The case studies described above clearly emphasize the fragility of post-war Soviet monumental artworks and their dependence on the structures they are connected to. If a building is eligible for preservation, an artwork connected with the building has a good chance of being preserved. Problems occur when an artwork is part of a building to be demolished, in which case the artwork can only be preserved by removing it from the

original site, yet by doing so the piece loses its context. Is it practical or ethical to separate the artwork from its original site, or should the piece be documented and then allowed to be destroyed?

What might happen to detached artworks? The mural in Kurtna is exhibited with pride and is fully appreciated after its conservation, yet Leo Rohlin's artwork is still sitting in some remote warehouse. Unfortunately, there are several situations similar to that of Rohlin's artwork that conservators of the Estonian Academy of Arts have come across. One of the first monumental paintings of its kind to be de-mounted in Estonia was by the Estonian painter Elmar Kits (1913–1972). Kits painted a 25-square-meter mural in 1965 to decorate the popular Tarvas restaurant in the city of Tartu. After it was detached in 2014, the pieces of the mural were “temporarily” stored. Today, the pieces are still waiting to be exhibited. Similar to Rohlin's work, the discussion of the rescue and preservation of the Kits mural happened only through the public attention drawn to the case. Unfortunately, due to the owner of the former restaurant building having no interest in this artwork and the national heritage board lacking the means to intervene in this process, the initiative ended right there.²³ Thus, the question remains: should we try to preserve post-war monumental art using all means possible? For whom should we attempt to preserve it and what price are we willing to pay?

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²³ For more, see Hilkka Hiip, Helen Volber, “Demounting the murals from their architectural environment – salvage or destruction?”, in *Monumental Treasures - Preservation and Conservation*. XX NFK (The Nordic Association of Conservators) Congress. From 21 October 2015 to 23 October 2015, Helsinki, 118–125.

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Santrauka

Taikomosios dailės menininkai – monumentalios keramikos kūrėjai Sovietų Estijoje: praeitis ir ateitis

Hilkka Hiiop, Anu Soojärv, Varje Ōunapuu

Reikšminiai žodžiai: keramika, demontavimas, sovietinė sienų puošyba, restauracija.

Straipsnyje, remiantis dviem pavyzdžiais – meno kūriniams, sukurtais 1967 ir 1978 m., aptariamas keramikos naudojimas Estijos monumentaliojoje dailėje pokariniu modernizmo laikotarpiu. Sovietinėje Estijoje keramika buvo laikoma ne vaizduojamuoju, o pramoniniu menu. Pramoninio meno kūrėjams tai tapo nemaža meninės saviraiškos kliūtimi. Antra vertus, ši aplinkybė suteikė taikomios dailės kūrėjams tam tikrą išraiškos laisvę. Kartais monumentaliosios dailės kūriniai būdavo užsakomi tiesiogiai iš keramikų, tačiau greičiau jau sutapus aplinkybėms nei tikslingai su jais bendradarbiaujant. Estijoje esama gana nemažai keramikų sukurtų monumentaliosios dailės kūrinių pavyzdžių. Pirmojo straipsnyje pristatomo sienų puošybos kūrinio autorė – keramikė Anu Rank-Soans. Kūrinys, vaizduojantis abstrakčias moterų ir paukščių figūras ir sudėliotas iš pusrutulio formos keraminių elementų, yra jos diplominis darbas, sukurtas baigiant Valstybinį dailės institutą 1967-aisiais. Antrasis kūrinys – didelio formato kompozicija iš sunkių keraminių elementų. Jį, turėjusį papuošti planuojamo statyti komunistinio švietimo instituto fasadą, sukūrė ir įgyvendino keramikas Leo Rohlinas 1978 metais. Šie pavyzdžiai leidžia patyrinėti, kaip keramikos kūrėjai dalyvavo Estijos monumentaliojoje dailėje pokariu, bandant atsakyti į klausimą, kaip keramikai – taikomios dailės kūrėjai – gaudavo progą kurti kūrinius viešosioms erdvėms, kurios įprastai būdavo prieinamos tik vaizduojamojo meno kūrėjams. Be to, straipsnyje yra pateikiamas restoratoriaus požiūris į dabartines problemas, vertinant ir išsaugant pokario

modernistinę architektūrą ir joje esančius meno kūrinius Estijoje, apžvelgiant galimybes išsaugoti pasmerktuose griauti pastatuose esančius sienų puošybos kūrinius. Straipsnyje yra apžvelgiami pokario epochos sovietinės monumentaliosios dailės kūrinių skirtingi likimai ir trapumas, pavyzdžiui, Anu Rank-Soans kūrinys po restauracijos su pasididžiavimu yra eksponuojamas ir puikiai vertinamas, tuo tarpu Leo Rohlino kūrinys tebedulka atokioje saugykloje.