

# Architect Ludwig Melville and Art Nouveau Architecture in Liepāja

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**Abstract** – The article analyzes the works of Liepāja's architect Ludwig William Melville, who was previously unknown but in fact is really remarkable and sets his place in the legacy of Liepāja Art Nouveau architecture. Several historical documents have been used in the study and L. Melville as a potential architect of many buildings has been identified through a broad formally-stylistic comparative analysis.

**Keywords** – 20th century architecture, Art Nouveau, Liepāja, L. Melville.

## INTRODUCTION

The port city of Liepāja, located in the west of Latvia, is notable for its architectural heritage of Art Nouveau. True, this is not commensurate with the unique collection of Rīga Art Nouveau buildings, but definitely surpasses one or another European metropolis proud of its Art Nouveau buildings.

There is not much documentary evidence of the construction history of Liepāja buildings, as the archive of the City Building Board was destroyed during the Soviet era. Fragmentary information can be found in the archives of architects Bertschy's construction designs, which are kept at the Liepāja Museum. The Girls' Grammar School building project, signed by architect Ludwig Melville, was found in recent research. Until that time, this architect was known only as a builder of Liepāja Peter's Market, as well as the architect of the building at *Lielā iela 5*. The discovery made it possible to understand and define wider both the creative approach and architectural language of the architect and, consequently, with a sufficiently high degree of reliability to identify a whole series of his work, thus filling a large white patch in the history of Latvian culture.

## I. PERSONAL LIFE

There is no much historical evidence about Ludwig William Melville (1837–1915). The twelfth book of the German congregation of the Liepāja Evangelical Lutheran Church contains a record that he was born on 18 September 1837 in the family of Carl William Melville, an honorary citizen of Liepāja and a counsellor at the Supreme Court of Kurzeme (*Oberhofgericht*), and Anne Elisabeth Melville (nee Konopka). On 2 November, he was baptized by a Rucava pastor Louis Melville. The christening took place in his parents' house, and among the guests there were also well-known persons, including Karl Gotlieb Ulich who later became Mayor of Liepāja [1]. Ludwig Melville was a second child. He had one elder and one younger sisters and three younger brothers.

Ludwig Melville's great-great-grandfather David Melville was born in Scotland, but the architect's grandfather Jacob Ludwich Melville, who was a merchant, already was a citizen of Liepāja [2].

In 1861, Ludwig Melville received a degree of a freelance artist from the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts for "the design of a swimming school" [3]. He can be seen in a photograph of a group of members of the Liepāja Town Council taken in 1878. This photograph can now be seen at the permanent exhibition of the Liepāja Museum, and from there, a portrait of Ludwig Melville (Fig. 1). In 1879, an advertisement was published in the Liepāja local newspaper in which L. Melville offered "to design plans for all kinds of new buildings and rebuilding projects", indicating that his apartment is located in Melville House, at *Jūras iela*, opposite the Customs [4]. In July 1881, he married Louise Puchert, a daughter of the Liepāja businessman, millionaire G. D. Puchert [5]. In the 1880s and 1890s, L. Melville was an active member of different municipal and public institutions – the City Building Board, commissions for paving, surveying, taxation of real estate, etc. Also in the 1900s, he was a member of the City Council [6]. In 1904, Courland Governorate approved L. Melville as the adviser (*Stadtrath*) to Liepāja City [7].

## II. ECLECTICALLY DECORATIVE ART NOUVEAU

Most of the identified architectural works of L. Melville reflect the transition from Eclecticism to Art Nouveau. Usually these buildings are lavishly decorated with the ornaments of the new style arranged in equal rhythm like in the façades of typical eclectic buildings. Such example of Eclectically Decorative Art Nouveau is also Peter's Market at *Kuršu iela 5/7/9* (Figs. 2 and 3). It is considered to be one of the most beautiful buildings in Liepāja, some even claim that it is one of "the most beautiful market pavilions in Europe" [8]. As indicated in many different publications, it was built between 1908 and 1910 to the project by Ludwig Melville and Georg von Malm, city engineer of Liepāja. Although the architectural finish of the building may appear quite eclectic, formal expressions of Art Nouveau can be seen in the curved lintels above the entrance door openings and transom windows that are divided into several vertical panes and covered with a single semi-circular arch. Moreover, architectural finish is saturated with three vertical lines of different lengths – grooves or *lesenes*. It is one of the most typical Art Nouveau ornaments. These lines run up the pilasters of the attic storeys and are interwoven into a sculptural frieze below the stringcourse

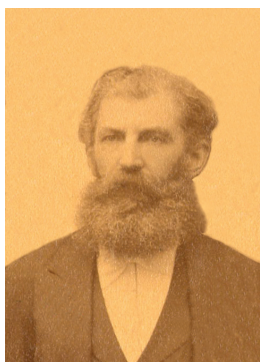


Fig. 1. Ludwig Melville [Picture: permanent exhibition of the Liepāja Museum].

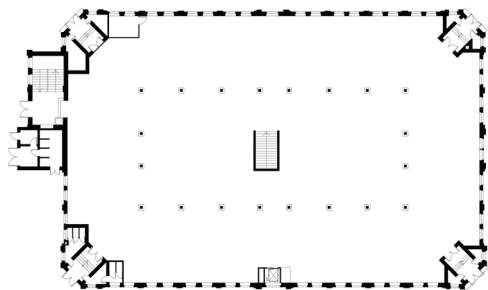


Fig. 2. Peter's Market at *Kuršu iela* 5/7/9. Plan. Ludwig Melville, Georg von Malm. 1908–1910 [Reconstruction of the layouts of the building by A. Ēniņa].



Fig. 3. Peter's Market at *Kuršu iela* 5/7/9. Exterior view. Ludwig Melville, Georg von Malm. 1908–1910.

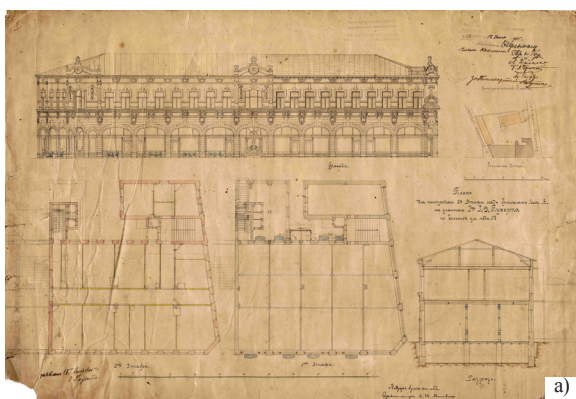


Fig. 4. Trading and office building at *Lielā iela* 5. 1905. Design for the extension of the building (a) [9], and exterior view (b).

running along the tops of the pilasters that are arranged at regular intervals in the façade.

The market hall roof rests on elegant trussing. Spacious hall evokes an uplifting feeling of lightness.

On 18 July 1905, the Liepāja City Building Board approved the design of G. D. Puchert's trading and office building at *Lielā iela* 5 (Fig. 4), signed by Ludwig Melville. On 17 July 1906, a note appeared on it stating that the building had been completed [9]. According to the design, the upper floor was added to the wing on the corner of *Lielā* and *Teātra* Streets. Evidently, the same architect had designed the wing of the house that was built earlier since the architecture of the building is uniform. The apertures arranged in a steady rhythm bespeak eclectic principles of composition, while Art Nouveau prevails in the decorative finish of the façades.

The design of one of the masterpieces of Ludwig Melville, the building of Girls' Grammar School (now Liepāja State Gymnasium No. 1) at *Ausekļa iela* 9 (Figs. 5, 6) was approved by the Construction Department of Courland Governorate in December 1907 [10]. Yet the construction of the building took several years. Already back in 1904, the city was allowed to spend 40,000 roubles [11], but it was not enough because the design estimate was 171,297 roubles and 87 kopecks [12].

The construction works, after several times of repeated biddings, started only on 11 February 1911. The works were assigned to a local industrialist Fridrihs Matisons who undertook to perform them according to the 1907 estimate. In this regard, the Minister of National Education stated in his report to the Senate: "Citizen Matisons [...] has performed a variety of works for the Liepāja City Board and Emperor Alexander III port, and he is known as a reliable and wealthy person" [13]. The impressive building, which covers an irregularly-shaped plot of land, was built over a year as shows the number "1912" in its façade facing *Ausekļa iela*. The building stands out with its elaborate massing that precisely reflects the layout of interior spaces while the arrangement of several finish details bears a strong resemblance to that of the buildings at *Lielā iela* 5 and several others, which may have been designed by this architect. The finish of the street façade is unusually abundant. The motif of three vertical lines varying in length has especially many interpretations here. The architectural finish includes also undulated lines, dreamy masks, circles, seashells, palmettes, rosettes, festoons, volutes, dentils, etc. In the architecture of school buildings in Latvia there are almost no similar examples. Facades of the courtyard wing containing classrooms and positioned at an oblique angle to the street are made of red brick with



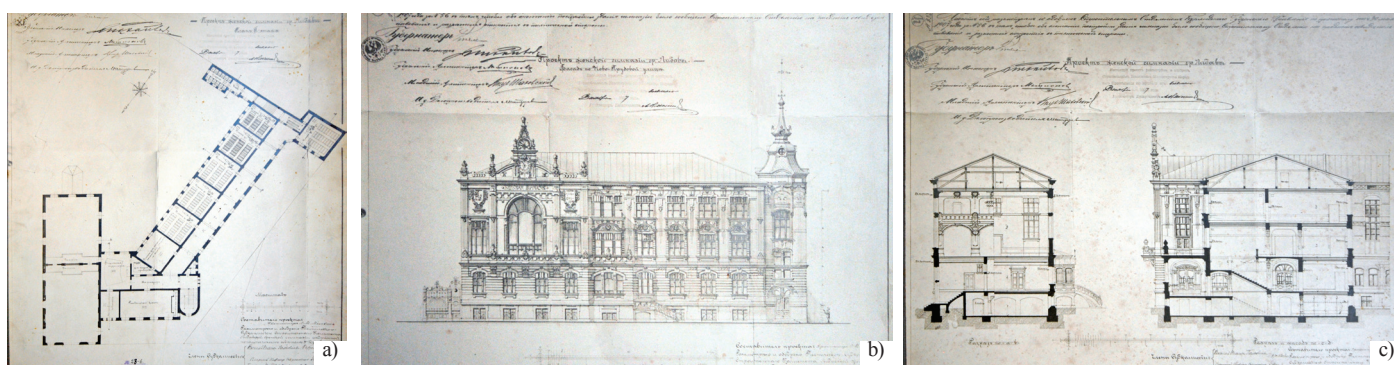


Fig. 5. Girl's Grammar School at Ausekļa iela 9. 1907–1911. Design plan (a); elevation (b) and section (c) [10].



Fig. 6. Girl's Grammar School at Ausekļa iela 9. 1907–1911. Exterior view from the street (a), view from the courtyard (b), staircase (c).

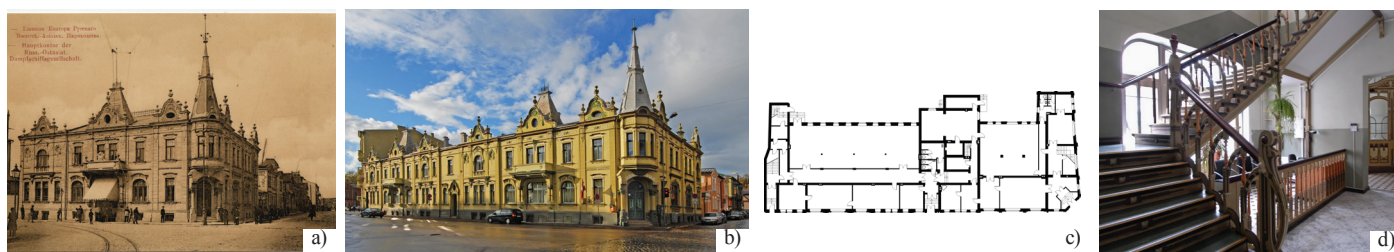


Fig. 7. The office building of the Russian East Asiatic Steamship Company at Kūrmājas prospekts 2/6. 1908–1911. A 1909 postcard (a); exterior view in 2011 (b); plan (c) [Reconstruction of the layouts of the building by A. Ēniņa], and the main staircase (d).

small light plastered patches. They are reminiscent of the “red-and-white” architecture of schools and other public buildings propagated at that time by Riga City Architect Reinhold Schmaeling.

The interior of the building reflects the decorative manner of Art Nouveau attuned to the artistic image of the street façade. The whole building is an example of genuine *Gesamkunstwerk*. It is perfectly restored, for which architect Ilze Mekša, the author of the renovation project, received the “Annual Latvian Architecture Award 2018”.

Not far from Girls' Grammar School, at Kūrmājas prospekts 2/6, there is another architectural jewel of Liepāja, where motifs and ornaments of Eclectically Decorative Art Nouveau

are combined into a dazzling symphony. It is the office building of Russian East Asiatic Steamship Company (*Russisch-Ostasiatischen Dampschiffahrt – Gesellschaft*, see Fig. 7). Today it houses Kurzeme Regional Court.

The building was completed in two stages. At first, in 1908, the wing was constructed on the street corner of Kūrmājas prospekts and Graudu iela, as indicates the year of construction displayed on the second gable from the corner. A postcard printed around 1910 shows the building as it was then: twice shorter than today. In turn, the second gable from the left contains the number of the year “1911” when the building was fully completed.

The façades generously adorned with a variety of decorative reliefs are strikingly similar to the street façade of Girls' Gram-





Fig. 8. Apartment house at *Dzintaru iela* 18. 1903. Exterior view (a) and entrance area in the staircase (b).



Fig. 9. Apartment house at *Elkoņu iela* 4. 1902.



Fig. 10. Apartment house at *Andreja Pumpura iela* 7. Around 1902.



Fig. 11. Apartment house at *Toma iela* 46. 1902.



Fig. 12. Apartment house at *Rīgas iela* 3. 1903.

mar School. The arrangement and rhythm of architectural finish and shape of decorative details allow assuming that the building of the Russian East Asiatic Steamship Company had been designed by architect Ludwig Melville.

Exuberance of sinuous lines, lesenes of varying length, floral motifs, circles, stylised triglyphs with guttae of different sizes and other Art Nouveau inspired ornaments in various compositions and combinations in the façades of the building is simply amazing. Interplay of ornaments is lively and light-hearted also behind the main entrance door where a small passage makes a slight turn to lead visitors to the staircase hall. Not only the doors of this small passage are a real masterpiece of carpentry, so are its walls with effective glazing and ornamental mouldings. Wooden stairs are of the same superb quality. Their railing is the work of a true master of decorative sculpture. Even risers are adorned with ornamental mouldings.

One of the earliest Art Nouveau buildings in Liepāja is the apartment house at *Dzintaru iela* 18 (Fig. 8). It was built in 1903 as show the dates seen on the cartouches that are inserted into the frieze in the upper part of the main façade. From a distance, the house resembles an eclectic building designed in the traditional Neo-Renaissance manner. However, only few elements adorning the façades have any references to earlier architectural styles. The building has pronouncedly asymmetric massing. Avant-corps that rises up at the right wing of the façade

facing *Dzintaru iela* contain the staircase. Window apertures there are lowered by half a level in relation to other apertures in the building. It shows Art Nouveau design principles: the internal spatial structure of the building is reflected in its exterior, namely, these windows illuminate landings of the staircase, which are half a level lower than the next floor.

Almost all of the varied yet elegant decorations and motifs of the architectural finish of the building can be spotted also in the school building at *Ausekļa iela* 9, in Peter's Market at *Kuršu iela* 5/7/9 or in the office building at *Kūrmājas prospekts* 2/6. All particular details, including interior finish and the applied principles of architectural composition, bespeak Ludwig Melville's creative style.

Similar to the buildings analysed above architectural decoration techniques, the principles of the facade artistic composition and the range of decorative elements utilised are also characteristic of residential buildings at *Elkoņu iela* 4 (1902; Fig. 9), *Andreja Pumpura iela* 7 (Fig. 10), *Toma iela* 46 (1902; Fig. 11), *Rīgas iela* 3 (1903; Fig. 12), as well as the house with Oscar Thal's haberdashery at *Graudu iela* 46 (around 1905). Most likely, the designs of these buildings were drawn by the same hand, and it should be architect L. Melville's hand.

Almost all buildings designed by Ludwig Melville are adorned with iconic three vertical grooves of different lengths. They embellish also the entrance portal of the shop of the eclectic





Fig. 13. Apartment house with shops at *Graudu iela* 40.



Fig. 14. The building of the Great Guild of Liepāja at *K. Ukstiņa iela* 7/9. Exterior view (a), façade fragment (b), staircase.



Fig. 15. Emigrant house at *Flotes iela* 5. Around 1912. Pulled down in 2016.



Fig. 16. Printing house at *Andreja Pumpura iela* 10.



Fig. 17. Apartment house at *Rīgas iela* 37/39. Exterior view (a), corner balcony (b).



two-storey wooden house at *Graudu iela* 40 (Fig. 13). The solution for the corner of the building is quite original: it is chamfered on the ground and first floors, while the upper part of the building below the roof is tetragonal. A decorative console of an intricate design makes a transition from one shape to another.

Similar massing has the red brick building of the Great Guild of Liepāja at *K. Ukstiņa iela* 7/9 (Fig. 14). Although the architectural expression is modest, the building contains enough details to bespeak the creative method of Ludwig Melville who had been also indicated as the architect of the building in several documents [14], [15]. Next to the entrance door, there is a decorative stone panel, which stands out on the red brick background with its chiselled Art Nouveau-ish contour, geometric shapes and sculpted plants. The decorative elements often used by Ludwig Melville can also be seen in the interior of the building.

Liepāja has a whole series of buildings whose architectural language directly points to L. Melville's creative approach and method. These are apartment houses at *Bāriņu iela* 21a, *Lāčplēša iela* 20, *Republikas iela* 17, *Kungu iela* 46, *Uliha iela* 13, *Liepu iela* 27, *Ganību iela* 57, *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela* 32, *Rīgas iela* 38 and 59, *Tirgus iela* 35, etc.

An impressive red brick building is one of the so-called emigrant houses at *Baseina iela* 9. It was built around 1910 as a temporary accommodation for people who had emigrated from Russia and waited for their turn to embark the ship bound for the USA

served then by the Russian East Asiatic Steamship Company. After World War I, a school was set up in the building.

Another two "emigrant houses" were built at *Flotes iela* 3 (Fig. 15) and *Flotes iela* 5. Around 1912 or later, one of Liepāja's newspapers, published in Russian, printed a picture of the Emigrant House and an article about the opening of the building stating that "it was built to the design by architect Melville". Unfortunately, the collector who has kept the clipping knows neither the title of the newspaper, nor the date of the publication of the article. Artistic image of the building acquires a clear tectonic arrangement and quite a modern look, which considerably differs from the architect's earlier works. After WW I and WW II, the buildings accommodated military establishments, and after 1990, they were taken over by the local government. In 2005, the building at *Flotes iela* 5, and in 2016, the building at *Flotes iela* 3 was pulled down. Pretty identical is the façade architecture of Meyer's printing house at *Andreja Pumpura iela* 10 (Fig. 16). Its owner was a publisher of *Libausche Zeitung*, a popular Liepāja's newspaper.

The corner balcony of the apartment house at *Rīgas iela* 37/39 (Fig. 17) attracts attention with a full supply of decorative clichés of Art Nouveau ornaments compacted on the balcony panels. This vivid concrete composition dynamically projects from the brick wall. At the bottom, it has a classic ionic cymatium profile. The consoles of a very similar shape support





Fig. 18. Apartment house at *Dīķa iela 11*.



Fig. 19. Apartment house at *Šaurā iela 1*



Fig. 20. Apartment house at *Avotu iela 4*. Exterior view (a), staircase (b).



Fig. 21. Apartment house at *Klaipēdas iela 6*. 1914.



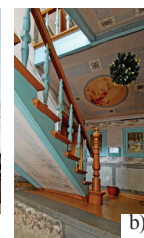
Fig. 22. Apartment house at *Friča Brīvzemnieka iela 35*.



Fig. 23. Apartment house at *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 55*. 1912.



Fig. 24. Apartment house at *Zāļu iela 15*. Exterior view (a) and staircase (b).



the balcony at *Ausekļa iela 9*. Many other decorative details also strikingly resemble both *Ausekļa iela 9* and *K. Ukstiņa iela 7/9*.

Façades of the buildings at *Dīķa iela 11* (Fig. 18), *Šaurā iela 1* (Fig. 19) and *Avotu iela 4* (Fig. 20) seem to have been designed in the same vein as the balcony at *Rīgas iela 37/39*.

The building at *Avotu iela 4* is one of Liepāja's Art Nouveau jewels. The overall façade composition appears unpretentious although its artistic finish comprises a whole lot of decorative elements, including the iconic three flutes of different lengths. All details of restrained yet rich architectural finish quite strongly resemble similar architectural elements at *Dzintaru iela 18*, *Elkoņu iela 4*, *Andreja Pumpura iela 7*, *Rīgas iela 3*, *Graudu iela 46*, *Bāriņu iela 21a*, *Lielā iela 5*, *Ausekļa iela 9*, *Kūrmājas prospekts 2/6*, *Kuršu iela 5/7/9*, as well as at *Republikas iela 17* and *Kungu iela 46*. It is quite likely that all these buildings had had the same author. At least it is known for sure that the buildings at *Lielā iela 5*, *Ausekļa iela 9* and *Kuršu iela 5/7/9* were designed by architect Ludwig Melville.

The entrance door to the building at *Avotu iela 4* and its fittings are a separate masterpiece of Art Nouveau, which blends everything into a single ensemble. The atmosphere characteristic of the style awaits inside the building as well. In the staircase, wooden balusters of the railing are still eclectic, though consoles supporting the beams of the landings and risers clearly speak the language of Art Nouveau.

### III. STYLE IN ITS PRIME

In the developed phase of Art Nouveau, building architecture became more rational and restrained, paying more attention to the massing and architectural elements – bay windows, gables, balconies, etc. Decorative details were usually fully integrated into the basic architectural form. Ludwig Melville's possible works in this stylistic category are recognizable due to some formal peculiarities, or at least after intangible similarities to the architect's many other works. For example, the gables of the so-called Perpendicular Art Nouveau buildings at *Klaipēdas iela 6*, *Friča Brīvzemnieka iela 35*, *Zāļu iela 15* and *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela 55*, appear to have been made by none other than L. Melvils. Several other elements of these buildings, both in the façade and indoors, also resemble the personal style of L. Melville.

A gable-like attic storey above the avant-corps in the central part of the façade at *Klaipēdas iela 6* (Fig. 21) strongly resembles attic storeys seen above many buildings that might have been built to the architect Melville's designs. Architecturally, the façade exhibits a certain likeness to that of the apartment house with shops at *Friča Brīvzemnieka iela 35* (Fig. 22). A mansard roof that has been added in the 2000s during the restoration of the building blends harmoniously with its design.





Fig. 25. Apartment house at *Toma iela* 43. Exterior view, staircase.

Fig. 26. Apartment house at *Uliha iela* 68. 1912

Fig. 27. Apartment house at *Peldu iela* 25

On the other, western side of the block containing the house at *Klaipēdas iela* 6, there is another building at *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela* 55 (Fig. 23) designed in the style of late Art Nouveau. Its overall façade composition and principles of arrangement and design of several details of architectural finish imply even more clearly that its author could have been Ludwig Melville. All avant-corps are surmounted by pediments, which are almost semicircular in form while their ends are concave. The central avant-corps is wider and higher than the other two, and a closer inspection reveals the number “1912” made of plaster under the cornice.

The apartment house at *Zāļu iela* 15 (Fig. 24) has almost the same silhouette and overall façade composition as the buildings at *Klaipēdas iela* 6 and *Friča Brīvzemnieka iela* 35. Though the vertical division of the seemingly modest façade is not so pronounced, it abounds in refined ornamental reliefs containing geometric shapes, mostly squares, circles and stylised flowers within squares. Such ornaments are quite widespread in the façades of many buildings designed by Ludwig Melville. At least four different textures of plaster are used in the façade finish. The house at *Zāļu iela* 15 is also one of those Liepāja's Art Nouveau buildings where impressive murals can still be seen in the staircase.

Almost the same architectural expression as that of the façades of the buildings at *Klaipēdas iela* 6 and *Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela* 55, with the help of some imagination, can be seen also at *Toma iela* 43 (Fig. 25). It is a striking piece of architecture possessing all features of Perpendicular Art Nouveau. Ornamental reliefs adorn the spandrels both on the walls and on the strongly projecting bay windows. The Neo-Classical entrance portal reflects the trend that came into fashion after 1910. So, the building was evidently constructed shortly before World War I. The staircase of the building wraps a visitor in a spectacular Art Nouveau atmosphere that bears a likeness to the stairs in the buildings at *Dzintaru iela* 18 and *Avotu iela* 4. Again, a similar contour repeats itself in a moulding, which adorns the stringer of the stairs and the bottom of support beams of the landings. All these

decorative details appear to have been added by the same artist and this artist most likely was Ludwig Melville.

Two apartment houses at *Uliha iela* 68 and *Peldu iela* 25 share a similar architectural idiom. The building at *Uliha iela* 68 (Fig. 26) is modest in size and restrained in architectural expression, but its overall image exudes refinement and includes features characteristic of Perpendicular Art Nouveau. The façade bears the number “1912”. The apartment house at *Peldu iela* 25 (Fig. 27) has a similar architectural finish executed in a slightly more ornate and elaborate way. The façade displays three flutes varying in length, combinations of circles, squares incorporating small stylised flowers, suspended reliefs in form of panels that end with a projected semicircle, which includes a raised circle. Both buildings have also almost the same composition of gable-like attic storeys with shallow avant-corps marking the location of staircases. All these details belong to the set of decorative motifs in particular and architectural language in general preferred by Ludwig Melville.

## CONCLUSION

Ludwig Melville's creative legacy is very rich and diverse. L. Melville's contribution among the identified Art Nouveau architects in Liepāja is the most comprehensive. His works display both decorative saturation and solid restraint, but they all stand out with a high-quality architecture and culture of filigree details. L. Melville's buildings are one of the most characteristic components of Liepāja cityscape and form a significant part of the inventory of Latvian cultural heritage.

## REMARK

All photographs, unless indicated otherwise – by the author of the article.

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