

# Craft teachers' graduation theses in Latvia

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## Abstract

*Cultural heritage is taught as part of the craft curriculum from the beginning of general education in Latvia. At the end of the craft teacher training programme, students complete a final thesis in which one of the tasks is to develop teaching content for the chosen theme and class. This article asks how traditional culture is reflected in students' final theses, using content analysis as the research method. 210 final theses containing studies on traditional crafts were selected for the study. The research findings identified four types of traditional cultural expressions: technique-, artefact-, ornament- and research-focused theses. The final theses examine both Latvian traditional culture and the traditional cultures of other nations.*

**Keywords:** artefacts, craft techniques, design, teacher education, traditional culture

## Introduction

“What is important in intangible or living heritage is its inheritance – how the younger generation will seize the opportunity to carry it on,” Ernesto Ottone, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture (Diena 2023). Latvian Intangible Cultural Heritage Law (2016) states that themes related to intangible cultural heritage should be included in the content of formal and non-formal education programmes and that relevant specialists and teachers should be trained.

Craft teacher training programs at the University of Latvia started in 1983 with the establishment of the Faculty of Pedagogy. The popularity of the program has fluctuated from an average of 35 graduates in the early stages of the program to 8 graduates per year today.

In Latvia, traditional culture has been part of the design (home economics) and technologies curriculum as well as the studies of prospective teachers of design and technology.

Sirpa Kokko (2021: 9) has distinguished five approaches to craft studies in higher education: 1. Educational crafts; 2. Traditional crafts; 3. Critical crafts; 4. Cultural heritage of crafts; and 5. Design-based crafts. The design and technology (previously: craft<sup>1</sup>) teacher study programme at the University of Latvia corresponds to the educational craft approach. At the same time, it is necessary to educate craft teachers to see the possibilities of preserving and developing craft traditions, and one of the possible solutions is to carry out research in this direction in the final theses of their studies. (Kokko, Räsänen 2019). As part of their studies at the University of Latvia, students pursuing the qualification of a craft teacher write a Bachelor's paper. Oftentimes these focus on topics related to traditional culture.

Craft skills are one of the forms of traditional<sup>2</sup> culture (Siliņa-Jasjukeviča 2021: 38). Crafts play an important role in preserving cultural heritage, both through practical activities and through learning about craft traditions (Kokko, Dillon 2021). Siliņa-Jasjukeviča and Rancāne (2022) conceptualise the approach as the study of traditional culture from a festive ritual perspective, to which every subject taught at school can contribute. In design and technology (crafts) lessons students can learn to make traditional room decorations, masks, wreaths, kitchen utensils, and basketry. Siliņa-Jasjukeviča's (2021) PhD thesis on the subject of craft distinguishes the following aspects of learning traditional culture: learning traditional techniques, learning to make traditional products (e.g. belt weaving), making copies (folk costume), and studying traditional culture. Jõeste (2023), writing about the use of Estonian ethnographic gloves to create new products, identifies three types: making copies, making a 'personalised copy' and creating new products based on tradition. In the analysis of our material, we have followed the general division of themes in craft education proposed in Siliņa-Jasjukeviča's work.

### **What is traditional?**

In Latvia, intangible cultural heritage is defined in the law as “a part of the cultural heritage of Latvia, which represents the cultural traditions of Latvia and consists of the knowledge, skills, values and behaviour models passed down from generation to generation, defined by the surrounding environment and developed by interaction with history, nature and creativity, including oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals,

1 The name of the subject at the school has changed several times, since the last education reform it is design and technologies, which also includes the learning of craft.

2 The Dictionary of Latvian Literary Language (1972–1996) explains traditional as “that which has existed in a certain group of people for a relatively long time and has been handed down from generation to generation; that which is based on tradition”.

festive events, knowledge concerning nature and the universe, traditional craftsmanship, as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith” (Likumi 2016).

In turn, the preservation of intangible cultural heritage is defined as “a set of measures aimed at ensuring the sustainability of the intangible cultural heritage, including identification, documentation, research, development, protection, promotion, enhancement, enlivening, practice and transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education” (Likumi 2016).

The popularity of traditional culture has progressed by leaps and bounds. Helgadóttir (2011), in her study of the popularity of the Icelandic sweater, points out that there have been two significant waves of popularity of the Icelandic sweater: one associated with the moment Iceland declared independence from Denmark and the other with the millennium as part of national branding and designers’ focus on folk traditions in a globalising world. Similarly, in Latvia, there was a particular flowering of traditional culture at the beginning of the 20th century during the establishing of Latvian independence and then in the late 1980s, early 1990s, in connection with the national awakening and the restoration of independence, when there was a particular interest in folk traditions, folk costumes and crafts. As Karlsonē (2023) points out, there is also an increase in interest in folk-costume-making in Latvia today. She also states that studios and hobby groups are the main places where craft skills are learned nowadays, but the basics of handicraft have been and still are being learnt in comprehensive schools.

### **Craft in comprehensive school curriculum**

The subject in which craft is taught, the name and content of which have changed over time, has a close relationship with the acquisition of traditional cultural values in Latvia. In the pre-WWII Latvian Republic, girls learnt traditional techniques such as knitting, embroidery, and weaving. Boys learnt metalworking and woodworking (Pöllänen, Urdziņa-Deruma, 2017). Intermittently, including during the Soviet period, the subject was connected with Latvian traditional culture and the study of Latvian ethnographic heritage, with girls learning traditional Latvian handicraft techniques such as knitting and embroidery (Urdziņa-Deruma, Milgrāve, 2014). With the restoration of independence, traditional culture was given special importance. The secondary school curriculum for grades 10–12 included making components of ethnographic folk costumes or dresses with elements of ethnographic patterns, and also introduced pupils to traditional festivities (TIM PZPI 1990; LRIM MSD 1992).

The 2006 Regulations Regarding the State Standard in Basic Education and the Subjects of Study Standards in Basic Education, subsection 19.3

includes the idea that one “can independently create a composition using various sources of inspiration (e.g. ethnography, folk art, crafts, professional art, nature), a sketch, technical drawing, blueprint necessary for making the object; can use drawings, patterns obtained from various sources of information; can justify and predict his/her ideas and the result of his/her activity” (Likumi 2006). The standards approved in 2013 include similar requirements: “11.3. is able to draw from nature, objects of material heritage, music and other environmental processes to create a simple product; has experience of creating and presenting a sketch of his/her idea. [...] 15.8. master traditional textile techniques – crochet, knitting, embroidery” (Likumi 2013).

The current State Standard for Basic Education includes outcomes for exploring and using crafts, ethnography, and cultural heritage in general as sources of inspiration for new solutions (Likumi 2018). For example in grade 9, theme 9.1 (“How does one make a design product combining several techniques inspired by an archaeological or ethnographic folk costume?”) includes in-depth research and use of archaeological and ethnographic folk costumes as part of the development of a creative product (Eglīte et al. 2019). Until 2018, students' creations were called products/articles (*izstrādājumi*), and since 2018, the term design products (*dizaina produkti*) has been used in the standard and in the model programme. (Likumi 2006; Likumi 2018).

### **Material and method**

When studying to become craft teachers, students are required to write final theses (bachelor's, qualification or diploma theses, depending on the requirements of the study programme). Part of the work consists of a research project where the students develop a model for teaching one particular theme in one particular class (most often grades 5–9) and validate it at a school, by carrying out pedagogical observations and analysing the results. In some cases, a model for the same theme is developed for two or more classes, e.g. a single task in composition for grades 5–9, such as animal stylisation, which is implemented in each class using a different technology (appliqué, knitting, crochet, embroidery, weaving).

In total, 245 available theses defended at the University of Latvia in the period from 1990 to 2024 were studied. 210 of them contained studies on traditional craft and were selected for the study. From 2007 onwards, all the final theses of the study programme are available, since from this year the final theses were submitted electronically and stored in the system of the University of Latvia. However, all final theses defended earlier are no longer available. A total of 190 final theses have been produced and defended between 2007

and January 2024. 159 theses with elements of traditional culture were selected for the study. Between 1990 and 2006, 55 final theses were available, of which 51 were selected as having elements of traditional culture.

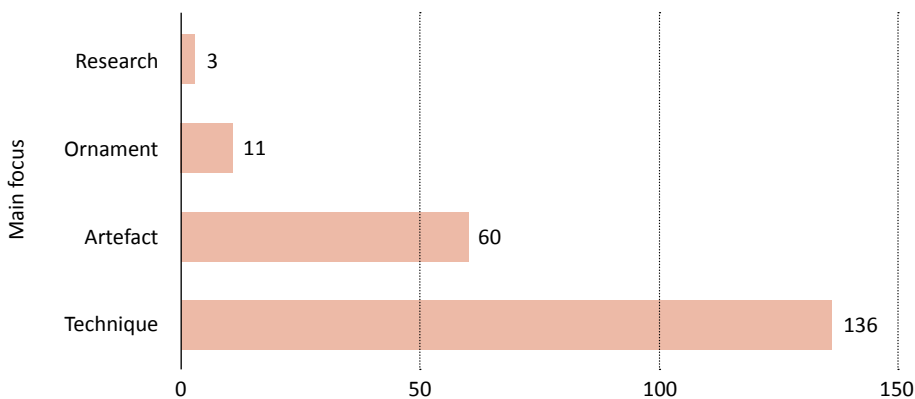
Content analysis was used in this study (see Pipere 2021). Authors were coded (from S1 to S210) starting with the last final thesis defended. For the purpose of the content analysis, the authors, years and titles of the available final theses were included in the table in chronological order, starting with the most recent.

The following columns were included in the table: Code, Year, Title of the final thesis, Copy of an artefact, Personalised copy, Artefact as source of inspiration, Ornament as source of inspiration, and Traditional techniques. During the content analysis, three columns were added: history of a technique or product, research as an assignment, and excursion.

When studying the final theses, it was necessary to divide them into content units and decide which group to include each thesis in based on the technique, product or source of inspiration described in the thesis.

The content units corresponding to the learning of traditional culture were mainly searched for in the thematic plans created by the students, their approval analyses, and the appendices. As a result, the components found in the final theses were grouped into four categories: technique-, artefact-, ornament- and research-focused theses (figure 1).

The question of what is considered a primary source or secondary source became an issue during the development of the research. The problem is that most of the time students do not use artefacts in school, but rather images (photographs, drawings, digital images) of the artefacts and descriptions of them in publications.



**Figure 1.** Main focus in craft teachers' graduation theses. *Figure by the authors.*

## Overview of the theses

### Traditional Latvian techniques

Learning Latvian traditional techniques and traditional techniques of other cultures together is the most frequently used aspect of traditional culture in students' final theses. The practical learning of traditional techniques is covered in almost all theses (208). In 136 theses, the traditional technique or techniques on display is the only form of traditional cultural expression. The most frequently used techniques are knitting, embroidery, crochet, sewing, and to a lesser-degree, woodworking, weaving, metalworking and other techniques.

Almost all theses that deal with knitting were about knitting with five or two knitting needles, using patterns with knit and purl stitches, braids and fir needles, picot hem, and jaguar patterns. Most theses propose colourful knitting. Knitting with beads and loom knitting have also been studied. The most popular types of products offered are socks and mittens. One thesis focuses on the combination of material textures in knitted head coverings. Knitting is combined with other techniques, such as embroidery and crochet. Several theses deal with the history of the development of knitting in Latvia, where students planned and implemented presentations on the technique and/or an overview of the historical development of the product.

*The teacher gave a brief history of knitting, discussed the wide range of knitting possibilities with the pupils, and demonstrated fingerless gloves. [...] The teacher interviewed the pupils in order to ascertain their knowledge of knitting traditions in Latvia, as well as their background knowledge of the materials, tools, and skills needed for knitting. (S20: 48.)*

Traditional Latvian colourwork embroidery techniques are used in several works. Bead embroidery, typical of the wreath embroidery of folk costumes, is also used. Students have studied stitches on canvas and given the task to pupils to combine them in their works. Two theses are about ribbon embroidery and one each on tulle embroidery, goldwork, Florentine work and embroidery on paper. In addition, machine embroidery inspired by Latvian ethnographic whitework embroidery was used:

*We will use sewing machine embroidery as much as possible to decorate everyday objects, but we will draw inspiration from Latvian patterns and techniques. (S208: 5.)*

Several works, such as ethnographic shirts, combine two techniques: embroidery and sewing. There are theses in which embroidery is combined with knitting and crocheting.



**Photo 1.** Crocheted bags made by pupils (S94). Photo by Māra Urdziņa-Deruma.

In most of the theses, colourful crochet is offered. Several theses focus on jewellery by crocheting three-dimensional forms. Other theses offer crocheting products such as scarves, hats decorations, bags, purses, collars, reflectors, toys, and vests (photo 1). Fewer works feature lace crochet.

The wood processing methods offered in students' final theses are sawing, carving, wood turning, and joining wooden parts.

Various weaving techniques and materials are used in students' theses, including belt weaving, loom weaving, weaving with natural materials, tapestry weaving and bead weaving. Along with the weaving technique, the pupils were introduced to the history of weaving.

*The author gave a brief history of weaving, the pupils were introduced to fabrics. [...] The author showed pictures and introduced the pupils to different woven fabrics: clothing, bed linen, etc. The pupils were then given theoretical knowledge on what belts are, backstraps [audene] and tablet weaving, and how they differ. (S10: 40.)*

Hand felting, which was historically a familiar technique for Latvians, as hats were felted, but had disappeared as a handicraft technique with the development of rice farming, made a return in Latvia at the beginning of this century. The students also studied the history of felting while writing their final papers on the felting technique, except in the the most recent thesis. None of the works relates felting to traditional culture. The most popular type of product is felt bags.

Fewer works are devoted to such techniques as braiding, macramé, metalwork and leatherwork. Braiding is a traditional technique in which students use a variety of traditional materials: wood, metal wire, and paper. Theses on braiding include cup trays and baskets made of birch branches, Mežotne braiding and baskets made of metal wire, and trays and boxes made of paper. The pupils had to make watch straps, dream catchers and key chains using the macramé technique. Wire and tin processing are used in theses on metalworking. The students offered pupils the chance to create leatherwork handbags, cell phone holders, boxes and jewellery using perforations, stitching, braiding and shaping. S97 explores the nālbinding technique, which was used in Latvia in ancient times but is little-known today and never included in craft curricula.



What is noteworthy here is that the students first made the needles themselves and then made the bags (photo 2).

### **Objects: creating copies and new products**

The creation of copies of Latvian traditional cultural artefacts, such as ethnographic shirts, is described in theses which were defended in the early 1990s.

*In order to consolidate the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired during the training period of the course, as well as to see their practical application, a practical work – a copy of the components of an ethnographic folk costume – should be carried out during the summer practice. In this way, the students will also stimulate their cognitive interests and be involved in the research process by studying the components of the national costume – shirts, waistcoats, hats. (S210: 51.)*



**Photo 2.** Bag made by student S9 in nâlbinding technique. Photo by Māra Urdziņa-Deruma.

Making personalised copies using natural materials is proposed in works where the creation of traditional Latvian room decorations (e.g. *ķisti*, *puzuri*) is planned, as well as in one thesis where the creation of a mask is planned.

In addition to the creation of copies and personalised copies, the inheritance of traditional culture takes the form of the creation of traditional types of products in several theses.

Five theses deal with knitting Latvian traditional socks, five with mittens, and two with wrist warmers. Mittens have been particularly important and diverse in Latvian life. The most colourful and brightest mittens were knitted from the 1860s on (Jansone, 2021).

*Just like a folk song that expresses the Latvian way of life, work virtue and understanding of the world through the centuries, the mittens with their patterns, rhythms and colour combinations carries the message of Latvian taste, craft skills and traditions from generation to generation. (Grasmane 2014: xiii.)*

There are theses about weaving traditional belts, sewing an ethnographic tunic shirt (S38). and making firewood baskets from metal wire (S145). Theses dealing with woodworking include making traditional Latvian musical instruments (S68), birdcages (S64), stools (S113), and kitchen utensils – spoons (S76, S112), pestles (S83), and traditional boxes (*cibas*) (S51) (photo 3).





**Photo 3.** Spoons made by student S112; traditional spoons as a source of inspiration.  
 Photo by Māra Urdziņa-Deruma.

*The most popular technique is the making of a wooden spoon, a subject closely linked to the identification and learning of cultural heritage and the opportunity for everyone to participate in it. (S76: 56.)*

The traditional whistle (*svilpaunieks*) is a source of inspiration for making artefacts out of two materials: traditional (clay) and non-traditional (polymer plastic) (S24).

*... it is necessary to understand the structure of the whistle, in particular the position of the airflow holes, so it was explained to the pupils that the decorative trim made of polymers would have to be adapted to the “song” of the whistle, and there was a demonstration of a cross-section of the whistle “song” and the trim. (S24: 58.)*

The creation of personalised copies can also be seen in the preparation of traditional Latvian dishes in four theses.

*To plan the menu and table settings for some Latvian anniversary celebrations, taking the dietary groups previously allocated into consideration. (S26: 43.)*

Two theses use a specific artefact of Latvian traditional culture as a source of inspiration. In both cases, the product is a wreath. In the first case, a specific

South Kurzeme wreath (S36) is used as inspiration: the pupils made reflectors – embroidered pads with appliquéd reflective material (photo 4).

*The pupils had to embroider a fragment of the wreath of South Kurzeme using at least five different embroidery stitches and develop their ability to work independently. (S36: 58.)*

In the other case, a specific Sabile wreath (S109), the pupils made a print decoration, which they complemented with embroidery.

Several theses use components of ethnographic costume, e.g. mittens, belts, or any component from their native region or a freely chosen region, to generate ideas for a product using the same technique or a different technique with the same or a different material. For example, S34 offers mittens from a freely chosen region, and S168 (written by a native of Vidzeme) offers sock and mitten patterns for knitting dolls and toys (photo 5).

*Some pupils studied the pictures of the mittens and chose a particular mitten based on which colour combination seemed more interesting, others took into account the fact that the mittens represented their home region, while other girls looked for which mittens could match their imaginary image based on the colour combination. (S34: 52–53.)*

*The learning of knitting was based on the making of knitted toys, the composition of which used ethnographic patterns. (S168: 109.)*

S28 proposes to use skirts' striped patterns as inspiration for embroidering handbags. S153 proposes decorated Neolithic pottery sherds from archaeological excavations as a source of inspiration for making embroidered products of the students' choice. The most elaborate example is the following: influenced by the striped skirts of the thesis author's native region, a fabric is woven and incorporated into a patchwork whose composition is inspired by the region's architectural structures (S69).

Three theses offer folk costumes as a source of inspiration for new products.



**Photo 4.** Reflectors made by pupils; South Kurzeme wreath as a source of inspiration (S36).  
Photo by Māra Urdziņa-Deruma.

The first case, inspired by ethnographic costume, proposes creating a vest, jacket, or sweater using knitting, crochet, and embroidery (S14). In the second case, inspired by an archaeological costume, a freely-chosen product is offered in a freely-chosen combination of textile techniques (S8). In the third case, the source of inspiration is an ethnographic costume, and one can choose any technique or combination of techniques (S3).

Another thesis proposed using a freely-chosen component of the native ethnographic folk costume of the Vecpiebalga region to design a bracelet woven with beads (S10).



**Photo 5.** Dolls made by student S34; Latvian ethnographic mittens as sources of inspiration. Photo by Māra Urdziņa-Deruma.

*... the pupils had to choose a source of inspiration – a picture of a component of the ethnographic folk costume of Vecpiebalga. Inspired by the chosen image, the sketching started. (S10: 42–43.)*

### Ornament

Several theses use Latvian signs as sources of inspiration for the development of compositions. In general, signs are used in different techniques and materials. In S1, it is planned that pupils decorate plywood with patterns in various techniques for making boxes. Another thesis proposes that Latvian patterns be used in weaving with beads. In the last lesson, “One by one, the students showed the opened and decorated bracelet [and] explained why they chose the specific sign” (S45: 45). In other theses, patterns are used for printing, patchwork, knitting, and embroidery on crochet. In recent years, there has been a tendency not to use traditional cultural objects (S1, S3) but products made by designers that use signs as a source of inspiration.

S182 uses animal stylisation techniques seen in Latvian traditional culture as well as in the traditional culture of other nations as a source of inspiration for grades 5–9.

*After learning about the historical aspects of animal stylisation, the girls learned to stylise animal silhouettes and created sketches for their socks. The preparation of the drawing was interesting and difficult, as the pattern – a stylised dog – not only needs to be drawn but must also be included in the checked boxes, and the required number of stitches must also be taken into account. (S182: 48.)*

### Craft studies

Several diploma theses describe pupils' research activities. One thesis requires pupils to carry out research without undertaking practical work; instead, pupils visit various artisan workshops in their native region to witness weaving, crocheting, embroidery, knitting, harness making, woodworking, and cooking (S164). In other theses, the task for the pupils is to study Latvian ethnographic belts, after which the pupils weave the belts (S107, S156).

*... the main purpose of the study, the meaning of the belt's practicality, symbolism, pattern, colour, and technique. The development of the study also involved discerning the meaning of modern belts and creating an insight into the belt-wearing traditions of other nations. The pupils performed the practical task by making their own belts using at least two techniques, and the description of making the belt should be placed in the study. (S107: 3.)*

In one thesis, pupils conducted two studies on folk costume skirts and traditional architecture (S69). In another, pupils wrote a report on the history of costumes (S123).

*The students of the work process performed two tasks: they made a product – an accessory for a graduation dress – and developed a report on the history of costumes. (S123: 43.)*

Several works compared traditional Latvian techniques with the heritage of other nations.

*The girls looked for common and different patterns in Latvian and foreign mittens, studied mittens from Latvian regions, their colour combinations and proportions. [...] Knowledge and understanding of the mitten-wearing traditions in Latvia, the basic elements of ethnographic patterns in Latvian and non-Latvian mitten patterns. (S120: 64–65.)*

Excursions to exhibitions, museums, and craft workshops to introduce pupils to traditional culture were used in final theses.

*Educational excursion to the Kõnu mill. Observe the processing of wool and the end result of each process. Introduce them to wool-processing equipment. Visit a sheep farm and observe sheep in their natural environment. (S4: 45.)*

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, S8 visited the Latvian National Costume Center Senā Klēts and made a video herself, while S69 arranged for part of the museum's collection to be brought to the school.

## Conclusion

The traditional culture represented in students' final theses mostly manifests itself as practical learning of Latvian traditional techniques (knitting, weaving, embroidery, felting, macramé, wood carving, wire work, leather processing) or traditional techniques of other nations (batik, fabric printing, patchwork, silk painting). Along with learning the techniques, the students get to know and discuss the history of the development of specific techniques. The teacher demonstrates visual aids and, in some works, also conducts research and introduces the history of the technique or relevant products/development. Excursions to the Folk Costume Center Senā Klēts, craftsmen workshops, museums, and exhibitions are used to promote pupils' motivation.

As a source of inspiration, Latvian traditional ethnographic material, and to a lesser extent archaeological material, is used. There are theses where the primary point is to learn some technique, learn how to create a specific product, research the culture of the native region, or use traditional culture to make a creative product. However, there is a tendency in several theses to use the design-thinking approach, instead of addressing the historical development of techniques.

In general, many components of the Latvian folk costume have been used as sources of inspiration: headdresses, wreaths, hats, mittens, and socks. In addition, ethnographic objects are indicated as sources of inspiration: lace of towel ends, firewood baskets, spoons, and pestles. The visual design of traditional cultural artefacts as a source of inspiration is more used in those techniques that have been considered Latvian traditional techniques for centuries: knitting, weaving, embroidery, and combined works in which traditional techniques are incorporated with each other or with other techniques.

In order to preserve the traditional culture, teachers who teach craft must be both skilled in and appreciate traditional craft. Teachers are models for both mastering practical skills and abilities, and for creative processes and research; ensuring the succession of education and culture.

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**Lolita Šelvaha.** *Photo by Anete Šelvaha.*

## Läti käsitööõpetajate lõputööd

### Resümees

*Traditsioonilise käsitöö õpetamine on olnud osa Läti põhikoolide õppekavast alates selle õppeaine loomisest. Käsitööõpetaja-õpingute viimase etapina peavad kõik tudengid tegema lõputöö, kus tuleb muuhulgas valmistada ette tunni õppesisu valitud teemal kindlale üldhariduskoolide klassile. Siinse artikli eesmärk on sisuanalüüsi meetodit kasutades uurida, kuidas traditsiooniline käsitöökuultuur peegeldub tudengite lõputöodes. Vaatluse all on 210 lõputööd, mille teemad käsitlevad traditsioonilise käsitöö õpetamist. Lõputööd võib jagada traditsioonilise kultuuri väljendumisviiside järgi tehnika-, mustri- ja esemepõhisteks ning uurimistö-keskseteks. Lisaks Läti traditsioonilisele käsitööle leidis tunnikavades ka rahvusvaheliste tehnikate õpetamist.*

**Võtmesõnad:** esemed, tehnikad, disain, õpetajakoolitus, traditsiooniline kultuur