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Geometry and Color. Decoding the Arts of Islam in the West from the Mid-19th to the Early 20th Century

**edited by Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga**

Impressum

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An Encounter with the Architecture of the Islamic World as Turning Point in the Transformation of Artistic Expression

The Case of the Latvian Modernist Jāzeps Grosvalds

Abstract

One of the most important Latvian artists of the early twentieth century, Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891-1920), was interested in the "Oriental" world since his adolescence. His first real meeting with the imagined Oriental atmosphere took place in 1913, when he traveled to Spain and visited Toledo, Córdoba, Seville, and Granada. The trip impressed him by the versatility of colors, light, ambience, and architectural forms, and was depicted in a sketch book. Nevertheless, the real transformation of Grosvalds' artistic expression occurred during his travels through (then) Persia. Due to the circumstances of World War I, at the end of 1917 he joined the Mesopotamian Front under the English Command. The campaign took place in 1918, and he crossed Iran and Iraq. Despite at times very difficult conditions, throughout his travel Grosvalds captured his impressions in sketch albums and watercolors, being interested in architectural, scenic, and anthropological studies. His oeuvre from this period shows a certain level of abstraction, and almost nothing of the idyllic and luscious depiction, characteristic for many Orientalist painters. One of the most interesting evaluations of his Persian artworks was provided by the famous French artist Amédée Ozenfant (1886-1966) in 1940, when he published an article on Grosvalds' art. Among other things Ozenfant emphasizes that Grosvalds had not depicted picturesque scenes, had not copied what he saw in front of his eyes as many others have done. Grosvalds' watercolors have a special effect and power; they are fruits of creativity, being not superficially loaded with exotic charm, but synthesizing and transforming its magic.

Keywords: Latvian Modernism; Jāzeps Grosvalds; diaries; watercolors; Persia

Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891-1920) was a Latvian artist, considered to be a pioneer of the Classical Modernism in Latvian art. In the social hierarchy of the time, his parents belonged to the upper class of Latvian society. His father Frīdrihs Grosvalds (1850-1924) was a wealthy lawyer and an important figure in Riga's official and political scene, and thus, Jāzeps grew up in a prosperity incomparable to the living conditions of other Latvian contemporary artists. The Grosvalds family occupied a large, perfectly designed and furnished flat in their five-story house at the very center of Riga. This apartment was a gathering place for many Latvian intellectuals of the time. Jāzeps learned languages, played piano, took physical exercise, became acquainted with the fine arts (drawing and painting), and in due time was sent to a privileged grammar school of the classical type, where he excelled in all branches of humanities. His linguistic skills were particularly evident,

¹ Ieva Kalnača, Head of the Project Management Department and Curator, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.
Email: ieva.kalnača.ik@lnmm.lv

he spoke, read, and wrote in Latvian, German, Russian, French, and English, had some knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, and finally also a bit of Persian. All that, no doubt, helped him to become a well-educated artist who could quickly obtain the information he needed from art books and periodicals published all around Europe. He could easily make contacts with teachers, colleagues, and art lovers in different circles and countries.

Although there is a considerable number of early works, as well as many written sources, revealing Grosvalds' thoughts from 1908 onwards, his artistic growth remains partly a mystery. The jump from childish naivety to a surprisingly early, even premature ability to master the modern styles of the particular time is difficult to explain (Kļaviņš 312). He missed the usual phase of Academic Realism that was almost inevitable for every beginner at that time; he never attended art school, where he would have had to engage systematically over a long period in drawing plaster casts and painting models. But, through self-study he mastered the formal language of the *new art* of the time.

After graduating from grammar school in 1909, his parents made the decision to send him to Munich for the winter and, overall, he spent some four years abroad. In Germany he met his older brother Oļģerds Grosvalds (1884-1962), who together with his friends began to guide Grosvalds into European cultural and social life. During that time, the artist made a lot of sketches, attended private art studios, and travelled (highlighting Venice). Afterwards, in the autumn of 1910, he travelled west again, this time to Paris, where, besides other activities, he attended various private art academies, for example, the Vitti Academy, where his professor was the famous Spanish artist Hermenegildo Anglada Camarasa (1871-1959). Grosvalds enjoyed his artworks and liked his Spanish motifs, but did not become a follower of him, because the younger artist's style was much more modern. From Paris he also travelled to Belgium, to London, to the Netherlands, to the island of Jersey, and to Switzerland.

After this period, Grosvalds needed to complete the obligatory one-year military service of the Russian empire (as Latvia was then a part of it), during which he was unable to maintain a regular artistic practice, although he tried to find time for sketching. In the autumn of 1912, he returned to Paris, where he again attended art academies and immersed himself in the flourishing art scene of the time, inspired by the Parisian artistic and intellectual environment. He remained in Paris till the outbreak of World War I.

It is worth mentioning that Grosvalds kept diaries over a period of more than ten years (1908-1918), beginning already in his adolescence. His unpublished diaries, today in the holdings of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, provide one of the most valuable sources for this investigation. Sometimes very detailed and sometimes just in a form of short, specific remarks, they are invaluable in helping to understand his artistic inquiries, versatile interests, and also his daily lifestyle. Regarding Grosvalds' attitude towards (and interest in) the Oriental world and its attractiveness, it is worth mentioning that the artist brings it up from time to time in his diary. For example, in 1908 he writes: "I indeed want to go to Bukhara. As soon as possible. Silk fabrics, fruits, women, old sheikhs, and flowering trees!" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1098, 8.1908).² Also at least one early drawing, depicting such motifs, is preserved. It is called *In the East*³ and dates to a time when he had not seen anything really Oriental with his own eyes.

² All translations are by the author of this article.

³ Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Austrumos*. 1904-1909, Indian ink on paper, 18,1 x 13,3 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM JGM-411.

Moorish Spain in 1913: Finding a new expression

The first real encounter with the imagined "Orient" occurred in 1913, when Grosvalds together with his aforementioned older brother, the art historian and diplomat Oļģerds, travelled to Spain and visited important cities with Islamic past such as Toledo, Córdoba, Seville, and Granada (fig. 1).



Figure 1: *Jāzeps Grosvalds in Spain. 1913, photograph. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM JGM-2057. Image courtesy of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.*

For Grosvalds, meeting a culture with a strong element of eastern traditions and decorative wealth, as well as a distinctly southern landscape in which harsh deserts alternate with tropical splendor, strengthened his neo-romantic will for eastern and southern exotics (Kļaviņš 115). Although the trip was not very long (it lasted about a month, starting at the end of August), and in some cities the brothers stayed for only one day, the range of impressions was clearly very wide

and varied. Both from the Spanish travel sketchbook and watercolors, as well as from the diary entries, it becomes clear that the artist was fascinated by the changing landscapes, the gorgeous gardens, as well as the types of people, their clothing, city views, and specific architectural objects and details. The landscape and its color palette seem of particular interest: for example, as he approaches Madrid, he writes “dry, African fields, burnt vegetation, hard, sharp mountains” (Grosvalds, *Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 19.9.1913), and later in La Mancha, “dry, hot, and incredibly lonely land, ...with bright colors—all pink, the earth red” (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 19.9.1913; fig. 2).

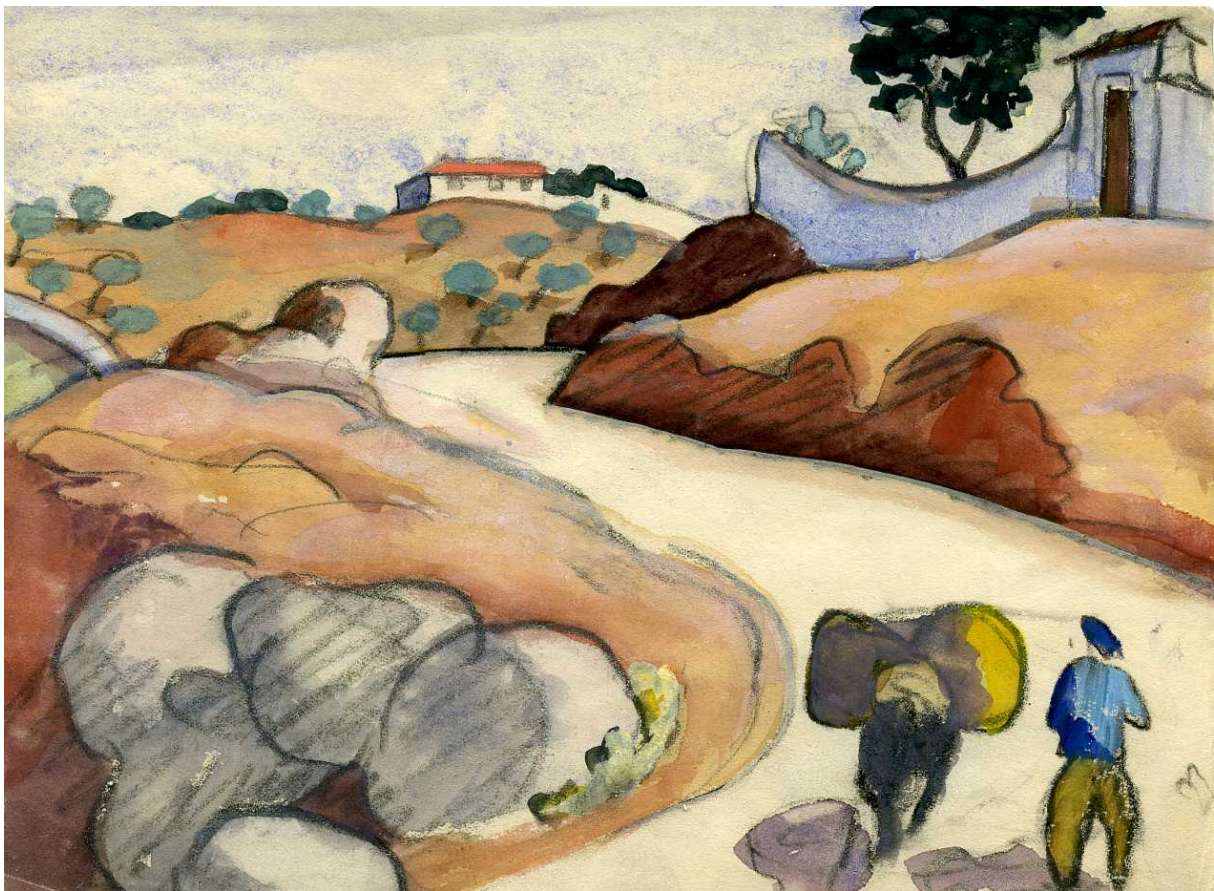


Figure 2: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Sketch book (Spain)*. 1913, watercolor and gouache on paper, 21.5 x 17.4 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM JGM-93. Image courtesy of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.

Grosvalds experienced the true encounter with Oriental architecture in Toledo, where he was impressed by the city's exotic atmosphere. He writes in his diary that Toledo is a place “where Moorish arch shines in half light at every step, ...behind latticed windows one hears cadences belonging to the east, then appears the cathedral's tower, and again you find yourself in an Arabic city street” (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 15.9.1913). Entering Andalusia, Grosvalds observes that “browns become redder, softer, colors are indescribable” (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 19.9.1913). Córdoba made an even bigger impression and is recorded in his remarks, revealing: “Behind the wrought-iron, flowery door, you see a cool, green patio with a fountain and armchairs, Moorish *azulejos* on the walls, and I notice a pair of dark eyes in the dark” (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 19.9.1913). Special attention was paid to the Mosque of the city: “Then through the *Patio de Naranjos* a truly African view can be seen; a cathedral is one of the biggest surprises ever. Flat

ceilings, a never-ending forest of pillars, delicate arches, and mysterious light (I had imagined a dome and minarets). Rich amazing mihrab with delicate mosaics and complex, crossed vaults. And in this miracle, which in the caliphs' times was like a fairy tale from 1001 nights, an annoying renaissance choir has been placed—I would like to hit it with my fists!" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 20.9.1913; italics in the original).

The artist's feelings are also characterized by a diary entry full of references to the imagined eastern world that revived during his visit to Seville: "...*die hängenden Gärten des Orients*—a book I dreamed of creating, where I wanted to print in words and pictures everything that a giant fantasy can find—strong colors, heavy, resounding words, strong perfumes. *Scheherazade*, Castle of Baghdad, Dervishes, Wonder Cities. I am like the old thousand-and-one-night sheikh who enters the city of copper, opens the gate after the gate, reads verses everywhere which talk about the volatility of happiness" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 22.09.1913; italics in the original; fig. 3).

Both brothers went to Granada as well, and although, strangely enough, there are no sketches or watercolors preserved, the diary reveals Grosvalds' impressions, especially in the Alhambra, where he was affected by the decorative versatility and splendor. He observes: "Balanced, harmonious shapes of myrtle backyard and fine *azulejos* roof; the wonderful yellow-red tone in the lion's yard; fabulous gilded and blue cupolas in the side halls—as if the bees had built a hive of blue wax and the vault had been cut with a knife; richness of ornaments" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 26.9.1913; italics in the original). The brothers saw the Alhambra during the day, but they came to the *Generalife*, when twilight had begun, thus the atmosphere was astonishing: "...through the variegated garden and the mighty cypress alley to *Generalife*, to a dreamy corner of paradise, which was the culmination of all that was seen before. ...a view over small gardens under spruce branches to the Alhambra Mountain and the blue lines of the *Sierra Nevada*. On the shady stairs—along both sides of the walls runs a cool spring, up—the view from the *Mirador*, could cry" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1109, 26.9.1913; italics in original).

Grosvalds' watercolors from Spain are like visual travel notes, which show a new expression, a new attitude towards color and the representation of the light. The artist himself said that his sketchbook was like a drawn diary, to which memories add value and, besides, he could hardly have left this place without noticing and fixing in his mind that great and nowhere-else-seen color combination. Evaluating the works from Spain within the context of Grosvalds' oeuvre, it has been written that it was the freedom from the requirements of representation, academic readiness, or idealization on which he always depended internally and externally that allowed him to achieve a new quality in these quick studies, showing his search for synthesis (Kļaviņš 119), which manifested itself fully some years later in his artworks from Persia. In connection with the Grosvalds brothers' trip to Spain, it is important to mention the fact that after returning, Grosvalds' brother, who had a PhD, gave a lecture on art and architecture in Southern Spain (which was later published in a local newspaper).⁴ This shows that they studied architectural monuments and art seriously enough in the cities visited.

⁴ "Priekšlasījumi. Oļģerts Grosvalds par Dienvidspānijas mākslu." *Dzimtenes Vēstnesis*, no. 38, 1914, annex. 4.

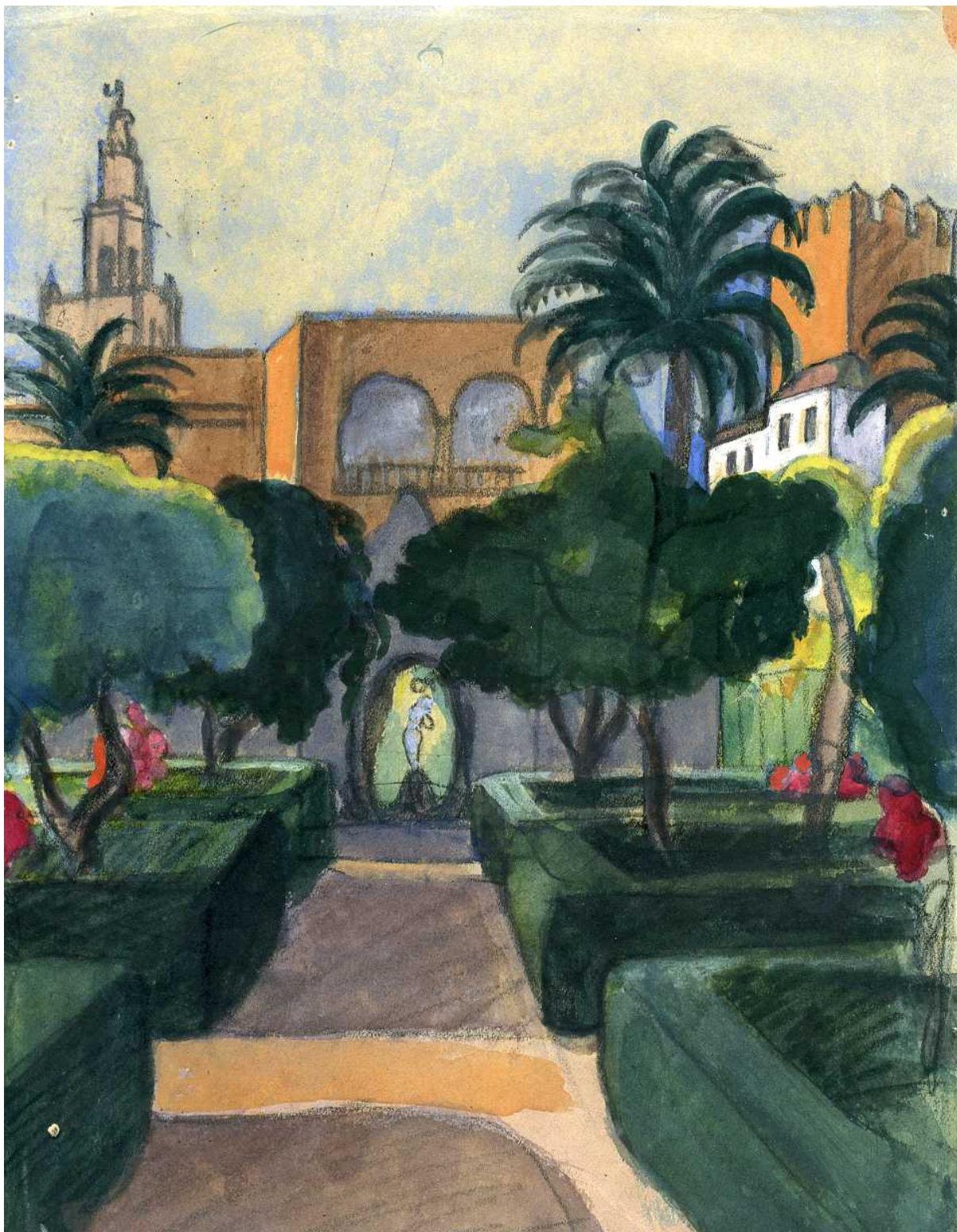


Figure 3: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Sketch book I Spain*. 1913, watercolor and gouache on paper, 21.5 x 17.4 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM JGM-93. Image courtesy of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.

Persia in 1918: Finding a certain level of abstraction

A new period in Grosvalds' life was marked by the outbreak of World War I. In 1915, he was mobilized, as a cavalry officer, in the army of the Russian Empire, and joined the sixth Tukums Latvian Rifle Regiment. During this time, he painted scenes from the lives of refugees and riflemen. In 1917, he was sent to help the French at the Western Front; due to different circumstances at the end of that year, he joined the so-called Mesopotamian Front under the English Command. In his diary he wrote: "I don't have any other choice now. I must remain in the service. I cannot go to Russia; there I should serve as a soldier with all the possible intricacy. Going to Mesopotamia [under English Command], I am not in conflict with governments, and I have a possibility to travel to a place where I couldn't go in any other way" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1118, 31.12.1917). The campaign/expedition took place in 1918 and took him to the territories of present-day Egypt, Iraq, and Iran (previously Persia), Turkey, as well as the Caucasus at the end. The longest and most important time, both artistically and psychologically, was spent in Iran.

Despite the at times very difficult conditions (they travelled on foot, by mule, donkey, or camel), Grosvalds captured his impressions in sketch albums and watercolors throughout all his journey, being interested in architectural, scenic, and anthropological studies. He describes the similarities between landscape features and architecture, paying a lot of attention to the geometrical simplicity of forms in combination with decorative wealth, and the refined use of color.

Grosvalds arrived in the eastern world when his unit was transported by steamer from the Italian coast to Alexandria. While there, the artist immediately appreciated its exotic qualities and put in his notes that Alexandria was a fantastic place with its colorful bazaar, and there he saw the real east for the first time, something he had dreamed of since his adolescence, as previously mentioned. After leaving Alexandria, the unit spent two weeks on a steamer, while sailing across the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, finally arriving at the city of Basra. During the maritime voyage, Grosvalds was enjoying himself with other soldiers, he was drawing a bit and had begun to learn Persian, as he wanted to have opportunities to communicate with the local people once he would enter Iran.

The watercolors from Basra show a quite idyllic atmosphere, which could even perhaps be called a little too perfect, in a way closer to traditional Orientalist painting. In those works, Grosvalds tried to put in and summarize everything characteristic of Basra—the river full of boats with people dressed in colorful clothes, the Oriental city in the background, where both residential buildings and the mosque's massive minaret and dome can be seen, palm trees rising over the buildings, describing Basra's famous palm forests—all that depicted in bright, soft colors. Nevertheless, his artistic expression and the way of depicting all the motifs he experienced changed significantly during the rest of the trip. The next waypoint, where the army remained for three weeks, was Baghdad, preparing for the campaign proper through Iran. While there Grosvalds wrote: "I am not very satisfied—everything [I draw] seems very pale and non-original, comparing with what I have seen, but I hope to make something later. Only on the last day I composed something nice—three rosy women in a narrow street of Baghdad" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1119, 18.4.1918; fig. 4). This motif is represented in various sketches and watercolors, and, after his return, was also elaborated as an oil painting.⁵

⁵ Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Three Women in the Streets of Baghdad*. 1919, oil on canvas, 100 x 82 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art, VMM GL-350.



Figure 4: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Three Women*. 1918, watercolor on paper, 27.5 x 22.7 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM Z-8666. Image courtesy of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.

Arriving in Iran, travel and weather conditions were difficult and distances long, but the artist did not stop either making sketches or writing notes in a diary (and apart), describing what was visible around him. Thus, it is possible to get an impression about their caravan as well. Grosvalds writes: "In this country, where the railway is unknown, all journeys are made in caravans—by horse, mule or camel. Our caravan—about a hundred mules, adorned with blankets and colored ribbons, with blue stone necklaces, which, according to the stories, provide a powerful talisman against all misfortunes and 'djinn's—arrives with a jingle of countless small bells" (Grosvalds, *Persijas ainas* 12). In the diary, his narrative talent appears as he describes different situations with a dose of humor. One can imagine the scene not only visually, but also hear and smell it. Observing the traditional habits, he writes: "In order to be able to load luggage, the camels are stimulated with a growl, something like 'khhkhkh'. The huge animals then fall to their knees and the bundles can be tied to the saddles they carry on their humpbacked backs. Compared to the hellish roar of mules and donkeys, camels seem to be very calm and make only a funny grunt in the form of a protest" (40).

Oriental bazaars, characteristic of all the cities and villages they visited, attracted the artist's eye; he depicted them on many occasions from different points of view and described those places in his diary from time to time, paying a lot of attention to their architectural forms, chiaroscuros, and the richness of colors. He emphasizes that "in the center of each Oriental city there is a bazaar, a labyrinth of wide, vaulted corridors that provide shelter from the sun and where shops and craftsmen's workshops are lined up on both sides in niches with pointed arches" (*Persijas ainas* 21; fig. 5).



Figure 5: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Bazaar's Corridor*, 1918, watercolor on paper, 23 x 28 cm. Värmlands Museum, Karlstad. Image courtesy of the Värmlands Museum, Karlstad.

He saw and appreciated the architectural elements in conjunction with interior decoration, with fabrics and with the visual appearance of the locals: "Daylight shines only slightly through the gaps in the pointed arches. These wide, white beams of the light in the shimmering dust, where the bluish smoke of cigarettes swirls, create theatrical spotlights on the colored fabrics of the shops, on the dark carpets, where the serious merchants have huddled, smoking the hookah, and on the white turbans of mullahs, with their red henna-painted beards" (*Persijas ainas* 21).

Grosvalds also depicts interiors, showing the richness of carpets, different Persian traditions, for example, water pipes, musical instruments, and—naturally—also the dressing habits of men and women. He notices that in the rural areas and smaller villages women wear colorful costumes and cover only the head, while nearer the city, all women are "carefully veiled in their black chadors, and with a black mask with a gold border on the face" (*Persijas ainas* 20; fig. 6).

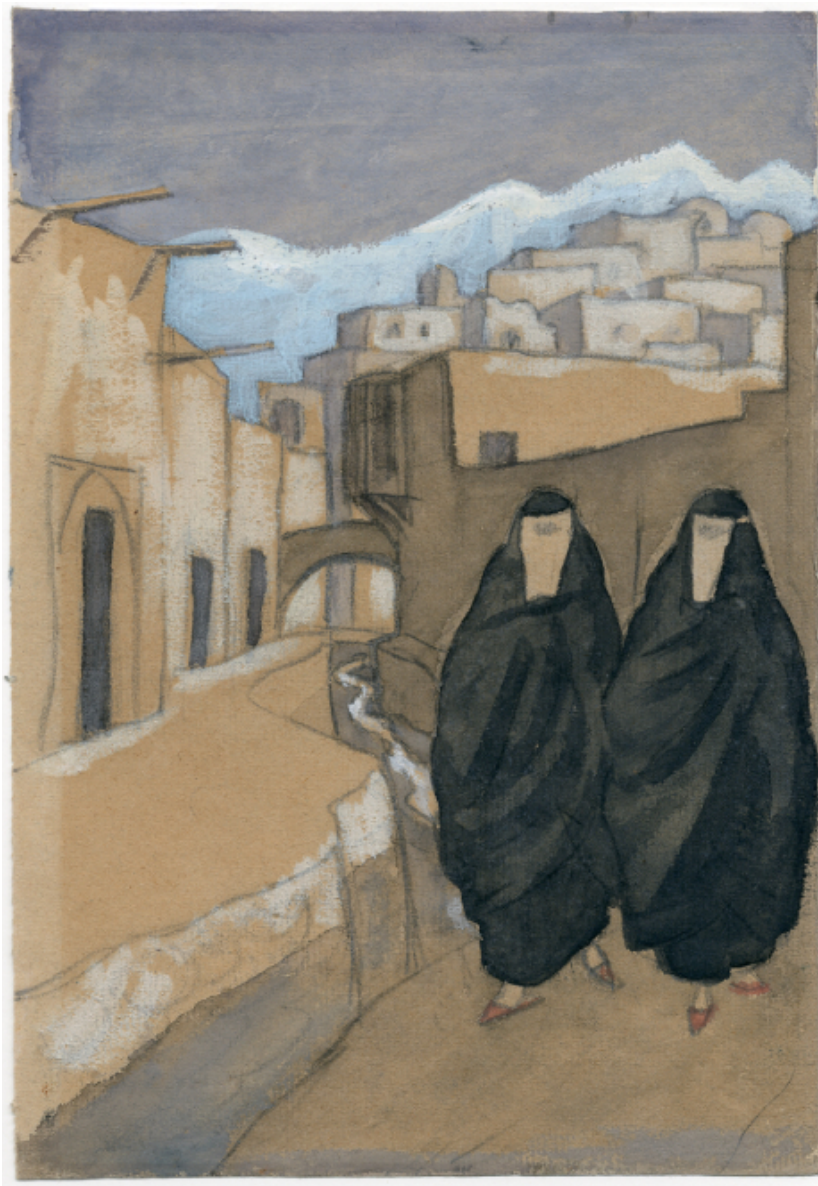


Figure 6: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Women in a Street of Hamadan*. 1918, watercolor on paper, 23 x 16 cm, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, VMM Z-8659. Image courtesy of the Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.

Landscapes and natural forms were just as important for him, and, interestingly, reminded him at times of his earlier trip to Spain: "Landscapes—reddish-brown mountains with ruins and a blue range in the background, at first reminiscent of Spain, but then very strange, grotesque and Persian, very sharp or very round mountains without vegetation, only with black dots, small bushes" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1119, 30.4.1918). As it has been seen on many occasions already, Grosvalds pays a lot of attention to the color scale and different tones.

In many of Grosvalds' watercolors the local architecture can be appreciated—he was interested in the appearance of whole villages, in simple residential houses, in tombs, caravanserais, city gates, mosques, and so on. Describing them, he always emphasizes the colors, captured in the surroundings. About the so-called "red villages," he writes: "A plain full of rosy clay villages that rise up here and there like molehills. Due to the red clay surface, everything here is incredibly red, and the river flows in the color of crayfish soup. Bright red clay houses, with the same red shadows" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1119, 22.4.1918). While the sky and mountains are represented as follows: "Round, dilapidated towers, light yellow evening sky...indescribable pink purple colors on the wrinkled mountains and light blue snow peaks in the distance...the road continues, climbing the wavy hills, behind which the majestic mountain silhouettes with snow-capped peaks stand closer and closer" (*Persijas ainas* 42).

The most beautiful and astonishing place they visited, in terms of architectural treasures, was Qazvin. Grosvalds depicted its city wall, various gates, and mosques, as well as lavishing praise upon them in his travel notes, writing that "Qazvin is surrounded by a sandstone wall with several magnificent blue gates, real gems of Oriental art, which a Persian poet compares to turquoise embedded in a copper bracelet" (*Persijas ainas* 44; fig. 7).



Figure 7: Jāzeps Grosvalds. *English Soldiers in Qazvin*. 1918, watercolor on paper, 22 x 25 cm. Värmlands Museum, Karlstad. Image courtesy of the Värmlands Museum, Karlstad.

The Blue Gate seemed to him as "the most beautiful piece of architecture I have seen till now" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1119, 4.6.1918). He paid attention to the decorative richness of mosaics which appeared on the gates, domes, and minarets, and the exquisite color combinations with "turquoise blue, joined by ultramarine tones, yellow and light pink" (*Dienasgrāmata* VMM JGM-1119, 4.6.1918). Once inside the city, the artist admired its main architectural objects, for example, the Imamzadeh Hosseins mosque with the "yellow-blue-green dome and a magnificent portal with six tall and graceful towers, between which are rounded niches, all decorated with arabesques and ornaments" (*Persijas ainās* 46).

Grosvalds elaborated a large number of drawings, watercolors (altogether around two hundred), as well as some oil paintings made after his return to Europe, depicting motifs of the Middle East. During the months spent in the east, a considerable amount of work was done, especially given the fact that this was not a leisure trip like other previous sojourns abroad but took place under difficult conditions and under the watchful eye of his superior officers. To sum up, his oeuvre from the travel through Persia shows a certain level of abstraction, and almost nothing of the idyllic and luscious depiction, characteristic of many Orientalist painters and also noticeable in his first attempts to visualize the Oriental world. Grosvalds' works are laconic, they focus on the main features, each of the objects is very specific, but at the same time not hyper-realistically drawn down to the smallest detail; his approach can be perceived as a generalization of the respective motif.

When the artist finally returned to Europe in February of 1919, he lived in London and then in Paris for some months, enrolling in the diplomatic service of the newly established state of Latvia. Alongside that, he continued to work with his Oriental experience. He wrote a book, *Tableaux persans* (Persian Pictures), in French and complemented it with his own illustrations (fig. 8).

It was a description of his roughly nine-hundred-kilometer-long expedition through Persia, which he wanted to publish as soon as possible. Due to various obstacles, the book was published for the first time only posthumously in 1978, in Sweden. Grosvalds also started to work with several large-scale oil paintings depicting Oriental motifs. He finished three of them and certainly would have created more if he had not been surprised by the Spanish flu less than a year later. Grosvalds died at the age of twenty-eight, leaving a huge footprint on the development of Latvian art, as an introducer of modernism, and also as a Latvian Orientalist, whose artistic expression changed because of his direct experience of the east, while seeing its color scale, light, landscape, and Islamic architecture.

This opinion is shared by Latvian and foreign art critics and art historians, who have described his artworks exhibited in various posthumous exhibitions. Thus, the Latvian art historian Jānis Siliņš wrote in 1924: "The highest peak of Grosvalds' art is his paintings and drawings from his eastern journey. Amazing energy, love of work was needed to create about two hundred artworks in unfavorable conditions, performing difficult duties of the service, while also collecting materials on the history and literature of Eastern nations" (1119-1120). The art critic Uga Skulme stated that "Grosvalds' Oriental watercolors are finer and more special than his earlier works, they show the clarity of the composition, simplicity of forms and a certain restraint of colors" (694-696).