The Latvian Institute promotes knowledge about Latvia abroad. It produces publications in several languages on many aspects of Latvia.
The maroon-white-maroon flag of Latvia is one of the oldest in the world and dates back to a battle against Estonian tribes near the Latvian town of Cēsis in the 13th century. According to one legend, it originated from a white sheet used to carry a mortally wounded Latvian tribal chief from the battlefield. Soaked with his blood on two sides, his soldiers hoisted the warrior’s sheet as a banner as it led them to victory. In the 1860's Latvian student Jēkabs Lautenbahs-Jūsmiņš discovered a written reference to this flag in a collection of 13th century rhyming verse chronicles popular among the knights of the Livonian Order. These 'songs' glorified the feats of the Germanic Crusaders that sought to Christianize the pagan Latvian tribes.

A half century later, in May 1917, artist Ansis Cirulis used this historical description to design the flag as we know it today. On June 15, 1921 this design was adopted as the Latvian national flag by parliamentary decree.

The flag's colour proportions are 2:1:2 (the upper and lower maroon bands are twice as wide as the white band in the middle), and the correlation of the width and length of the flag is fixed as 1:2. The distinctive maroon colour of the Latvian flag is officially known as "Latvian red" in the rest of the world.

Colour proportions of the white colour of the flag: Pantone White.
Colour proportions of the red colour of the flag: Pantone 1807C.
The Coat of Arms

Latvia’s national coat of arms was established as a symbol of independent statehood after the proclamation of an independent Latvian Republic in 1918. The coat of arms combines traditional heraldic symbols of Latvian national identity with those of historical territorial districts. The sun is a central symbol in Latvian culture, particularly in songs, poetry and art, and here symbolizes Latvian national statehood. Even before achieving independence, a stylized sun was used as a national symbol on uniforms worn by the Latvian Riflemen who served in the Czarist Russian army during World War I. The 17 rays of the rising sun represented the 17 Latvian-inhabited districts of the Czarist Empire.

The three stars above the coat of arms represent the three historical districts (Vidzeme, Latgale and Kurzeme-Zemgale) which formed a united Latvia. These culturally important regions are also symbolized by historic heraldic figures that date back to the early 17th century. The western Latvian regions of Kurzeme and Zemgale are represented by a red lion, a symbol used by the Duke of Kurzeme (Courland) as early as 1569. Latvia’s eastern regions of Vidzeme and Latgale are represented by a silver griffin. This mythological winged creature with an eagle’s head first appeared in 1566 when this part of Latvia came under Polish-Lithuanian control.

The Latvian national coat of arms was designed by Latvian artist Rihards Zariņš. The proper display of the three versions of the coat of arms - large, small enhanced and small - is regulated by Latvian law.

The Large Coat of Arms
The large coat of arms can be used by the State President, Parliament, Prime Minister, Cabinet of Ministers, government ministries, the Supreme Court and Prosecutor General, as well as Latvia’s diplomatic and consular missions.

The Small Enhanced Coat of Arms
The small enhanced coat of arms can be used by agencies of the Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers, government ministries, the Supreme Court and Prosecutor General, as well as Latvia’s Departments.

The Small Coat of Arms
The small coat of arms can be used by other government institutions, municipal authorities and educational institutions on official documents.
The National Anthem

"Dievs, svētī Latviju!" ("God bless Latvia!") was officially proclaimed Latvia’s national anthem in 1920, but it also played an important role in leading to Latvia’s independence in 1918. It was written by Kārlis Baumanis in the second half of the 19th century, at a time when the Latvian people were beginning to openly display strong national sentiments. In fact, it was the first song to use the word ‘Latvia’ in a lyric. The song was first performed in 1873 at the First Latvian Song Celebration in Riga. At the time, Latvians were well known as an ethnic group in the Czarist Russian Empire, but a country called Latvia did not exist. Nationally-minded writers and activists had begun developing the idea of ‘Latvia’ as a designation for the territories that had traditionally been inhabited by Latvians. To use the word ‘Latvia’ in a song was a bold challenge to the Czarist regime and was initially forbidden by Moscow. As a result, the word ‘Baltics’ replaced ‘Latvia’ in this first performance of the song. It was first sung as a national anthem on November 18, 1918 at the proclamation of Latvia’s independence. The Latvian anthem differs from many national anthems in that it does not mention war, national struggle or victory, but rather describes a land where young girls blossom, young men sing, and where both aspire to dance together in joy.

God, bless Latvia,
Our dearest fatherland,
Do bless Latvia,
Oh, do bless it!

Where Latvian daughters bloom,
Where Latvian sons sing,
Let us dance in happiness there,
In our Latvia!

Other Latvian Symbols

The National Bird

The Latvian national bird is the baltā cielava or White Wagtail (Motacilla alba). This tireless, highly energetic bird is frequently mentioned in Latvian folk songs as a symbol of hard work and industriousness. It likes to nest in building rafters, woodpiles and other man-made objects, and is most frequently seen scurrying across the ground in search of twigs for its nest and food for its little ones. As its name implies, it rapidly wags its tail up and down as it dashes about. The White Wagtail is a very visible resident of Latvia from April through October, but winters around the Mediterranean Sea. Because of its popularity and admirable traits, the White Wagtail was declared the national bird of Latvia in 1960 by the International Bird Protection Council.

The National Insect

The Latvian national insect is also one of Latvia’s most beloved symbols in children stories and fairytales – the Two-spotted Ladybird (Adalia bipunctata). The insect’s Latvian name – mārīte – is derived from Māra, the name of the supreme Latvian goddess, or ‘earth mother’ responsible for the fertility of the land. Unlike the sprightly White Wagtail, the Two-spotted Ladybird moves slowly and diligently, but is excellent at defending itself. It was chosen as the national insect of Latvia by the Latvian Entomologists Society.

The National Flower

The Latvian national flower is the pipene or daisy (Leucanthemum vulgare). This common wildflower blossoms in June, just in time to be woven into festive wreaths for the Midsummer festivities (Jāņi). It continues to bloom until September, providing Latvian flower lovers, decorators and celebrants with their most popular accent for floral gifts and arrangements throughout the summer.
**Amber**

Amber plays a role in Latvian history and has always been an essential part of the Latvian cultural identity. In ancient times the amber found along Latvia's Baltic Sea coast was considered 'good as gold' and was sought by Vikings as well as traders as far away as Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire. This led to the development of the Amber Road between Latvia and the Black Sea. Latvians, on the other hand, often refer to their Baltic Sea as the Amber Sea (Dzintarjūra) and have adopted amber as one of their most treasured cultural symbols.

Unlike other precious and semi-precious stones, Baltic amber (succinite) is formed from organic fossilized pine resin. Traditionally it has been used to create amulets, pendants, broaches, buttons, necklaces and intricate pieces of decorative jewellery. The way it absorbs body heat and the presence of succinic acid in amber has led Latvians to also use it for medicinal purposes. In 2007, a Latvian scientist discovered how to make hi-tech thread and textiles from amber for use in advanced medical applications. This has led the fashion industry to began exploring new decorative uses for this ancient natural resource from the Baltic Sea.

**National Trees**

The oak and linden are male and female figures in Latvian folklore, and popularly viewed as the national trees of Latvia. The linden, or lime tree (*Tilia cordata*, Latvian: *liepa*), and the oak (*Quercus robur*, Latvian: *ozols*), are characteristic of the Latvian landscape and figure prominently in the practical and spiritual lives of ancient Latvians. Both trees have traditionally been used for medical purposes, and are also frequently mentioned in legends, fairytales, and the Latvian *dainas*. Linden blossoms and oak bark are still popular today in teas and medicinal preparations. The oak had a divine status in the pre-Christian religious beliefs of the early Latvians, and many of these ancient sacred oaks still stand today. Many are designated by law as 'Great Oaks' and protected as national treasures. Oak leaves are used to create men's wreaths on Jāņi (worn by men named Jānis) and are a frequent design element in Latvian heraldry and decorative arts.
**The River of Destiny – The Daugava**

The Daugava River is not only Latvia’s largest, but also historically most important river. This 375 km river flows through heart of Latvia and the center of Riga, serving as a border between the historical and cultural regions of Vidzeme and Latgale on the right bank, and Kurzeme and Zemgale on the left. Celebrated by poets as ‘The River of Destiny’, the river was first used by Vikings as the first leg of the Amber Road, a major trade route linking the lands around the Baltic and Black Seas. In addition to its strategic role as a major transport artery, the Daugava was an essential means of livelihood for Latvia’s inhabitants. In recent times it has become the site of Latvia’s hydroelectric power stations and a major source of energy. The river’s fateful role throughout Latvia’s history has made it a treasured subject of song, poetry and stories.

**Symbol of Independence – Freedom Monument**

Latvia’s ‘Freedom Monument’, or Brīvības piemineklis, was completed in the nation’s capital of Riga in 1935, and is the single-most important symbol of Latvia’s independence and nationhood. Designed by Kārlis Zāle and built entirely from public donations, the monument survived a half century of Soviet occupation to emerge as a rallying point for mass pro-independence demonstrations in the late 1980’s. The sculptural reliefs at the base of the monument depict important moments in Latvia’s history, while the woman at the top symbolizes Latvia’s freedom and sovereignty. She holds aloft three stars symbolizing the three historical districts of Latvia. The inscription at the base (Tēvzemei un brīvībai) means ‘For Fatherland and Freedom’. On holidays and state visits, flowers are placed at its base to honour all those who have sacrificed their lives for Latvia.

**‘Jāņi’ – The Most Latvian National Holiday**

In Latvia, celebration of the summer solstice is the oldest and most beloved traditional holiday. The two-day long ancient pagan midsummer fest begins on Līgo day, June 23rd, and concludes on ‘Jāņi’, June 24th. Most Latvians leave their residences in the city to gather with family and friends in the countryside for all-night celebrations. Large bonfires are lit, special foods and beer are prepared, and traditional midsummer songs and dances are performed to honour the setting and rising of the midnight sun. Nature is at its peak in Latvia at this time, and lush meadow flowers, grasses, birch branches and oak leaves are used to festively decorate houses, animals and the celebrants themselves.
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