

**DESIGNER SOCIALISM:
THE AESTHETIC TURN IN SOVIET RUSSIA AFTER STALIN**

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Abstract

This study explores the formation of a new aesthetics in Soviet Russia during the 1950s-60s, carried out by art professionals – art critics, philosophers, decorative artists, architects and designers. It introduces the concept of “aesthetic turn,” understood not as a rupture from the Stalin era art canon, but as the gradual broadening of the meaning of aesthetics to encompass the spheres of everyday life, consumption, science and technology. I argue that by reconfiguring the principles of visual and material cultures, art professionals offered their specific vision of socialism, in many ways continuous with the Russian avant-garde and based on honest and creative relationships with objects, cheerful labor using beautiful, ergonomic tools and comfortable environments for recreation and self-expression.

Extensively exploiting archival and published sources, I analyze ideas, debates, projects, material objects and exhibitions across the closely interconnected fields of applied art, monumental art and industrial design, thus offering a view of post-war Soviet design in a broad sense. By revealing multiple voices of creative individuals, this study moves beyond existing interpretations of Soviet design as a weapon in the cultural Cold War, an instrument of social control employed by experts on the state’s behalf, or simply as an exercise in the plagiarism of Western models. As my analysis demonstrates, by the late 1960s Soviet art professionals succeeded to create a vibrant intellectual space between conformity and dissent. This dissertation thus contributes to the growing body of scholarship that recognizes the complex cultural and intellectual trajectories running through the conventionally understood periodization of Soviet history.

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List of Abbreviations

CPSU – Communist Party of the Soviet Union
 Ginkhuk – State Institute of Artistic Culture (Petrograd-Leningrad, 1923-1926).
 Inkhuk – Institute of Artistic Culture (Moscow, 1920-1924).
 KB – Engineering Bureau
 KhKR – artistic-engineering elaboration (the predominant form of design practice at VNIITE in the 1960s)
 LOSKh – Leningrad Branch of the RSFSR Union of Artists (1959-1968); Leningrad Organization of Soviet Artists (from 1968)
 LSSKh – Leningrad Union of Soviet Artists (until 1959)
 LVKhPU – Leningrad Higher School for Art and Industry named after V. I. Mukhina
 MOSKh – Moscow Branch of the RSFSR Union of Artists
 MVKhPU – Moscow Higher School for Art and Industry (former Stroganov School)
 SKhKB – Special Artistic-Engineering Bureau (from 1964)
 TsUES – Central Educational and Experimental Studio for Design (from 1964)
 Vkhutein – Higher Artistic-Technical Institute (1926-1930)
 Vkhutemas – Higher Artistic-Technical Workshop (1920-1926)
 VLKSM, *Komsomol* – All-Union Lenin Communist Youth League (youth division of CPSU)
 VNIITE – All-Union Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics (from 1962)

Note on transliteration:

This dissertation uses the Library of Congress transliteration system, with the exception of firmly established forms for specific names (Gorky, Mayakovsky, Shklovsky, Lissitzky, and Groys).

Design is a conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.

Victor Papanek, 1970.¹

It is the way in which, by assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting material world. These configurations, which are at once symbolic and material, cross the borders between arts, genres, and epochs. They cut across categories of an autonomous history or technique, art or politics.

Jacques Ranciere, 2002.²

¹ Victor J. Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 4.

² Jacques Ranciere, "The Surface of Design, in Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, English ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2007), 91.

Introduction

In October 1967, readers of the Soviet journal *Decorative Art of the USSR* (*Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*) found the new issue without its usual table of contents and mostly devoid of text. Instead, they saw forty-five pages of high quality color and black-and-white reproductions of objects produced at different times during the fifty years of Soviet power. This is how the journal editors—decorative artists, designers, critics and philosophers—chose to celebrate the jubilee of the October Revolution, joining the chorus of numerous festive events of the Soviet 1967. The editorial, appropriately entitled “Glory to the 50th Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution,” explained the choice: “In this journal issue we give the floor to the wordless yet eloquent witnesses to our history, the products of the creative spirit of artists.”¹ The “witnesses” appeared on the following pages: monuments to the Soviet Constitution, to Karl Marx and to Jean-Paul Marat, built in 1918-19 in Moscow according to the Lenin Plan of Monumental Propaganda; a 1920 porcelain saucer, ‘Red Baltic Fleet,’ decorated with the figure of a revolutionary sailor; the 1935 post-constructivist pavilion of the Moscow metro station “Red Gates” by the avant-garde architect Nikolai Ladovskii; an ensemble of traditional clay toys produced by Tajik, Uzbek and Russian craftsmen in 1960-61; the 1967 memorial to the victims of Nazism on the site of the labor camp Salaspils (Latvia); a 1967 *pulegoso*² glass vase by Moscow artists; a selection of the late 1920s textile patterns with industrial motives; the interior of the

¹ “Da zdravstvuet slavnoe 50-letie Velikoi Oktiabr’skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii!” *Dekrativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 10 (October 1967): 1-2. Unless indicated otherwise, the translation of all Russian quotations is mine.

² *Pulegoso* (from the Italian dialect word *pulega*, “bubble”) refers to glass containing numerous bubbles of various sizes, produced by adding bicarbonate of soda, gasoline, or other substances to the melt. The technique was elaborated in the late 1920s at the Murano Island by designer and businessman Napoleone Martinuzzi. The irregular texture of glass, produced by bubbles, resonated with Soviet glass artists’ experimentation with textures in the 1960s; hence the popularity of *pulegoso* in the Soviet Union.

Soviet Pavilion at Expo 1967 in Montreal; a decorative painting of a peacock by a village craftsman from Kiev region; the recently finished high-rise building of the COMECON Headquarters on the New Arbat Street in Moscow; and many more. The image gallery was concluded by a black-and-white photo of the 1920s Lenin monument in Batumi, Georgia, effectively opposed to a plain red page.

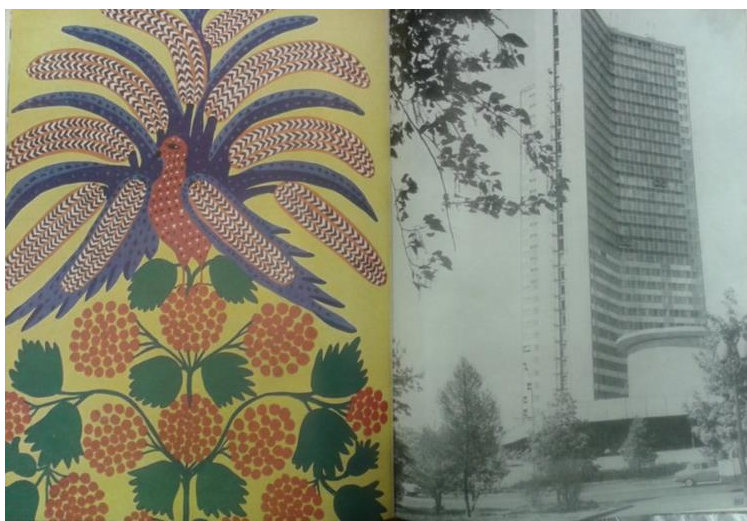


Figure 0.1. Double page (40-41) of *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR 10* (October 1967). Left: M. Primachenko, decorative painting. Bolotnia, Kiev oblast, 1965. Right: Mikhail Posokhin et al, COMECON Building at Novyi Arbat in Moscow, 1967.



Figure 0.2. Double page (48-49) of *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR 10* (October 1967). Lenin Monument in Batumi, 1920s.

To today's viewers, the image gallery is striking by the eclecticism of themes, types, scales and techniques. Its principles appear opaque, in a way similar to those of Borges's Chinese Encyclopedia, famously invoked by Michel Foucault in the preface to *The Order of Things* – the reader faces the “oddity of unusual juxtapositions.”³ What was the reason for placing together a war memorial, a porcelain cup, a youth café interior, and a Lenin monument? The easy answer, that they had been all produced in the Soviet Union, does not explain the choice of precisely these objects, and not others. Nor does it elucidate the reasons for the slightly mixed chronology (interchanging objects from the 1920s and 1960s) and for the conspicuous absence of the images from the period from the late 1930s to the 1950s. The question remains: what is the logic behind this order of things?

I suggest that the common ground for selecting objects for the special issue of *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, immediately comprehensible for the journal readership, was the particular aesthetics that gradually emerged in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death and took a pronounced form by the late 1960s. Here I understand “aesthetics” not as art theory or as a branch of philosophy dealing with art matters, but in a broader sense, put forth by the philosopher Jacques Rancière, as “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding modes of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.”⁴ The new aesthetics came to replace the Stalinist regime of the arts, which, following Rancière, can be described as representative, that is, adhering to a hierarchy of genres and subject matter

³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvi.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, “Foreword,” in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2006), 10.

and privileging speech over visibility.⁵ Within such a representative regime, the publication of the image gallery discussed above was unthinkable. So was the appearance of a specialized journal on decorative arts – notably, *DI SSSR* did not exist before December 1957. Though the rhetoric and meanings of art criticism changed throughout the Stalin era, the narrative always overshadowed visual imagery. Thus, for example, the article “Thirty-Five Years of the Soviet Art” by the President of the Soviet Academy of Arts Aleksandr Gerasimov, published in November 1952 in the official art journal *Iskusstvo*, included only few images – figurative painting and sculpture on heroic topics, – and a long narrative glorifying the triumph of socialist realism, abundant with references to the works of Lenin and Stalin.⁶ There, images appeared as illustrations to the text. On the contrary, the October 1967 issue of *DI SSSR* reduced texts to captions, allotting to the images the primary role in expressing the ideals and effects of the Revolution, or, in other words, representing the post-Stalin order of things. This dissertation investigates the historical event that made the new type of representation possible – the formation of an aesthetic regime in Soviet Russia in the 1950s-60s, carried out by art critics, art historians, philosophers, decorative artists, architects and designers – a creative milieu that I call, for the sake of clarity, art professionals. In what follows, I provide an extensive explanation of the notions comprising the dissertation’s title – “Designer Socialism” and “Aesthetic Turn.” Then I proceed to discuss the basic terminology of my analysis, sources and methodology, and, finally, to outline the dissertation’s chapters.

⁵ Rancière, “Foreword,” 21.

⁶ Aleksandr Gerasimov, “Tridtsat’ piat’ let sovetskogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 5 (November-December 1952): 9-23.

Conceptualizing the “Aesthetic Turn”

I call the process by which the aesthetic regime of arts came to replace the representative one around 1953 in Soviet Russia the “aesthetic turn.” This term immediately provokes two associations to be explained. Firstly, it recalls the numerous “turns” that occurred in historiography in the second half of the twentieth century, as a result of which today’s historian is, in Peter Burke’s witty expression, “in danger of becoming dizzy.”⁷ In particular, the historiography of the Soviet Union witnessed a “social” turn in the 1970s and a “cultural” turn spurred by the opening of the archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸ In this dissertation, I by no means intend to exacerbate the readers’ dizziness by proposing yet another turn in the scholarship on Soviet history. Nor do I look for a historic “turn” in the Soviet academic disciplines of art history or aesthetics in the 1950s – 1960s. Instead, I use the term to characterize the gradual broadening of the meaning of aesthetics to encompass the world of objects and the ways people interact with these objects.

Secondly, and more importantly, an “aesthetic turn” implies a certain position in the periodization of Soviet history that was often written in terms of breaks, shifts and changes. Up to the time period examined in this dissertation, Soviet history features such obvious

⁷ Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press, 2004), 71.

⁸For a concise survey of these turns, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Introduction," in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (Routledge, 2000), 1:14. Starting in the field of the studies of Stalinism, “cultural turn” affected the research on the Khrushchev period in the 2000s and more recently have inspired innovative historical research on the Brezhnev period. See, for example: Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of de-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies 23 (London: Routledge, 2006); Melanie Ilić and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies 57 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009); other examples of the scholarship on post-Stalin culture will be discussed below in this introduction. For the survey of the recent studies of the Soviet 70s see Juliane Fürst, “Where Did All the Normal People Go?: Another Look at the Soviet 1970s,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 14, no. 3 (2013): 621–40.

landmarks as the introduction of New Economic Policy in 1921; Lenin's death in 1924; the launch of industrialization and forced collectivization in the late 1920s (notably, characterized by Stalin himself as "Great Break");⁹ the Great Terror of 1936-37, the German Invasion in the Soviet Union in June 1941, the end of the war in 1945 and the new wave of repressions; Stalin's death on March 5, 1953 and Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 that denounced Stalin's personality cult and proclaimed the Party's return to the true Marxist-Leninist principles. While these events strongly influenced all spheres of Soviet life, during the last two and a half decades historians have presented more complex historical dynamics, focusing on particular policies, activities and continuities such as retail trade, consumer culture, pleasure and luxury, mass housing, youth culture, the position and value of intellectuals, and cultural contacts with the West.¹⁰

The history of Soviet visual art, too, has its specific turning points, most famously, the 1932 Party Decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations" that abolished all independent artistic initiatives; the First Convention of Soviet Writers in 1934,

⁹ I. V. Stalin, "God velikogo pereloma k XII godovshchne oktiabria," *Pravda*, November 3, 1929. This term was cited by a number of scholars of the period, for example: Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1987); Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia*, Leisure, Consumption, and Culture (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Julie Hessler and American Council of Learned Societies, *A Social History of Soviet Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s*, Consumption and Public Life (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); David Crowley and Susan Emily Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010); Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Washington, D.C.: Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Juliane Furst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

where socialist realism was defined as the only approved method of Soviet art making; the attack on cultural intelligentsia in 1948-1952, associated with the name of the Party ideologist Andrei Zhdanov (the infamous “*zhdanovshchina*”), Khrushchev’s address at the Second All-Union Convention of Construction Workers and Architects in December 1954, denouncing “excess” in architecture and urging the architects and builders to turn to industrial methods; the Picasso exhibition in Moscow in December 1956; and Khrushchev’s intervention at the exhibition of Moscow Artists in December 1962 with a harsh critique of abstract art that signaled the curtailment of the relative cultural freedoms that had unfolded within the 20th Congress atmosphere. These events provide a general framework of the perceived twin breaks: first, in 1932-1934, from the internationally influential avant-garde, or “Soviet modernism,”¹¹ to state-sponsored chauvinism and the triumph of socialist realism, often dismissed as propagandist kitsch, or demonized as evil “totalitarian art,” analogous to the art of the Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy;¹² and second,

¹¹ The widely known term “Russian avant-garde,” was applied to innovative art movements of the 1910s – early 1930s retrospectively: it was used in the West since the 1960s and was not used as self-definition by the artists in question (though was frequently referred to in broader political and social sense). Instead, such terms as “leftist artists,” “futurists,” “Suprematists,” “Constructivists,” “productivists” proliferated, according to artists’ professional orientations. The problematic nature of the term has been specifically discussed in 2009 in a special section of the No. 2 of the journal *Russkaia literatura*. In particular, art historian Andrei Krusanov brought to light the debate among late Soviet art historians about the criteria for defining a movement or a particular artist as “avant-gardist” (such as active support of the Bolshevik revolution, provocative behavior, or rejection of figurative art). He also draws the line between the use of the term “avant-garde” between art historians (*iskusstvovedy*) and historians proper (*istoriki*), arguing that the former pay more attention at ideas and artworks while the latter explore social, economic, institutional and other contexts. According to him, historians are responsible for turning “Russian avant-garde” from the notion (*poniatiie*) to name (*imia*) – that is, from the tool of art criticism to the tool for describing particular historical event (see A. V. Krusanov, “O termine ‘Russkii avangard,’” 2 (2009): 33-67). In spite of all these complexities, I chose the term “Russian avant-garde” for present discussion, because it captures the character of post-war global scholarly interest to this phenomenon; to borrow Krusanov’s classification, I use “avant-garde” as name. I speak of Russian, rather than Soviet, modernism, in order to encompass also pre-revolutionary development, while recognizing the spread of modernist art movements beyond what became Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. “Russkii arkhitekturnyi avangard: ot grants iavleniia k granitsam termina,” *Russkaia literatura* 2 (2009): 33-67.

¹² Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People’s Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990).

in 1954-1956, to the very cautious openness to Western culture, gradual “rehabilitation” of the Russian avant-garde, at least in architecture, and, as several historians have recently stressed, the emergence of design as a profession.¹³

Notably, the events associated with the second perceived break resulted in an intensifying perception of the first one. In the atmosphere of renewed Soviet internationalism and intensification of cultural contacts of the 1960s and 1970s, Western travelers could become familiar with some avant-garde works, carefully preserved in storage rooms of museums and in private archives, first of all, those by collectors Nikolai Khardzhiev and George Costakis, and by artist Anna Leporskaia, a student of Kazimir Malevich.¹⁴ These encounters fuelled excitement about the Russian avant-garde and, consequently, its heroization as the victim of repressive Stalinist cultural policy. This attitude was also greatly advanced within the Soviet Union by the surviving participants of the avant-garde movements and by their pupils, the younger generation of creative intelligentsia. The most prominent advocates of avant-garde visual art were the writer and collector Nikolai Khardzhiev, who had been personally familiar with the avant-garde’s greatest masters,¹⁵ and, from a younger generation, the architectural historian Selim Khan-

¹³ Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London: V&A Pub, 2008); see also numerous articles by Susan Reid on Soviet design, domestic and consumer culture.

¹⁴ Nikolai Khardzhiev, *Stati Ob Avangarde: V Dvukh Tomakh*, Arkhiv Russkogo Avangarda (Moskva: RA, 1997); Troels Andersen, ed., *K. S. Malevich. The Leporskaia Archive* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011). See also an American art critic’s personal recollection about his experience of discussing avant-garde in a circle of Moscow intellectuals in 1967: Hilton Kramer, “Rehabilitating the Russian Avant-Garde,” *The New Criterion* 7 (September 1988): 1, available at <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Rehabilitating-the-Russian-avant-garde-5705> accessed 23.01.2015.

¹⁵ From 1960 to 1968, Khardzhiev organized a series of short exhibitions of the avant-garde in the Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow, including those of Malevich, Tatlin, Lissitzky and Filonov. Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 55-56. See also Nikolaï Khardzhiev, *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Palace Editions, 2002).

Magomedov and design critic Larisa Zhadova (the wife of the celebrated poet Konstantin Simonov). Their enthusiasm about the avant-garde's revival echoed that in the West, especially in the US, where it was a part of a larger trend: European modernism was imported to America before World War II by such masters as Mies van der Rohe and László Moholy-Nagy and popularized by the Museum of Modern Art. After the war, it evolved (or, according to some, degraded) into a uniform, business-driven International Style, yet was also radicalized by certain progressively-thinking architects and designers.¹⁶ The MoMA's first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr., who had visited the USSR in the 1920s and met many prominent artists,¹⁷ strongly contributed to the inscription of the Russian avant-garde into the history of Western modernism in the 1950s and 1960s. He was a devoted supporter of pioneering academic research in the art of late Imperial and early Soviet Russia, conducted by the very young British art historian Camilla Gray in the late 1950s in MoMA (after her communication with surviving Russian émigré artists in Paris) and in the early 1960s in the Soviet Union. The resulting book *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, published in New York in 1962, was quickly translated into German (1963), Italian (1964) and French (1968) and, in spite of its shortcomings, was for quite many Western art historians a revelation.¹⁸ In her 1964 review of this book, Nina Juviler remarked: "Unfortunately, we in the West have been inclined to underplay the important contributions Russian artists made to art during those years of fervent experimentation and creative intercourse between Russian and European artists that began with the twentieth century and

¹⁶ Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Rejean Legault, eds., *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Montréal: Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Barr, Alfred H., Jr., "Russian Diary, 1927-1928," *October* 7 (Winter 1978): 7-50

¹⁸ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1962). Notably, Gray still did not use the term "avant-garde," speaking of "modern movement in Russian Art instead.

ended three decades later.”¹⁹ Notably, in this interpretation Stalinist cultural policy of the early 1930s appears as a much more decisive break in Russian art history than the October Revolution. The book’s launch took place in London’s Grosvenor Gallery during the opening of *Two Decades of Experiment in Russian Art 1902-1922*, the first survey exhibition of Russian avant-garde. Gray’s book prepared a fruitful soil for the research, publications and exhibitions on the Russian/Soviet avant-garde that followed in the 1970s and the 1980s, proliferated in the 1990s with the opening of archives in post-Soviet countries, and reached grandiose scale by today.²⁰

¹⁹ Nina Juviler, “Review,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 8, no. 1 (April 1, 1964): 103–5.

²⁰ Since the International Art Deco Exhibition in Paris in 1925, where Russian artists, including Constructivists, presented their works, Russian avant-garde art was little known in the West. The first important post-WWI exhibition in this respect was the one of Malevich’s paintings, organized in Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1958; in 1959 it traveled to Braunschweig Kunstverein, to the Bern Kunsthalle and further in Europe. In the 1960s, museums and commercial galleries in the West demonstrated growing interest to the Russian avant-garde and showed inclusive exhibitions with high percentage of emigre artists like Naum Gabo, Kandinsky and Chagall. The number of exhibitions grew in the late 1960s in the light of the popularization of the avant-garde by the European and American New Left. After the Helsinki Accord of 1975, Russian avant-garde became the matter of international diplomacy and was now shown in the major institutions in Europe and the U. S. Most prominent examples are “Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930” (The National Museum of Modern Art at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1979) and “The Great Utopia,” (Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1981). For the informative account on this see: Éva Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art,” *Centropa* 3, no. 2 (2003) 93-104. In 1979, Croatian literary theorist Aleksandar Flaker organized a seminar on Russian avant-garde in Zagreb, which resulted in a publication of the “glossary” of Russian avant-garde (Aleksandar Flaker and Dubravka Ugrešić, *Pojmovnik ruske avangarde* (Zavod za znanost o književnosti filozofskoga fakulteta sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 1984); German edition Aleksandar Flaker et al., *Glossarum Der Russischen Avantgarde. Theorie*, Auflage: 1. Aufl. (Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 1989)). Post-1960s historiography of the Russian avant-garde is vast, even if one takes only its visual part. Its complete survey is beyond the purpose of this introduction. To name just a few important books and edited volumes (while there is also a large number of journal articles): Nikolai Khardzhiev, ed., *K istorii russkogo avangarda/ The Russian avant-garde* (Stockholm: Hylaea press, 1976); Alexandra Schazkikh, *Sowjetische Malerei aus den Karpaten* (Seemann, 1976); Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (UMI Research Press, 1980); Andrei B. Nakov, *L’avant-garde russe* (F. Hazan, 1984); Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); John E. Bowl, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, (New York, N.Y: Thames and Hudson, 1988); S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1987). Larisa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (New York, N.Y: Thames and Hudson, 1988); Elena Sidorina, *Russkii Konstruktivizm: Istoki, Idei, Praktika* (Moscow: Galart, 1995); Evgenii Kovtun, *Russkii avangard 1920-1930-kh godov* (St. Petersburg: Avropa, 1996); G. F. Kovalenko, ed., *Amazonki avangarda* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004). I mention some later books on the Russian avant-garde later in this introduction.

In the late 1960s, the rise of the New Left in the West, in particular the student movements and anti-Vietnam-war protests, as well as the Prague Spring reforms, prompted a new wave of attention towards the Russian avant-garde as the art of “original” and “uncorrupted” socialism. After the defeat of the 1968 movements, the avant-garde was invested with the strong symbolic meaning of revolutionary anti-capitalism (but at the same time, ironically, it was presented by liberal Western scholars as divorced from politics and developed into a profitable brand for showing and selling).²¹ One prominent outcome of this rediscovery of the avant-garde was the launch of a new journal of aesthetic criticism and art theory, appositely called *October*, in New York in 1976.²² According to one of its early editors, the philosopher Susan Buck-Morss, in contrast to MoMA’s portrayal of the Soviet avant-garde as an aesthetic style, *October* “was loyal to new art that resurrected the politics of avant-garde art, the desire, through the aesthetics of daily life, to transform society.” She specifies:

It was for reasons of social engagement that we looked to the past, not as an issue of art-historical chronology. Artists and theorists were attempting to revive the political excitement that was generated at that earlier time. From Constructivism to cinema, from public art to collective production, we turned to the work of Bolshevik revolutionary artists for practical inspiration. As for the ultimate triumph of Stalin's aesthetic program in the USSR, it seemed to be the utter defeat of the avant-garde.²³

Thus, by the early 1980s, Russian avant-garde art acquired the status of a heroic experiment and the innocent victim of Stalin on both sides of the “iron curtain.” While relevant scholarship had grown in sophistication and diversity since the publication of Gray’s book, it often tended to contrast the eras of avant-garde and socialist realism (both in visual art

²¹ Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art.”

²² “About October,” *October* 1 (April 1, 1976): 3–5.

²³ Susan Buck-Morss, review of Vladimir Paperny’s book *Architecture in the Age of Stalin* (2011), http://www.paperny.com/k2_morss.html accessed 1.02.2015

and architecture) as the eras of blossoming creativity and dogmatism, respectively.²⁴ The result was what historian Daria Bocharnikova aptly calls “history of lost modernism.”²⁵ Not accidentally, from the 1960s, the general histories of modern art in Anglophone scholarship consider the Russian/Soviet experience only up until 1932-1934, and very selectively, focusing at such iconic figures as Malevich, Tatlin, and Lissitzky.²⁶

However, the “break” of 1932 was most vigorously conceptualized not by these Western and Soviet advocates of the avant-garde, but by an author who presented an alternative vision – cultural historian and designer Vladimir Paperny. In 1975-1979, for his PhD dissertation, he wrote an innovative account on Stalin era architecture, too daring to be accepted in the USSR. In 1985, after the author’s emigration to the U. S, it appeared as monograph entitled “*Kul’tura dva*” (*Culture Two*) thanks to Ardis Publishers²⁷ (by that

²⁴ Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*; Zhadova, *Malevich*; Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*; Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*; Sidorina, *Russkii Konstruktivizm*; see also articles in *Malevich zum 100 Geburtstag* (Köln: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978); Khan-Magomedov’s and Zhadova’s seminal books were first published in the socialist bloc: in East Germany in 1983 and Hungary in 1984, respectively (K. Paul Zygas, “Review,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 50, no. 4 (December 1, 1991): 468–70). For the critical summary of Western approaches to the Russian avant-garde by the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, see Paul Wood, “The Politics of the Russian Avant-Garde,” in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, and Amsterdam (Netherlands). Stedelijk Museum, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992): 3-20.

²⁵ Daria Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern: A History of Architectural Profession in the USSR, 1954-1971” (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2014), 17. Though she applies this term to the narrative of Soviet architecture, I suggest that it is also relevant for the understanding of visual art, including easel art and the art related to daily life, that in the 1920s and 1930s was given different names, depending on the approach and setting: “applied,” “industrial,” or “productivist.”

²⁶ For example: Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1992); Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993). It is worth mentioning the recent tendency in the international scholarship to move beyond the conventional narratives of the Russian avant-garde and consider its hitherto overlooked artists, streams, and ideas. See John E. Bowl and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, Rosalind P Blakesley, and Margaret Samu, eds., *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014).

²⁷ Vladimir Paperny, *Kul’tura Dva* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985). In 1996 the book was issued in Russia by the publishing house *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, founded in Moscow in 1992 by literary critic Irina Prokhorova and her brother, businessman Mikhail Prokhorov, with the aim to bring together cutting-edge scholarship on culture and politics, conducted both on the post-Soviet space and in the West (Vladimir Paperny, *Kul’tura Dva* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1996)). This publication was much expected in Russian intellectual circles and generated even broader popularity of the book. Its 2002 and 2011

time the manuscript had already widely circulated in Moscow in samizdat copies); its fragmented translation into English significantly impressed American scholars associated with *October*.²⁸ Paperny's interest in structuralism, typical to Soviet liberal intelligentsia of the mid-1970s, as well as his reading of Heinrich Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque* (translated into Russian in 1913), led him to find a common ground for understanding the architecture of the early Bolshevik and Stalin periods. Criticizing the unspoken consensus on the "suppressed avant-garde" among architectural historians and critics of the 1970s, including his teacher Khan-Magomedov, Paperny presented the change in the official policy towards architecture of the early 1930s as a symptom of the change of cultural paradigm. For the sake of impartiality, he offered the terms "Culture One" and "Culture Two" for describing politico-cultural events, respectively, of the 1920s and of the 1930s–early 1950s. Analyzing a broad range of archival and published materials, he distinguished a number of binary oppositions underlying the major dyad Culture 1 - Culture 2. To summarize this analysis, Culture 1 is dynamic, egalitarian, collectivist, iconoclastic and future-oriented, while Culture 2 is static, hierarchical, focused on exceptional individuals and eager to absorb the diverse cultural forms of the past to become a pinnacle of historical progress. Moreover, Paperny suggested that the whole history of Russian culture can be described in terms of cyclical interchange of the two cultures. Even though today this structuralist model may look simplistic, it remains valuable as historical evidence of the bold revisionism within late Soviet scholarship on architecture. A pioneering

publications in English provoked a new wave of attention and a number of positive reviews. Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002; 2011). See the reviews by S. Frederick Starr, Susan Buck-Morss, Boris Groys, John Bowlt and Jean-Louis Cohen (in French) at <http://www.paperny.com/k2.html>, accessed 2.02.2015.

²⁸ Buck-Morss, review of *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*.

comprehensive study of Stalinist culture, devoid of moralist bias, *Culture Two* became for leftist critics a new vantage point from which to criticize the Western culture industry.²⁹

The central concept of my dissertation, the “aesthetic turn,” can be perceived as structuralist, a variation of Paperny’s analytical scheme, which, in particular, implied the return of Culture 1 after Stalin’s death. For example, after characterizing Culture 2 as focused on the achievements of the past, in contrast with futurist Culture 1, Paperny argued: “The new wave of the striving towards the future and rupture with the past started in Soviet culture only in the late 1950s”; he quoted Khrushchev’s proclamation about the approaching arrival of Communism, made on the XXII Party Congress in 1961, as the most vivid manifestation of this rupture.³⁰ While recognizing the significance of Party and state reformist policy for the emergence of new cultural trends, I do not evaluate this process in terms of rupture. With all due respect to Paperny’s intellectual rigor, I have not written this dissertation as a sequel to *Culture Two*. While Paperny uses the concepts “Culture One” and “Culture Two” to demonstrate the structural unity of each of the two historical periods, my purpose is to analyze a heterogeneous set of ideas, pronouncements, concepts and objects that constituted post-Stalin Soviet aesthetics. Even though this aesthetics was strongly influenced by the legacy of the avant-garde, in particular Constructivism, it was formed in very different social, political and economic circumstances and under the impact of a multitude of factors. Therefore, the aesthetic turn was not just a re-turn to the avant-garde, or even to the cultural pluralism of the 1920s that exceeded the avant-garde. It was

²⁹ According to the reading of young architecture historian and critic Ross Wolfe, *Culture 2* sheds new light on the crisis on modernism and reveals the contradictions of post-modern society by analyzing the crisis of modernism in the Soviet Union which by three decades preceded similar situation in the West. See Ross Laurence Wolfe, “Stalinism in Art and Architecture, Or, the First Postmodern Style,” *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 5, no. 1 (2013).

³⁰ Paperny, *Kul'tura Dva*, 19.

a gradual process of the formation of new positions and categories, to a great extent conducted by those people who had been active in the avant-garde movements and continued to work, though often in different spheres and capacities, under Stalin. Therefore, the “aesthetic turn” refers to change without neglecting the importance of continuity. In this respect, my dissertation speaks to the growing body of work that recognizes the complex cultural and intellectual trajectories running through the conventionally understood periodization of Soviet history, in particular, the history of Soviet art and cultural production.³¹ It does so, however, not by embracing the *longue durée* of Soviet socialism, but by focusing on two decades – the 1950s – 1960s - marked by significant reforms in cultural policy that allowed full-fledged development of certain previously existing ideas as well as the emergence of new ones. Though on a much more modest scale, my aim is akin to that of Foucault in his classic work *The Order of Things*: to describe “an epistemological space specific to a particular period.”³²

Explaining “Designer Socialism”

In official Soviet terminology, artists of all profiles, art critics and philosophers belonged to the sub-stratum of “creative intelligentsia”;³³ in the early 1960s, the newly recognized profession of designer fell somewhere in between the categories of “creative” and “technical” intelligentsia, as their position vis-à-vis traditional art-making and

³¹ Bowlt and Matich, *Laboratory of Dreams*; Ekaterina Degot’, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2002); Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*; Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*; Diana Kurkovski West, “CyberSovietica: Planning, Design and the Cybernetics of Soviet Space, 1954-1986” (Ph.D diss., Princeton University, 2013); Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern”; Irina Sirotkina, *Shestoe chuvstvo avangarda: tanets, dvizhenie, kinesteziia v zhizni poetov I khudozhnikov* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo evropeiskogo universitea, 2014).

³² “Foreword to the English Edition,” in Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xi.

³³ Dzhermen Mikhailovich Gvishiani et al., eds., *Kratkii Slovar Po Sotsiologii* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1988), 92-94.

engineering was constantly a matter of debate. The aesthetic turn was thus an undertaking of Soviet intelligentsia, and its study is a contribution to the scholarship concerned with the agency of the intelligentsia – or, in other words, intellectuals or professionals – under state socialism.

The increasing social status of various sorts of professionals with the further development of science and technology – in Soviet terminology, the “scientific and technological revolution” – was discussed by a number of Western, mostly American, scholars in the 1970s – 1980s.³⁴ A related stream of research deals with the meaning of the intelligentsia in socialist societies, in particular its position vis-à-vis state and Party elites.³⁵ It often articulates the clash between two notions of the intelligentsia: the one presented by Stalin in 1936 and maintained in official ideology throughout the Soviet era —a social stratum (*prosloika*) of people with university degrees professionally engaged in highly skilled mental work—and the 19th century notion, signifying a socially heterogeneous milieu united by high moral standards and critical attitudes towards the state, with free expression and critical thinking as its primary ideals.³⁶ Interest in this problem was spurred

³⁴ Franklyn Griffiths and H. Gordon Skilling, eds., *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1971); Moshe Lewin, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates: From Bukharin to the Modern Reformers* (Princeton University Press, 1974); George W. Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982); See Susan Reid’s comment on this stream of scholarship: Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 47, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2006): 236.

³⁵ Walter D. Connor, *Socialism, Politics, and Equality: Hierarchy and Change in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); György Konrád and Iván Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, 1st ed (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979). Michael D. Kennedy, *Professionals, Power, and Solidarity in Poland: A Critical Sociology of Soviet-Type Society*, Soviet and East European Studies 79 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

³⁶ These notions can be viewed as symptoms of two major approaches to defining intelligentsia, which sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh terms “formal” and “normative.” According to him, formal approach is based on such criteria as the level of education and involvement in creative work; it was taken not only by Soviet sociology (that kept the Stalin’s notion of “*prosloika*”), but also by a number of Western scholars. The normative approach is subjective, as it is based on the beholder’s judgment about moral virtues of persons, such as altruism and kindness; this approach was popular not only among Soviet dissidents, but also some official writers, such as Vladimir Dudintsev and Daniil Granin, and was shared by some Western intellectuals,

by the fall of socialist systems in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the USSR. In particular, émigré and post-Soviet Russian authors demonstrated a tendency to internalize the idea of the Soviet intelligentsia as a progressive, oppositional milieu, true to the highest ideals of humanity and thus continuing the mission of their 19th-century predecessors – sometimes termed “liberal intelligentsia.”³⁷ This narrative is kindred to the earlier “history of lost modernism,” because it, too, presents an opposition “creative individuals (or collectives, depending on the perspective) vs. repressive state.”

Both narratives received timely criticism. A notorious example is the 1992 book *The Total Art of Stalinism* by Leningrad counter-cultural philosopher Boris Groys (originally published in German 1988 as *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*).³⁸ It is often discussed together with Paperny’s *Culture Two* due to the similarity in subject, polemical tone, unacceptability in the USSR and the émigré status of both authors (Groys moved to West Germany in 1981).³⁹ However, Groys disagreed with Paperny’s structuralist vision of two cultural paradigms and argued instead for logical continuity between the avant-garde and Stalinist

including sociologist Karl Mannheim. While some of the authors cited above use the terms “intellectuals” and “intelligentsia” interchangeably, Shlapentokh carefully notes that the former term is more characteristic for Western academic discourse and the latter for Russian and Soviet one. Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post-Stalin Era* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), ix-x.

³⁷ Liudmila Alekseeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); E. Iu. Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, New Russian History (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*; this idea is also moderately presented by Shlapentokh, though he recognizes a high degree of Soviet intellectuals’ cooperation with the political elite (Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power*.) Rather idealized portrayal of intelligentsia appears in memoirs of the participants of the aesthetic turn such as art critic and theater director Irina Uvarova, the wife of the famous dissident writer Iurii Daniel, and by design theorist and saxophone player Aleksei Kozlov. See Aleksei Kozlov, *Dzhaz, rok i mednye trubny* (Moscow: Eskmo, 2006); Irina Uvarova, *Daniel i vse vse vse* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2014).

³⁸ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and beyond* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992). Original publication: Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (München-Wien: Carl Hansen Verlage, 1988).

³⁹ Wolfe, “Stalinism in Art and Architecture, Or the First Postmodern Style”; Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern,” 18-21.

art, based on the ongoing ambition to subject society to a single hyper-rational plan, that is, to aesthetically reorganize it. Repudiating what he calls “the myth of the innocent avant-garde,” Groys presented artists’ pronouncements and works as prolegomena to socialist realism – the apogee of the avant-garde: “Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic terms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favored.”⁴⁰ According to Groys, Stalin took the position of power to which Malevich, Tatlin and other avant-garde artists had aspired. However bold and innovative, Groys’s analysis is unsupported by evidence about actual participation of avant-garde artists in state institutions and campaigns; as Daria Bocharnikova notices, he “never precisely explain how this or that metaphor or artistic aspiration was translated into reality.”⁴¹

This problem was addressed two decades later by two American art historians, who took advantage of the “archival revolution.” In 2005, Maria Gough presented her insightful study *The Artist and Producer: Constructivism in Revolution*, where she investigated the complex interrelation between formal and political experiments at Moscow’s Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) – “the hotbed of Constructivist activity.” Analyzing previously unknown and overlooked theoretical debates, concepts and objects, Gough traced the development of constructivists’ attempt to enter industry, rationalize production processes and thereby assume an administrative role in Soviet system. As she concludes, this attempt mostly failed, as the Constructivists’ ideas about an artist’s role in industry proved

⁴⁰ Boris Grois, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and beyond* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9.

⁴¹ Bocharnikova, “Inventing socialist Modern,” 20.

incompatible with the Party's views on the rationalization of industrial production.⁴² Pamela Kachurin's 2013 book *Making Modernism Soviet: the Russian Avant-Garde in the early Soviet era, 1918-1928* pays more attention to the problem of continuity between early Bolshevik and Stalin periods.⁴³ Like Groys, Kachurin rejected the vision of avant-garde artists as "political virgins," but, unlike him, meticulously explored artistic networks, patron-client relations and functioning of important art institutions (namely, The Moscow Museum of Painterly Culture, the Vitebsk Art School, and the Petrograd Museum/Institute of Artistic Culture). Working in these institutions during the stereotypically "liberal" era of New Economic Policy, modernist artists (the term Kachurin prefers) implemented restrictive measures for controlling activities of Soviet visual artists. However, in the late 1920s they had more and more to subsume their interests to those of their patrons in order to retain agency in the cultural sphere. Thus, Kachurin demonstrated the importance of patronage and power-relations in the development of Soviet art in the first half of the twentieth century. Her study therefore belongs to the recent stream of studies devoted to the role of professionals in the Sovietization of culture and their reliance on powerful patrons and institutions.⁴⁴

Recently, a number of studies presented a balanced response of the idealistic narrative of Soviet intelligentsia. Rather than exposing Soviet intellectuals as opportunistic power-

⁴² Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (University of California Press, 2005).

⁴³ Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Vera Tolz, *Russian Academicians and the Revolution: Combining Professionalism and Politics*, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Evgenii Sergeevich Gromov, *Stalin: Vlast I Iskustvo* (Moskva: Respublika, 1998); Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939-1953* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2006); Iankovskaia, G. A. *Iskusstvo, den'gi I politika: Sovetskii khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma* (Perm': Permskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2007); Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

seekers or, in the case of artists, aspiring master builders of society, scholars have strived to achieve a nuanced picture. Thus, historian Steven Bittner recognized the complexity of the intelligentsia's reactions to Khrushchev's contradictory policies, paying attention to different generations and experiences in the preceding era, including complicity in repressions. He also noticed the intelligentsia's penchant for self-victimization, which to a great extent nurtured the myth of the "Thaw" as a liberal era, radically different from the oppressive periods of Stalinism and Brezhnev's "stagnation." Against this vision, created post-factum by Soviet intellectuals, Bittner brought an argument for the historical continuity of cultural processes and the intelligentsia's diverse strategies of navigating "the turbulent waters of de-Stalinization."⁴⁵ Katerina Clark, in her impressive revision of the history of Soviet culture of the 1930s, demonstrated the complex roles of prominent figures, such as filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, as both agents of Stalinist cultural policy and cosmopolitan intellectuals.⁴⁶ In the most recent study, Benjamin Tromly portrayed Soviet intellectuals under Stalin and Khrushchev as a heterogeneous group of educated professionals, who to a great extent were reconciled with the state system and enjoyed the benefits it provided, while also seeing themselves "as bearers of state-sanctioned models of enlightenment and culture."⁴⁷ Building upon the arguments of these authors, this dissertation aims to take a neutral stance towards Soviet "creative intelligentsia" and considers the activity of art professionals beyond the customary chain of dualities – collaboration vs. opposition, cynicism vs. truth, power-seeking vs. altruism, and so on. It

⁴⁵ Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw*, 11.

⁴⁶ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev*, Includes Bibliographical References (pp. 262-288) and Index (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

tells the story of professionals affirming their social role and aiming at betterment of the society, who prepared the conceptual ground for Soviet design. They challenged the principles of the Stalinist representative regime of arts, yet they did so within the official institutional system, not against it. To be precise, some of the agents of the aesthetic turn were at different times related to dissident subcultures: two remarkable examples are art critic and Christian believer Aleksandr Saltykov (1900-1959), who was imprisoned in 1930-34 on charges of “church revolution,” and Marxist philosopher Boris Shragin, who in the 1960s became a human rights activist and lost his job in 1968 because of his open support for persecuted intellectuals.⁴⁸ Clearly, the beliefs of such people influenced their aesthetic views. However, one should be cautious not to present the post-Stalin aesthetic turn as dissident or countercultural activity, especially given that some of its agents were Party members. Rather, it was the initiative for a systemic change, stimulated at first by immediate post-war optimism about positive changes in the society of the victors, and, after the tough period of late Stalin’s repressions, fuelled by de-Stalinization and relative liberalization of culture.

On the institutional level, the aesthetic turn stemmed from decorative artists’ lobbying for recognition as serious professionals, equal to painters, sculptors and architects. In the context of the state and Party’s efforts for the improvement of citizens’ living standards, epitomized by the mass-housing campaign, decorative art could effectively claim to be the most progressive of arts and thus worthy of generous financial and ideological support. Definitely, patronage was a strong factor behind the aesthetic turn. For example, the patronage of the Minister of Transport Machine Building Viacheslav

⁴⁸ “Soobshcheniie A. A. Saltykova,” in *Rossiiskaia muzeinaia entsiklopediia*, T. 2 (Moscow: Progress, 2001), 163; OSA, f. 300-85-49, box 50:13 *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* 1 (April 30, 1968), l. 9.

Malyshev allowed young technical professional Iurii Soloviev to establish the Architecture-Engineering Bureau in 1946 and work as a designer when this profession was not yet officially recognized. By the early 1960s he had gained a good reputation in the Soviet governmental circles, in particular, the support of the First Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers Alexei Kosygin, and as a result Soloviev was able successfully to implement his idea of a state-sponsored design system.⁴⁹ Designers working in more traditional spheres of industry, such as textile, glass and ceramics, appealed to the authority of the city and regional leaders of the USSR Artists' Union in their conflicts and negotiations with administrators of factories where they were employed.⁵⁰ Patron-client networking in the sphere of design is the subject of much-needed research that would significantly complement Kachurin's study.⁵¹ My dissertation, however, tells a different story. It views the aesthetic turn not as the product of a power struggle but as a set of ideas and strategies directed towards what I call "designer socialism."⁵² Soviet art professionals themselves never used this term; it is chosen for the present study as a metaphor for an ideal that united a diverse field of creative activities –applied art, monumental art, industrial and graphic design, as well as traditional crafts. Its essence was in making the Bolshevik Enlightenment-inspired vision of the rational social order⁵³ perceptible in the daily life

⁴⁹ Vladimir Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki. Kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 225-229; Iurii Soloviev's interview for Moscow design Museum, 2012, published on March 26, 2013, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5JA6k4bJbI> accessed on February 3, 2015.

⁵⁰ Kim Slavin and Nina Slavina, *Byli my molody* (St. Petersburg: RID, 2000).

⁵¹ On the broader discussion of the role patronage in Soviet culture see a special journal issue: *Contemporary European History* Vol. 11, No. 1, Special Issue: Patronage, Personal Networks and the Party-State: Everyday Life in the Cultural Sphere in Communist Russia and East Central Europe (Feb., 2002).

⁵² Within this expression, "designer" is used in a broad sense of the professional determining qualities of elements of material environment according to a rigorous system of principles, in particular the unity of beauty and utility. See the discussion of terminology below.

⁵³ On the Enlightenment roots of the Russian revolution see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, Reprint edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 6-9. Without debating Kotkin's thesis that Stalinism radicalized the revolutionary utopianism rather than betrayed it, I propose that

environment. It echoed ideological trends of the post-Stalin Soviet intelligentsia, discussed by a number of scholars since the 1970s and summarized by émigré historian Vladimir Shlapentokh as “neo-Leninism,” “technocratism” and “liberal socialism.” However, “designer socialism” was not an attribute of any of these trends, but encompassed certain characteristics of each: the neo-Leninist praising of the October Revolution and demand that its “official slogans be implemented into life;” the technocratist belief in scientific progress as the force for resolving social problems, including the organization of daily life; and the search for pluralism and flexibility, characteristic of liberal socialism – yet in the cultural rather than the political sphere.⁵⁴ In a way, “designer socialism” was a liberal continuation of the Stalinist project of *kulturnost*’—a shortcut program for becoming a proper member of modern socialist society—but with higher ambitions prompted by the achieved mass literacy, dramatic increase of urban population in Soviet Russia, the state’s concern with increasing living standards, the progress in science and technology and intensifying cultural contacts with the West as well as within the socialist bloc.

While “designer socialism” was quite far from the reality of Soviet consumption and daily life, my aim is not to inscribe it in the history of socialist utopias⁵⁵ but to present it as driving force in the actual work of art professionals. For this purpose, I rely on the concept of mediology, suggested by French philosopher Régis Debray for the critical theory of the transmission of cultural meanings within and across societies. In his famous recent article in *New Left Review*, Debray looks for the common mediological basis underlying all

de-Stalinization, accompanied by scientific and technological revolution, prompted the multiple ways to reformulate this utopianism, and aesthetic turn was one of such ways.

⁵⁴ Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power*, 149–171.

⁵⁵ For the discussion of the abundant uses of the term “utopia” in the studies of Soviet Union see West, “CyberSovietica,” 39–42

branches of socialism. He presents it “as an ensemble composed of men (militants, leaders, theoreticians), tools of transmission (books, schools, newspapers), and institutions (factions, parties, associations).”⁵⁶ This approach helps to conceptualize post-Stalin Soviet aesthetics as a mediological basis for “designer socialism,” whose composition, in addition to people, books, journals, (design) schools and institutions (Artists Unions, Artistic Foundation, and various research institutes and design bureaus) includes material objects. Thus, the items of the image gallery published by *DI SSSR* in October 1967 appear as transmitters of cultural meanings from art professionals to the readership.

What I have argued so far does not imply the coherence of all the agents of the aesthetic turn in terms of personal beliefs and attitudes to the Soviet regime. The protagonists of my study are not an artistic subculture with rigid borders, but a broad milieu of intellectuals concerned with visual art and material culture, of different ages, social backgrounds and life experiences, united by the common cause of the “extended historical generation,” to borrow the term of historian Vladislav Zubok.⁵⁷ While it is not my aim to write a social history of the aesthetic turn or to map its social composition, a commentary on its background is necessary for clearer understanding of its aesthetic views. The oldest of this extended generation were born at the very end of the 19th or the very beginning of the 20th century, came of age in the 1920s, had experience in vibrant and diverse artistic life of early Soviet Russia and, in many cases, were students of world-famous heroes of the Russian avant-garde (who, with a few exceptions, did not live up to Stalin’s death). Among this cohort, two characters are given special attention: the multi-talented designers Anna Leporskaia (1900-1982) and Boris Smirnov (1903-1986), who matured as artists in

⁵⁶ Régis Debray, “Socialism: A Life-Cycle,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 46 (August 2007): 6.

⁵⁷ Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 20.

Petrograd/Leningrad and had a profound influence on post-Stalin Soviet aesthetics. All of these people were affected by the war: they fought, worked hard on the home front, in particular helping to evacuate museums and art industries; many of them, including Smirnov and Leporskaia, survived the siege of Leningrad.⁵⁸

A younger stratum of this milieu was born in the 1920s and enrolled in higher education soon after the war. In fact, the revival of special education for decorative artists and designers – a crucial driver of the aesthetic turn – took place in Leningrad in the midst of the war, primarily motivated by the need of restoring the city’s architectural treasures after the envisioned victory. Yesterday’s soldiers and people too young to have fought but traumatized by the war were united in the first cohort of post-war students of the newly opened Leningrad and Moscow Schools for Art and Industry. For many of them, design education was not only a lever for professional development, but also a way to receive food, clothes and housing in the war-ravaged biggest Soviet cities.⁵⁹ In several years, after the new wave of repressions in the late 1940s – early 1950s, Stalin’s death and the start of Khrushchev’s reforms, these young people joined their teachers in professional discussions, at exhibitions and on the pages of special journals. Similarly to Western architects and designers, such as Jaap Bakema of the Netherlands or Alison and Peter Smithson of Britain, the younger stratum proceeded from their wartime experience to the burning question of material environment’s capacity to foster “free movement and individual choice,”⁶⁰ while also adhering to the socialist ideal of collectivism.

⁵⁸ RGALI, f. 2475, op. 1, d. 1; TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 3. d. 175, 179, 181, 187, 304, 306; op. 5. d. 112, 177, 186.

⁵⁹ RGALI, f. 25460, op. 1, d. 1; TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 22; Svetlana Mirzoian and Sergei Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina* (St. Petersburg: Iunikont Design, 2011), 123-128; 135-203.

⁶⁰ Sarah Williams Goldhagen, “Freedom’s Domiciles: Three Projects by Alison and Peter Smithson, in Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Rejean Legault, eds., *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Montréal : Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 75-95; 78.

Still younger agents of the aesthetic turn were born just before or during the war and started their professional careers at a time when the design profession was officially recognized and institutionalized. Thus, the aesthetic turn was by no means the revolt of “sons” against “fathers”. It encompassed different generations and, as I will demonstrate, diverse views.

Art and Design: the System of Concepts

From the explanation of the concepts, announced in the dissertation title, I proceed to the explanation of operative terms. So far, I have used a number of aesthetic-related terms: material culture, visual art, decorative art, monumental art, applied art, craft, and, last but not least, design. All these terms have numerous historically specific and often ideologically loaded definitions, exhaustive discussion of which would require a separate dissertation. Here I lay out the definitions, one by one, which may seem problematic in some aspects yet most relevant for this particular study.

First of all, my understanding of “material culture” shares the one generally accepted in the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies – the relationship between people and things, or, to specify, the system of symbolic meanings, sensory qualities, affects and uses of things.⁶¹ By the latter I mean both man-made and natural things, since the latter, as I will demonstrate, were an important reference for Soviet art professionals. Sometimes I also use the narrower term “material environment,” referring to the spatial and tangible structures of daily life. The negative connotations of “material culture,” such as

⁶¹ This understanding is promoted, for example, by the *Journal of Material Culture*; its editorial, somewhat tautologically, defines its concern as “the relationship between artefacts and social relations” and encourages authors to explore “the linkage between the construction of social identities and the production and use of culture.” <http://mcu.sagepub.com/> accessed 16.02.2015. Though this definition can be criticized as too broad, it has an advantage of openness for new research questions and approaches.

consumerism and commodity fetishism,⁶² are critically addressed in this dissertation as a part of a fundamental problem of subject-object relations in socialist society. Therefore, my study is a contribution not only to the by now established tradition of historical study of material culture,⁶³ but also, more specifically, to the emergent inquiry into the nature of socialist commodity, demonstrated by such scholars as Susan E. Reid, David Crowley, Emma Widdis, Christina Kiaer and, most recently, Tom Cubbin.⁶⁴

It should be emphasized that, even though the protagonists of my study sometimes spoke of “material culture” (*material’naia kul’tura*), as well as “object-spatial environment” (*predmetno-prostranstvennaia sreda*), which is close to “material environment,” I take both terms used as analytical tools rather than objects of analysis. By contrast, the remaining terms are defined with attention to their uses within post-Stalin aesthetics. Thus, “visual art” (*izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo*, or, in the Bolshevik speak of the late 1910s – 1930s, *izoskusstvo*;) plays a formal role in my narrative – delimiting the scope of arts perceptible mainly by vision, as opposed to music and literature; architecture is understood here as close yet not belonging to visual art, as it was conceptualized by many theorists, including Soviet ones from the period in question. The following terms are not easy to define, because the very lack of clarity in terminology is to a great extent the subject of my analysis. The terms “decorative art” (*dekorativnoe iskusstvo*) and “applied art”

⁶² Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Social Archaeology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993).

⁶³ Leora Auslander et al., “AHR Conversation: Historians and the Study of Material Culture,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1355–1404.

⁶⁴ David Crowley, “Warsaw’s shops, Stalinism and the Thaw,” in Reid and Crowley, *Style and Socialism*, 25–48; Emma Widdis, “Sew Yourself Soviet: The Pleasures of Textile in the Machine Age”; Susan E. Reid, “Happy Housewarming: Moving Into Khrushchev-Era Apartment,” both in Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (Anthem Press, 2009), 115–132 and 133–160; Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (The MIT Press, 2008); Tom Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine: Futurological Experiments in the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1968–76,” *Home Cultures* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 5–32.

(*prikladnoe iskusstvo*) became popular in Russia from the mid-19th century under the influence of the European, primarily British, movement for art reform, prompted by the rapid industrialization and mass production. Both terms were associated with decoration of mass-produced objects of utilitarian use and, more broadly, with the process of opening art and industry schools and the organization of peasant craftsmen into artisanal manufactures since the 1860s, which reached its peak in the turn of the century.⁶⁵ In the education of decorative/applied artists, the main emphasis was put on meticulous study of traditional Russian and European ornaments, understood as decisive stylistic elements. The promotion of artisanal industry also played a role in popularizing traditional ornaments. The leftist artists of early Bolshevik Russia, particularly Constructivists, dismissed this approach as backward and superficial – this position was most vividly manifested on the pages of art criticism journals *LEF* (1923-25) and *Novyi LEF* (1927-1928). “Applied art” (*prikladnizhestvo*) and “decoration” (*ukrashatel'stvo*) were used as pejorative terms. They were to be replaced by “production art” (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*) that implied artists’ full participation in production, though the character of this participation was the subject of much debate throughout the 1920s.⁶⁶ At the extreme, productivist theorist Aleksei Gan called for the “death of art” and introduction of “artistic labor” (*khudozhestvennyi trud*), which implied an artist’s conversion into a proletarian.⁶⁷ The unity of art and industry was not only the ambition of certain radical artists, but a state-sponsored campaign, manifested as early as in 1918 in by the Department of Fine Arts at the Commissariat of Enlightenment

⁶⁵ Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917*, Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery Sovetskogo Dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995), pp. (366-367)

⁶⁶ Jaroslav And'el et al., eds., *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: Rizzoli, 1990); Gough, *The Artist as Producer*.

⁶⁷ Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver: 2-ia Gostipografiia, 1922).

(IZO Narkompros). During the New Economic Policy, however, the crusade against decorativism came at odds with the new entrepreneurial class's taste for conventional ornaments, which made Constructivists soften their position, or, in a different interpretation, engage more seriously with the problem of the socialist commodity.⁶⁸ After the reform of artistic organizations in the early 1930s, accompanied by the condemnation of "formalism," the Constructivist slogan "art into life" was realized not so much in industry as in the sphere of minor architectural forms (*malye arkhitekturnye formy*), architectural decoration (*arkhitekturno-dekorativnoe ubranstvo*) of public parks and gardens, and decoration (*oformleniie*) of festivities, parades and public interiors. The terms "*dekorativnoe*" and "*prikladnoe*" were used quite frequently, but usually in the sense of minor forms of art, secondary to painting and sculpture; at the same time, artisanal industry was instrumentalized for souvenir production and showcase of the diversity of traditional crafts of Soviet Republics, "national in form and socialist in content."⁶⁹

This was the legacy with which the agents of aesthetic turn had to deal in establishing operating terminology. The somewhat cumbersome term "decorative-applied art" was popularized by Moscow art historian Aleksandr Saltykov as a signifier for the art of organizing everyday life. The term was used in the official names of specialized departments in artists' unions and sections at exhibitions and became a part of the official terminology. In the polemics that constitute the object of my study, different art professionals criticized either one of these terms—"decorative" or "applied"—or both, as

⁶⁸ The former interpretation was offered by Christina Lodder, the later, considerably latter – by Khristina Kiaer: Christina Lodder, "Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s," in And'el et al., eds., *Art into Life*, 99-197; Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*.

⁶⁹ David Aranovich, "Khudozhestvennoe oformleniie dvortsa sovetov," *Iskusstvo* 4 (July-August 1938): 181-182.

pejorative and neglectful of the important function of this art in socialist society. The mouthpiece of the aesthetic turn, established in late 1957, was, after some debate, named *Decorative Art of the USSR*; in the first editorial, artist Mikhail Ladur and philosopher Karl Kantor offered a new classification: decorative art as umbrella term for monumental art (reliefs, frescoes, mosaics, etc.) and applied art (giving form to useful objects).⁷⁰ Soon after that, at the discussion of the editorial board with artists and critics, Ladur reiterated that applied art is just one kind of decorative art, and thus the latter gave the title to the journal oriented at the broad range of themes.⁷¹ The editorial of January 1962, discussing the new tasks of artists in the light of the decisions of the XX Party Congress, presented decorative art as a sphere encompassing not only applied and monumental art, but also all sorts of decorative works (*oformlenie*) as well as folk crafts organized in the USSR in the form of artisanal cooperatives.⁷² This statement did not preclude further debates and complaints about terminological confusion, which *DI SSSR* actually welcomed as an evidence of the intensity and dynamism of new art theory. However, the journal never denounced the conventional terminology just outlined. For this reason, and for the sake of clarity, I adopt it for my own discussion.

The rapid development of science and technology necessitated the recognition of a particular type of specialist responsible for the visual organization of industrially produced objects: not only consumer goods, but also machine tools, electronic equipment, transportation, industrial and laboratory interiors, as well as packaging and corporate identity. The constructivist aspiration of rationally organizing environment and processes

⁷⁰ “Krasotu v zhizn’,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 1 (December 1957): 3-5.

⁷¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, l. 4.

⁷² “XX s’ezd KPSS I zadachi dekorativnogo iskusstva,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1962): 1-2

had to be raised to a new level, and the traditional applied artist, working in such habitual spheres as textile, ceramics, glass, etc., proved not competent for this task. Again, as in early 1920s, the question of artist's changing role in society became burning. On the institutional level, this resulted in the 1962 governmental decree requiring the aesthetic control of all industrial production in the USSR and creating for this purpose the all-Union system of institutions, headed by the All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics, VNIITE, and special staff positions at factories (more detail on this is given in Chapter 1). On the terminological level, art professionals had to maneuver: while the principles and institutions of the new profession were modeled after the Western, in particular, British experience, the Western term "design" would imply "kowtowing in front of the West" and hence was unthinkable for official use. Therefore, a cluster of new terms, perceived as properly socialist, was invented, with considerable influence from the professional vocabularies of "brotherly" countries of the bloc (see part 3.3 of Chapter 3).

In this dissertation, I will use the term "design" in my own analysis and specific "socialist" terms when quoting the sources. Recognizing the broadness of the Anglophone term "design," I take it in the modern sense indicated above – an activity concerned with visual appearance of industrial products, complexes and environments, and its correspondence to a number of other factors (functional, economic, ergonomic, etc). To be precise, there are numerous classifications of design, such as industrial design, graphic design, product design, interior design, and process design. I will use some of these terms when discussing relevant cases. It should be emphasized that drawing the line between "decorative art" and "design" – for example, between applied art and product design, or between *oformleniie* and interior design – is not always easy for a historian of post-Stalin Russia, and neither was it for the protagonists of my story. Therefore, the choice of the term

is every time conditional. In my vision, the distinction between decorative art and design lies in the scope of mass reproduction and in the corresponding sphere of industry (i.e. textile vs. machine-building). My basic rule is to use the term “decorative art” in relation to unique or small-edition items produced by artists working with traditional materials and “design” in reference to the work of VNIITE employees; for all that lies in between, the choice is bound to be conditional in each particular case. This terminological uncertainty is the symptom of a broad debate on the relations between art and design that involved professionals throughout the 20th century – from Hermann Muthesius to Hal Foster, which can be an argument for seeing the post-Stalin aesthetic turn as a case study of the global development of modern art and design.⁷³

Sources and Methodology

As it should be clear by now, my dissertation is not about one particular type of activity or profession, be it folk crafts, applied art, product or graphic design, etc. It covers the whole range of activities, projects, objects and the ways professionals created, exhibited and evaluated them. Accordingly, in my dissertation I use a diversity of sources that can be divided into four categories. The first is archival material. In the archives of Moscow and St. Petersburg, I worked with the following types of materials: state and Party documents, such as orders, resolutions, reports and correspondence with organizations; various documents of several art- and design-related institutions: the USSR Artists’ Union and its Moscow and Leningrad branches; VNIITE and its Leningrad branch; Research Institute of

⁷³ Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hal Foster, *Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes* (Verso, 2003); Alex Coles, ed., *Design and Art* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007).

Art industry; Moscow and Leningrad Houses of Dress Prototypes; and Lomonosov Porcelain Factory in Leningrad; photo- and cine-documents related to retail trade, art education, art exhibitions, fashion defiles, etc. Among these, the stenographic records of professional discussions within the “decorative-applied” art sections of the Moscow and Leningrad Artists’ Unions, preserved at the Moscow and St. Petersburg Archives of Literature and Art (RGALI and TsGALI SPb) received most attention because they reveal the diversity of professionals’ reactions to crucial economic, social and cultural changes after Stalin. These documents, therefore, provide precious information for telling the story of post-war aesthetics from the artist’s point of view. Definitely, the aesthetic turn was constructed at numerous professional meetings beyond the Artists’ Union, within groups ranging from VNIITE engineers to village craftsmen, whose aesthetic views and approaches were very different. By the same token, it is clear that members of the “decorative-applied art” sections of the regional and republican Unions of Artists produced very different discourses from those of Moscow and Leningrad. Collecting all these records and comparing discussions across professional and geographical (thus also cultural, political and social) range is a challenging and time-consuming enterprise and the task for my further research. In this dissertation I focus on a very influential segment of art professionals who shaped publicly available discourse: their closed meetings served as workshops for ideas that appeared in the press and gradually crystallized in tangible objects, exhibitions, public interiors and outdoor environments. The materials from the folders of the Leningrad and Moscow Schools for Art and Industry were also among most important, given the crucial role of art education in launching the aesthetic turn.

This point logically leads to another category of sources: periodicals and specialized literature published in the period in question. Two major periodicals for my inquiry are, of

course, the journal *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* and the VNIITE bulletin *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* (*Technical Aesthetics*), founded in 1964 and concerned specifically with problems of design, architecture, urban planning, as well as, from late 1960s, scientific forecasting and cybernetics. Journals related to various aspects of the aesthetic turn range from the narrow professional *Tekstil'naia Promyshlennost'* (*Textile Industry*) to the famous literary journal *Novyi Mir*, a widely perceived mouthpiece of the “liberal intelligentsia.” Published sources offer materials on different regions of Soviet Russia that can partially compensate for the limited geographic scope of my archival research.

The third category of sources is represented by six interviews, conducted over four years of research with artists, designers and art historians in St. Petersburg, Moscow and New York. These sources were taken critically, not only as voices of the agents of aesthetic turn but also as evidence of the present-day memory of late Soviet aesthetics on the level of agency, creativity as well as bureaucratic routine.⁷⁴

Finally, the fourth category of sources is the world of Soviet objects – artworks, design models and parts of public interiors. The works of applied art that were produced for exhibitions as unique pieces or as models for small editions are available in museums, since such objects rarely made their way into people’s homes, serving instead as pure manifestations of designer’s ideas, or, one can say, as conceptual art. The domestic objects that actually served people in their homes are mainly approached here through reproductions. Investigating the objects in their domestic environments, or after their years-long service, is the task of cultural anthropologist or a historian of everyday life; this

⁷⁴ However, in the final version of the dissertation, the materials of only two interviews – with St. Petersburg design theorist and former Leningrad designer Mikhail Alekseevich Kos'kov and with Petersburg glass artist Natalia Malevskaiia-Malevich, are cited directly; others were used for contextual knowledge.

dissertation looks at objects at the moment of their presentation to the public by art professionals.

My basic method is modeled after Foucault's archeology. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault inquired into a "middle region" between the orders of codes governing a society and the system of scientific theories explaining these orders – the domain where culture frees itself from conceptual grids and reveals the unspoken order of things that constitute the basis for ideas and objects dispersed throughout different fields of knowledge.⁷⁵ Similarly, my work attempts to determine the common basis for different fields of artistic activity through looking beyond the Party statements and official institutions at diverse discursive and material objects, combining close reading of texts, formal analysis of objects and the analysis of social and political contexts.

Chapter Outline

I consider the "unspoken order" of post-Stalin aesthetics as constituted by three major categories, namely, realism, up-to-datedness and taste. This interpretation determined the structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 1 represents the genealogy of Soviet decorative art and design from the 1930s to the late 1960s, focusing on state policy and institutions. Three following chapters are devoted to categories. Chapter 2 traces the revision of the concept of realism, and, consequently, of socialist realism, which officially remained the only allowed method of art making until perestroika. It uncovers "lyrical" and "practical" variations of socialist realism that emerged in the 1950s and then demonstrates how the theme of "organic,"

⁷⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

important for the development of visual arts and architecture since antiquity, played a particular role in the Soviet context as a tool for expanding the notion of “socialist realism.” Chapter 3 brings the global concepts of modernity and modernization, which usually accompany discussions of design, industry and production, to the level of objects, by inquiring in the understanding of up-to-datedness among art professionals throughout the two decades in question. Finally, Chapter 4 analyses taste as a category for constructing and representing new social hierarchies as well as probing the limits between authenticity and appearance, which resulted, on the one hand, in the proliferation of taste advice and search for optimal assortment of goods, and, on the other hand, in restating the question of artist’s role in modern society. This question had been crucial for Constructivists and became even more painful in the condition of scientific and technical progress and the Soviet society moving into post-industrial era.

Clearly, my archaeology is highly selective, and one could tell a very different story using different sources. Yet this should not devalue the voices of the chosen protagonists as they worked hard to make state socialism tangible and enjoyable. Following Foucault again, I consider this dissertation “an open site”.⁷⁶ though it does not offer an exhaustive explanation of late Soviet aesthetics, it uncovers meaningful questions.

⁷⁶ “Foreword to the English Edition,” in Foucault, *The Order of Things*, x-xiv; xii.

Chapter I: The Birth of Soviet Designer

Institutionally, Soviet design started in 1962 with the establishment of the All-Union Scientific-Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE), following the active institutional development of design in the U.S., Western Europe, Japan, and the countries of socialist bloc.¹ But the actual history of Russian/Soviet design starts earlier. It may be traced back to the early 18th century, specifically to the construction and decoration of machine tools and measuring instruments, while the origins of Soviet design, broadly defined,² are sometimes seen in traditional folk arts and town crafts.³ However, more often historians of Soviet design view its starting point in the avant-garde experiments of the 1920s, especially Constructivism and the related movement of “productivists” (*proizvodstvenniki*) with their radical project of rejecting fine art, converting the artist into a producer and directing her or his creative energy to constructing a new everyday environment (*byt*).⁴ Their legacy was crucial for further development of Soviet design, both as an object of negation in Stalin’s time and as an example for emulation, even though often disguised, during Khrushchev’s “Thaw” up to the end of the 1960s, when the system of

¹ Jonathan Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 165-181.

² There are numerous definitions of design, and, of course, the choice of a definition conditions the one writes a history of design and the temporal point when one begins it. In this example, by “design broader defined” I mean any creative human activity of creating aesthetically expressive and practically useful objects, complexes of objects, or whole environments or systems. Not surprisingly, such definition allows extending design history far back in time, but also geographically and socially. Thus, design historian Vladimir Aronov cites Russian wooden log hut (*izba*), peasant’s stove, samovar, Russian traditional baths (*banya*), the cut of peasant’s clothes, etc., as examples of “the classic of Russian design.” Vladimir Aronov, “M. E. Gize i problemy izucheniia istorii dizaina v Rossii,” in Marietta E. Gize, *Ocherki istorii khudozhestvennogo konstruirovaniia v Rossii XVIII – nachala XIX veka* (St. Petersburg: Philology Department of St. Petersburg State University, 2008), 7-37.

³ Aronov, “M. E. Gize.”

⁴ Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina* (Moscow: Gallart, 1995); Aleksandr Lavrentiev and Yuri Nasarov, *Russian Design: Tradition and Experiment, 1920-1990* (London: Academic Publishers, 1995); Dmitry Azrikan, “VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism or Plato’s Academy of Design?” *Design Issues* 3 (1999): 45-77.

Soviet design was elaborated. However, there were also various systemic factors, determining the profile of design in Soviet Russia in the 1950s – 1960s. This chapter outlines the succession and effects of these factors, providing the background for the following chapters, and highlights the trajectory of the development of the new profession and new activity.

1. 1. Prolegomena: Design and Decoration in Stalin's Time (1930s-1940s)

In 1923, a famous Soviet association of avant-garde artists, critics and writers, LEF (“Levyi Front Iskusstv” - “Left Front of Art”), published the first issue of its mouthpiece journal of the same name. One of the articles was by the prominent art critic, theorist of so-called “productivist art” (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*) and Vladimir Mayakovsky’s close friend, Osip Brik. It was a call for converting artists into organizers of industrial production and social life. Proclaiming Constructivism to be the only true method of building a new, proletarian material culture, Brik denounced fake constructivists, who were, for him, merely applied artists:

They don’t paint pictures, they work in production, speak of materials, textures, constructions, but the result is still an old-fashioned decorativism [*ukrashatel’s tvo*], applied fancywork, [*prikladnichestvo*], [ornamental] roosters and flowers or circles and doodles.⁵

These miserable applied artists, “*prikladnichki*,” submit “stylish ornaments” to textile factories, not understanding, that soon this will become irrelevant: “There is a producer who needs neither pictures, nor ornaments, and who is not afraid of iron and steel. This producer is the proletariat.”⁶

⁵ Osip Brik, “V Proizvodstvo!” *LEF* 1 (1923): 105. Translation of all the Russian quotes is mine except for specially indicated cases.

⁶ Ibid.

By the end of the 1920s, Soviet authorities decided that what the proletariat needed was neither expedient Constructivist objects, nor “stylish ornaments” in Constructivist fashion, but modest luxury, deserved by hard work, including conventional ornaments⁷ and, on the other hand, decorative abundance of public interiors and state holidays. From 1932, with the (in)famous resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” (April 23, 1932)⁸ the avant-garde idea of artist as life-organizer gave way to artist as collaborator with power, obedient to the tastes of the Party leaders. The ideas of “productivists” were labeled “bourgeois formalism” and rejected. The development of Russian/Soviet proto-design (or, according to one author, early design of “first wave” of design in Soviet Russia)⁹ was curtailed. Now visual artists were expected to celebrate the Soviet “bright future” in paintings, sculpture, graphic arts, monumental art (frescoes, mosaics, or tapestries), decoration of public interiors, city squares, parades, and festivals. In the sphere of transportation and military hardware, specialists responsible for outer appearance of items and its interconnection with their function were not called “designers” but “constructors” (*konstruktory*) – design engineers (with the reference to construction as activity, not as a concept of the Russian avant-garde).¹⁰ Their activity was perceived as purely technical and not aesthetic; the predominant criteria for their designs were practicality, durability and

⁷ Djurdja Bartlett, *FashionEast: The Spectre That Haunted Socialism* (MIT Press, 2010), p. 22; Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Berg, 2003); Aleksandr Vasiliev, “Doma mod vMoskve v 20-kh godakh,” <http://www.moda.ru/content/id/7363/5916/> accessed 15.01. 2013.

<http://www.moda.ru/content/id/7363/5916/Doma+Mod+v+Moskve+20-yih+godov>

⁸ “Postanovlenie Politburo TsKVKP (b) ‘O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii,’ 23 aprelia 23, 1932 g.,” *Partiinoe stroitelstvo* 9 (1932), p. 62, accessed 15.01.2013 <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/USSR/1932.htm>

⁹ Mikhail Kos'kov, *Predmetnoe tvorchestvo*, Vol. 3, Part VI (St. Petersburg: Ikar, 1996): 5.

¹⁰ Confusion might stem from the translation of “*konstruktor*” as “*designer*” in books on Soviet engineering.

economy.¹¹ The only Soviet art journal *Iskusstvo* did not pay attention to their work, not regarding it as not related to aesthetics.

In this context, did design exist from 1932 to 1953? Design is a broad concept and the answer depends on the definition. Industrial design, which implies artists' active participation in all enterprises producing commodities and machines, was not a part of Soviet practice at that time. Yet design in the sense of decoration and arrangement was alive, albeit under strict control, in set design, book illustration, dress design, handicraft workshops, public celebrations, etc. – what was termed “decorative” or “ornamental” (*oformitel'skoe*) art. After 1932, these spheres became the refuge for avant-garde artists who did not want to turn into mainstream painters or sculptors. The Moscow Regional Union of Soviet Artists (MOSSKh), established on June 25, 1932, under the aegis of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of RSFSR, included a sector of decorative-ornamental art (*dekorativno-oformitel'skogo iskusstva*). This sector was divided into the sections of decorators and textile artists.¹² In 1940, it also included the section of “decorative-applied art” (*seksiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva*).¹³ The resolution of the Council of People's Commissars “On Foundation of the Artistic Fund of the USSR,” from February 4, 1940, listed decorators (*oformiteli*) and “artists of industry” (“*khudozhniki promyshlennosti*”) among the artists to receive remunerations from the Fund for their work. Thus decorators and artists who created artistic prototypes for industrially produced goods were recognized as artists.¹⁴ But they were seen as second-rate artists, helpers of architects

¹¹ Dmitry Azrikan, Interview for the Journal *Projector*, September 23, 2008.

<http://www.designet.ru/context/interview/?id=37621> accessed 17.11.2012; Lavrentiev and Nasarov, 47.

¹² RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, l. 34.

¹³ Online catalogue of RGALI <http://www.rgali.ru/object/227760804?lc=ru> accessed 2.01.2013.

¹⁴ “Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov. Postanovleniie ot 4 fevralia 1940 goda no. 186 ‘Ob obrazovanii Khudozhestvennogo Fonda Soiuza SSR.’” <http://www.economics.kiev.ua/download/ZakonySSSR/data04/tex16462.htm> accessed 27.12.2012.

and engineers, and inferior to painters, sculptors and artists of easel graphics.¹⁵ They submitted their designs to factories without actually participating in the production process.

Interior design was also practiced in the 1930s – 1940s. This was not only the age-old design of architectural interiors, but also design of the interiors of transportation vehicles – ships, boats, airplanes, trams, etc. Thus, for example, architect Iosif Alexandrovich Vaks, an employee of the Leningrad Research and Project Institute of House Building and Civil Engineering (Lenproekt, established in 1925), was among the first Soviet architects who engaged in industrial design activities in the 1930s. In the 1940s-1950s, together with his colleague Leonid Katonin, he designed interiors for a number of passenger boats, for a reconstructed arcade-type department store “Gostinyi Dvor” in Leningrad, and a tram car for Leningrad car-repair plant.¹⁶

The two spheres, engineering and decorative art, had little in common at that time: one was oriented to solving utilitarian tasks, the other to making new socialist “beauty.” Designer Dmitry Azrikan contends that during the period of the 1930s to the 1950s, industrial products “were withdrawn from the sphere of culture” and “were treated only as tools to build socialism.”¹⁷ This claim might seem exaggerated: engineers of Soviet military hardware and various transport vehicles obviously cared about the visual impact of their work, such as grandiosity of size, visual expression of solidity, etc. – just like architects did. Hence, for example, the widespread use of streamlined forms, which were not always functionally necessary, or the austere elegance of lamp designs by a prominent architect

¹⁵ Alexei Balashov, “Tvorcheskoe sodruzhestvo,” TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 23, l. 128.

¹⁶ Svetlana Mirzoian and Sergei Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina* (St. Petersburg: Iunikont Design, 2011).

¹⁷ Azrikan, “VNIITE”, 45.

Abram Damsky.¹⁸ Azrikan himself cites elsewhere the passenger car “Pobeda” (“Victory”, 1944-45) and the jet fighter MIG-15 (1947), as examples of Soviet design, albeit heavily resembling Western models.¹⁹ However, these were carried out by engineers, with the primacy of function and economic reasoning. They had appeared before a designer’s “type of activity itself was constructed and legalized, forming an autonomous sphere.”²⁰ Azrikan explains this paradox by the immanence of design ideals to human labor as such.²¹ Developing his idea, I would characterize the Stalinist order of things not as totalitarian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as some scholars did,²² but as a regimented system, where the functional environment is separate from the sphere of aesthetics. There was no clear system of interrelation of utility and aesthetic appearance, and no theory of explaining such a system. Different types of material objects, such as transportation vehicles, furniture, or textiles, were not conceived as a stylistic unity. At least, there was no positive official discussion of industrial aesthetics.²³

The post-Stalin aesthetic turn began to be prepared during the war years. The reason was practical. The astute need to train specialists for post-war restoration works on a huge scale was recognized as early as in 1942.²⁴ Leading Leningrad architects Valentin Golli and Ivan Fomin discussed the project of arranging green spaces in Leningrad after the siege

¹⁸ Aleksandr Lavrentev and Yuri Nasarov, *Russian Design: Tradition and Experiment 1920-1990*, English Ed edition (London; New York: Wiley-Academy, 1996), 48-61.

¹⁹ Dmitry Azrikan’s interview for the Journal *Projector*, September 23, 2008 <http://www.designet.ru/context/interview/?id=37621> accessed 23.07.2012.

²⁰ Dmitry Azrikan’s interview for the Journal *Projector*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle, Reprint edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2011); Hans Günther, “*O krasote, kotorai ne smogla spastic sotsializm*” [“On Beauty that could not Save Socialism”], translated from the German by A. Markov, *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie*, 101 (2010), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2010/101/gu2.html>, accessed 27.07.2012

²³ As evident from the issues the only official art journal *Iskusstvo* of this period; see also Vladimir Paperny. *Kul'tura Dva* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie, 1996): 275-277.

²⁴ Mirzoian and Helmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-peterburgskaia shkola dizaina*, 123.

would be broken.²⁵ Also in 1942, Iosif Vaks sent a letter to the chief architect of the city, Nikolai Baranov, with the request to open a school of art and industry, based on the experience of the Central School of Technical Drawing, which had been liquidated in 1922.²⁶ Vaks insisted: “Our school is a concern of all Leningrad architects. Your future closest helpers would be prepared nowhere but here. Take the examples of the architects [Andrei] Voronikhin, [James] Cameron, and [Francesco Bartolommeo] Rastrelli: they governed their studios personally. But their students knew all their requirements, knew every stroke of their sketches.”²⁷ Baranov also held a position of the deputy Director of the the Executive Committee (Ispolkom) of the Leningrad Soviet of toilers’ deputies,²⁸ and, evidently, brought the issue for consideration within this institution.

At that time, Vaks worked for the Headquarters of the Airpower Forces of the Krasnoznamennyi [Red Banner] Baltic Fleet, camouflaging airfields, together with other architects. He also camouflaged the Smolny Institute Building, the headquarters of Leningrad Communist Party, in accordance with the general plan of Leningrad camouflage,

²⁵ According to historian Elena Zubkova, who refers to recollections of war veterans, fighting mood of Soviet soldiers was strong, because the war turned the previously abstract public spirit into a concrete aim to fight the adversary. Thus the victory was seen as just and much expected, which also presupposed the concern about dealing with post-victory problems. Elena Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy 1945-1964* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1993), 16-25.

²⁶ The Central School of Technical Drawing, named after its father-founder, Baron Alexander Ludvigovich Stieglitz, was opened on January 29, 1881, with the aim of preparing artists for industry. This was a part of the reform of art education in Russia, which took place in the second half of the 19th century and was based on West European experience. This reform, in turn, was inspired by international industrial exhibitions in Europe. In 1962, the Stroganov School of Technical Drawing was open in Moscow; Alexander Stieglitz took this example and granted 1 million silver roubles to the Russian Finance Ministry for opening a school of technical drawing in St. Petersburg. The Stieglitz school gathered outstanding professors and gave its students versatile education. After the Revolution in 1917, the school was renamed “Higher School of Decorative Arts,” and in 1918, it was united Academy of arts as the First State Art-Educational Workshops. In 1922 this institution was renamed the Petrograd Higher Art-Industrial Institute (Vkhutein). Thus it became a counterpart to the innovative design school in Moscow – Vkhutemas (Higher Art-Industrial Workshops), which in 1926 was, too, renamed Vkhutein. In 1930 both schools were closed. Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 13-69.

²⁷ Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 125.

²⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1 d. 22, ll. 2 (turn), 14.

elaborated by leading city architects. Many artists and architects engaged in this activity at that time, using their decorative skills for a vital need of wartime.²⁹ As Vaks later recollected, immediately after a partial break of the siege on January 18, 1943, he started giving lectures at the frontline about the history of the city. Now he could apply his professional skills in another way, making show screens to cover destroyed facades of architectural monuments, depicting their original condition – to be restored when the war ended.

In October 1943, finally, Vaks' request was met: the Leningrad Ispolkom sanctioned opening the Art School of Architectural Decoration of Buildings (*Leningradskoe Khudozhestvennoe Uchilishche po arkhitekturnoi otdelke zdanii* - LKhU) under the City Administration for the Architectural Affairs. Valentin Golli was appointed the school's deputy director and Vaks became the Head of the Education section. The school was officially opened, with the sanction of the Council of People's Commissars of RSFSR, on January 1, 1944, which can be considered the starting point of post-war design education in Soviet Russia.³⁰ According to Vaks's own recollection, as well as archival documentation, both Ispolkom and the Party leadership of Leningrad were interested in an immediate opening of the school. They helped finding the first students - 125 very young people, 15-18 years-olds, who had been earlier evacuated from Leningrad and now came back specifically for being trained as restorers.³¹ The Leningrad Ispolkom, and personally its head, Piotr Popkov, also assisted Vaks and his colleague-architects in putting the interiors of both the school and the dormitory in order and in providing tools and materials

²⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1 d. 22, l. 4.

³⁰ Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 115-117.

³¹ Ibid., 125-139.

necessary for the learning process.³² LKhU desperately needed experienced architects, restorers and decorators as instructors. This was a difficult task: the majority of pre-war specialists died or had been evacuated from Leningrad. As Vaks recollects, “experts were sought for and found one by one, like gems,” and all those who remained in Leningrad were engaged in teaching in the newly opened school. Some art specialists who had left Leningrad were invited to return.³³ All of them had working experience of 35-40 years and all had graduated, before 1917, from the Imperial Academy of Arts or from Central School of Technical Drawing.³⁴ Understandably, none of these artists worked in their profession during the time of siege; they were engaged in the work of barest necessity, such as fixing utilities for military hospitals or repairing footwear. Vaks managed to gather highly professional teaching staff, who, however, had traditional art education rather than experience in avant-garde currents. Quite expectedly, the majority (if not all of them) were men. Vaks himself soon became the proper director of LKhU³⁵ and held this position until his dismissal in 1946 for his connection to Popkov, who was among the accused in the Leningrad Affair. However, Vaks did not lose his job, and even headed the section of artistic metalware at the Department of Sculpture.³⁶

Students were provided not only with housing, but also with basic clothes, work wear and free meals. Obviously, future cadres for restoration works were much valued and taken care of. LKhU had five departments: decorative painting (mural and plafond painting

³² TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 22, ll. 8-17; 22.

³³ Designers Svetlana Mirzoian and Sergei Khelmianov, authors of the monograph on the history of Mukhina School, maintain that Vaks included in his least of wanted instructors those artists who had been arrested and were in prison or in exile, with reference to Vaks’ diaries and recollections. However, the authors do not specify whether Vaks’ could really use his power as a leading Leningrad architect to secure amnesty at least for some of these people. Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 132-133

³⁴ See footnote 26.

³⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 22, l. 5.

³⁶ Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 180-181.

– colored painting, grisaille, graffito); decorative molding; stone and marble work; woodwork (carving, mosaics, and inlay); and metalware (tapping, embossing, smith work, and casting). Importantly, three more LKhU departments were connected to enterprises: the Department of artistic ceramics to the Lomonosov porcelain factory; the Department of glasswork to the Factory of Artistic Glass, and another Department of Metalware (iron and bronze casting, embossing) to the bronze-casting workshop of the Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.³⁷ Students actively took part in restoring architectural monuments of Leningrad as well as palaces and parks of the city's famous suburbs, former tsarist residences - Pavlovsk, Pushkin, Petrodvorets, Gatchina, and Oranienbaum (now Lomonosov). In addition, LKhU students helped demolish the remainders of destroyed houses, unload coal and firewood, and clean the streets, thus also, in a way, designing the face of the liberated city. This work went on throughout the 1950s and even longer. As designers Svetlana Mirzoian and Sergei Khelmianov argue, no significant building of Leningrad, which had been destroyed by bombing, was overlooked by LKhU restorers. Yet their names are still little known even for Petersburg citizens. Among these students were Svetlana Onufrieva, Leonid Liubimov, Nadezhda Smirnova, Lidiia Strizhova, and Mariia Voronina.³⁸

The next step for giving decorative and applied arts socio-political significance in the USSR is also connected to art pedagogy. On February 5, 1945, the Council of People's Commissars (SNK) of the USSR launched a Resolution "On Preparing Cadres for Art Industry and Art-Decorative Works." It proclaimed the urgent need to educate highly skilled specialists for participating in the "new construction work and restoration of the

³⁷ Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

cities and monuments of art, destroyed by the Nazi aggressors.”³⁹ The two main points of the Resolution were, first, the directive given to the Main Administration of the Labor Reserves under the SNK on establishing thirty art-industrial vocational schools with the total acceptance of 3140 students; and, second, the reopening of two major Russian art-industrial schools in the status of higher education institutions. One of them was the oldest professional school of decorative and applied art in Russia, the Stroganov Art School in Moscow. It was established by the Count and art patron Sergei Grigorievich Stroganov in 1825 and since then existed under different names; in 1918 it was reorganized into Vkhutemas and later dispersed into several institutions.⁴⁰ Now the Stroganov Art School was to be reorganized under the name Moscow Higher School of Art and Industry (*Moskovskoe Vysshee Khudozhenstvenno-Promyshlennoe Uchilishche*, henceforth MVKhPU). Another was the already mentioned Central School of Technical Drawing in St. Petersburg, named after Baron Stieglitz⁴¹; it was to be reestablished as the Leningrad Higher School of Art and Industry (*Leningradskoe Vyshee Khudozhestvenno-Promyshlennoe Uchilishche*, henceforth LVKhPU). In fact, LVKhPU was developed on the basis of already functioning institution, LKhU. Both schools were expected to prepare “professional cadres for art industry, technical drawers and masters of decorative-applied art.”⁴² The order of listing specializations is important: clearly, the priority was given to technical professions over artistic ones. The predominantly practical purpose of this reform is confirmed by the requirement that both schools had to be provided with educational-

³⁹ RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1, d. 337, l. 1.

⁴⁰ The official website of Stroganov Academy <http://www.mghpu.ru/?page=02about/02history>, accessed 29.08.2011.

⁴¹ See footnote 26.

⁴² RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1, d. 337, l. 4.

industrial workshops and subordinated directly to the Committee of Architectural Affairs under the SNK.⁴³ The 1945 Resolution is most remarkable by advocating a substantially practical approach to decorative and applied arts, generated by the vital needs of the post-war reconstruction, and by strongly linking architectural and applied art practices.

A parallel design development took place in engineering. This part of the story is connected to the name of Iurii Soloviev, today referred to as “patriarch” or even “inventor” of Soviet design. A son of the director of an aircraft factory, Soloviev belonged to the so-called “gilded youth” of late Stalin’s time and personally knew Stalin’s children, Vasilii and Svetlana.⁴⁴ Soloviev graduated from the Moscow Printing Institute in 1943, and in December 1945 he created and headed the Architecture and Art Bureau under the aegis of the Ministry of Transport Industry.⁴⁵ There is a little doubt that establishing the Bureau was possible thanks to Soloviev’s close connection to the top state administration: Viacheslav Malyshev, then Minister of the Transportation Industry (and in 1948-49 the Head of the newly created State Committee for Science and Technology), was his patron and father-in-law.⁴⁶ Soloviev himself evaluated the Bureau *post factum* as the first design organization in the USSR, but, he added, it was not recognized as such.⁴⁷ This body dealt with designing

⁴³ RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1, d. 337, l. 4.

⁴⁴ Thus Soloviev had access to Western clothes and other commodities; not surprisingly, he was “well-known fashion admirer” and black marketer of Western goods, which well could be stimulating for his interest in design. Author’s interview with Mikhail Alexeevich Kos’kov, recorded in St. Petersburg 16. 04. 2011; Azrikan, “VNIITE”; Vladimir Paperny, “Vospominaniia o futurologii,” in Vladimir Paperny, *Mos-Angeles - 2* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie, 2009), 70; Iurii Vasiliev, “Korol’ dizaina,” *Itogi* 884 (May 20, 2013), <http://www.itogi.ru/arts-spetzproekt/2013/20/190033.html>, accessed 1.06.2012.

⁴⁵ Woodham, Jonathan. *A Dictionary of Modern Design*. Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 395; “Soloviev! 90 let patriarkhu rossiiskogo dizaina!” [“Soloviev! The Patriarch of Russian Design Turns Ninety!” Interview with Yuri Soloviev, the webpage of the Union of Designers of Russia. 2010-01-11 11:43:53 http://www.design-union.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=482:soloviev90&catid=40:world&Itemid=238

⁴⁶ Discussion of the blog entry “Back to the USSR” (about Soloviev’s role in Soviet design), <http://kak.ru/columns/designet/a1517/>, accessed 21.03.2015.

⁴⁷ “Soloviev! 90 let patriarkhu rossiiskogo dizaina!” [“Soloviev! The Patriarch of Russian Design Turns Ninety!” Interview with Yuri Soloviev, the webpage of the Union of Designers of Russia,

transportation vehicles, for example, passenger river boats, railway cars, trolley buses for Moscow, and, most prominently, atomic-power ice-breaker “Lenin” (1953-55).⁴⁸ However, this organization presented its activity not as industrial design, but as engineering (“*konstruirovaniie*”), and its activity was ignored by applied artists. It can be evaluated as a proto-design stage, or design without theoretical background, which was to be developed in the 1960s.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, some restructuring took place within the Moscow and Leningrad Unions of Soviet Artists (MOSKh and LSSKh). The sector of decorative-ornamental art in MOSKh was renamed the “section of decorative-applied art” and subdivided into three sub-sections: decorative-ornamental works, textile, and applied art.⁵⁰ This section, like its counterpart in Leningrad, was to gain strength and become a locus of debate about cultural and social changes in the following decade.

1.2. The Beginning of Applied Artists’ Reformist Propositions (1950-1957)

In the early 1950s, when Stalin was still alive and powerful, and the echo of “*zhdanovshchina*” still sounded, the Moscow and Leningrad sections of decorative-applied art openly argued for the high importance of this art, hitherto seen as mere “fancywork.” For example, Leningrad book illustrator Vladimir Kochegura, at the meeting of the

<http://design-union.ru/portalnew/place-of/world/482-soloviev90>, uploaded 11.01.2010, accessed 21.03.2015.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki. Kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 225-226.

⁴⁹ Because of his power to influence the authorities, and his privileged social position, Soloviev is a controversial figure in the history of Soviet industrial design. Both experienced and young designers still express this ambiguity, revealing the desire to dissociate the activities of designers from power games (see the comments on the review of Soloviev’s 2004 autobiography: <http://kak.ru/columns/designet/a1517/>). Nonetheless, his outstanding role in developing Soviet industrial design is undeniable. He appeared as the agent of institutional change at the time when Soviet art theory was ready to embrace industrial aesthetics.

⁵⁰ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, l. 34

decorative-applied art section in February 1953, called for pressing the Administration Board of LSSKh to treat this section equally with others. He complained, in particular, that painters and easel graphic artists buy all the best paintbrushes in the Union's kiosk and only worse-quality ones remain for applied artists – *prikladniki*, as they were colloquially called. “By the way,” he reminded, “we need good paintbrushes first of all. I have seen the sketch of [the architect and interior designer Abram Il’ich] Lapirova, where he made very meticulous, delicate ornamentation. Its implementation requires very good materials. But it turns out that we cannot have a claim to such materials equally with the members of other sections.”⁵¹

At the same meeting, interior designer Efrem Sandler complained that, unlike other visual artists, *prikladniki* rarely had individual studios where they could do experimental work and thus develop their professional skills. “This is a rebuke to the Administration Board, which still does not consider us a competent section.”⁵² He also opined that only one section representative in the LSSKh Administration Board, Vsevolod Sulimo-Samuilo, was not enough. In the case of his illness, no one would defend the interests of applied artists, so another candidate needed to be proposed.⁵³ Sandler concluded: “Nobody understands that we are significantly more *the* artists than graphic artists, who [only] illustrate books, whereas we deal with books, with interiors, with porcelain, with fabrics, with ceramics, with enamels, and so forth.” By the same token, he added, applied artists are superior to painters: “Try suggesting a painter to make a brooch or illustrate a book – what will he come up with?”⁵⁴ Universalism was presented as both a misfortune and an

⁵¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385.

⁵² Ibid., l. 30.

⁵³ Ibid., l. 30.

⁵⁴ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 31.

advantage of applied artists, making them misunderstood creators, victims of the colleagues' arrogance. Similarly, at the beginning of 1954, prominent applied artist, architect and LVKhPU Professor Boris Smirnov spoke of superiority of applied art at a research conference in Leningrad. "The image-bearing effect [*obraznoe vozdeistviie*] of applied art works every day, during one's whole life, and not episodically, only in museums and at exhibitions. This is a socially meaningful specificity of applied art as a guide in certain ideology and sublime artistic taste."⁵⁵ Like the productivists, Smirnov called for reforming everyday life – *byt* – through the aesthetics of material objects, without, however, proclaiming the death of art, or denying the significance of decoration. Applied art was to be one's own personal socialist realism.

Meanwhile, Moscow artists also spoke about the importance of decorative and applied art. At the meeting of the decorative-applied art section of MOSKh in September 1953, the artist Chervonnyi insisted that "decorative art is connected to poetry, prose, music, with the whole diversity of Soviet reality, of Soviet life." That is, decorative art was described as a competent and equal part of Soviet culture, broadly defined. Therefore, Chervonnyi continued, a good decorative artist has to be an all-round, universally educated person, and "a politically active member of the society,"⁵⁶ foreshadowing one of the future approaches to the industrial design profession. *Prikladniki* from both MOSKh and LSSKh positioned themselves as the elite among all Soviet applied artists, bearing responsibility for improving industrial production, advertisement design of interiors, shop windows, streets, squares and private apartments in Soviet cities.

⁵⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, l. 70.

⁵⁶ RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2470, l. 34.

The pronouncements about the power of applied art were not just a matter of professional development and personal ambitions. Already at the beginning of 1950s, the Soviet Party leadership understood well that the improvement of living standards and consumer goods was an important instrument for keeping the population's loyalty and the Soviet Union's positive image vis-à-vis the capitalist West. As architectural historian Catherine Cooke described it, "in the appalling physical state of the war-ravaged Soviet Union it was clear that the attention to living standards was not just a humanistic issue. A better material environment was the essential machinery for generating the higher productivity and commitment of individuals on which any attempt of the Soviet Union to keep up with the West depended in the tough Cold War world."⁵⁷ The XIX Communist Party Congress, in October 1952, laid out directives for the fifth five-year plan, including mass-scale expansion of the state's housing construction programs.⁵⁸ The new Party regulations, adopted at the Congress, promised "satisfaction with constantly growing material and cultural needs of the society," and this became an important point of reference for applied artists in their claims for gaining authority.⁵⁹ This promise presupposed investments in the development of decorative-applied art. If we are to believe Leningrad artist Zakharov, the expenditure plan of the USSR Art Fund for 1952, approved by the USSR Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Finances, allocated 4.5 million rubles for decorative-applied art, while only 1.5 million rubles for painting and sculpture each. An analogous plan for 1953 assigned 5.5 million rubles to decorative-applied art and only 2.5

⁵⁷ Catherine Cooke with Susan E. Reid. "Modernity and Realism: Architectural relations in the Cold War." In Susan E. Reid and Rosalind P. Blakseley, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and the Decorative Arts* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 173.

⁵⁸ "Direktivy po piatiletnemy planu razvitiia SSSR na 1951-1955 gody," *Pravda*, August 20, 1952, 1-2.

⁵⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 386, l. 1-3.

million rubles to painting and sculpture each.⁶⁰ Thus, from 1952, applied artists' appeal for recognition within their professional community was backed by the state's material support. After Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev, whom Cooke describes as "above all a practical man who got things done,"⁶¹ used the issue of improving living standards as a weapon in his struggle for power. The political situation turned even more favorable for applied artists, allowing them to cautiously revive the 1920s constructivists' slogan "into production!"

Indeed, entering industry became the primary objective of Moscow and Leningrad decorative artists around 1953. At the above mentioned meeting, Moscow artist Chervonnyi strongly suggested the participation of decorative artists of all kinds in regular fall and spring exhibitions of MOSKh. "This would have a significant impact upon broad masses of people through the things which enter the household of a Soviet person; while on the other hand, it would push production, so that these commodities would be mass-produced."⁶² From the beginning of the 1950s, Moscow textile artists, working at factories, in the Research Institute of Art Industry (established in 1932) and in the workshops of the USSR Art Fund, worked hard on reinterpreting folk motives for the mass-produced commodities used in urban settings. Such modernized ornaments were developed for carpets, tablecloths, curtains, and fashionable dresses. For example, Vera Aralova, designer at the Moscow House of Dress Prototypes, proudly announced to Moscow textile artists that dresses made from the fabric, designed by artist A. Pod''apolskaia, had been highly evaluated at the International Fashion Competition in Prague, in September 1953.⁶³

⁶⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 38, l. 36.

⁶¹ Cooke, "Modernity and Realism," 173.

⁶² RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2470, l. 27.

⁶³ RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2470, l. 4.

Yet the items made according to high quality designs were mostly of limited production, available at exhibitions and fashion shows rather than on sale to a regular consumer.⁶⁴ In February 1953, Leningrad artists could name three important design organizations of the city.⁶⁵ The art-industrial complex *Lengoroformlenie*, existing since 1950, dealt with decoration of urban space, outdoor advertising, producing and distributing posters, and also theater set design.⁶⁶ *Torgreklama*, established at the beginning of the 1950s, was responsible for advertising commodities.⁶⁷ *Lenizo* (1929-1954), a cooperative organization of Leningrad artists, coordinated the work of factories and workshops, distributed commissions to artists, and sold artworks through the network of its shops.⁶⁸ Decorative artist Evgenii Krshizhanovskii regretfully admitted that artists employed in these organizations were controlled by their directors and had to strictly follow their requirements. Since these directors were not competent in aesthetic questions, he said, the quality of production turned out to be quite low. Therefore, members of the decorative-applied art section were strongly encouraged to take control over this production. “I have not seen,” Krshizhanovskii claimed, “that the work in this direction stimulated growth of prestige and artistic quality of these organizations.” Therefore, he concluded, certain members of the section should be selected for controlling design work within these bodies.⁶⁹

By 1953, the artists of Leningrad and Moscow decorative-applied art sections had been members of artistic councils – consultative bodies, authorized to select prototypes for

⁶⁴ On socialist fashion as ideological construct and propaganda tool see Bartlett, *FashionEast*, 5-8; 137-180.

⁶⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 11

⁶⁶ <http://www.ruian.ru/company/press/101> accessed 28.12.2012.

⁶⁷ <http://www.advertology.ru/print25257.htm> accessed 28.12.2012.

⁶⁸ Evgeniia Petrova and Vladimir Leniashin, eds., *Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei. Katalog muzeinogo sobraniia. Zhivopis'*. Vol. 10. *Prevaia polovina XX veka* (St. Petersburg: Palace Edition, 2008), 130.

⁶⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, ll. 11-12

mass production – at many enterprises.⁷⁰ However, they could not do much for improving quality, being pressed by factory managers and trade workers to select items which were easier to produce or, allegedly, more appealing to consumers. Sometimes, however, there were simply no decent prototypes to choose. This is what happened in winter 1953 at the meeting of the artistic council of the Leningrad Wallpaper Factory, organized by the Department Store DLT (*Dom Leningradskoi Torgovli*). The submitted prototypes “made a very sad impression,” while the representatives of trade organizations “just cried: if you do not pass at least one prototype, we will have to stop trading, but the demand for wallpaper is huge!” Thus the artists had to make a compromise with other council members and choose mediocre prototypes; otherwise the work of wallpaper factory would stop.⁷¹

By the time of Stalin’s death in March 1953, applied artists had several suggestions for solving, at least partially, the quality problem, and they went on proposing solutions in a changing political climate. The first suggestion was, essentially, “start with yourself.” All members of the decorative-applied art sections, those employed at factories, as well as those working by commissions from the USSR Art Fund, had to be highly qualified professionals and constantly polish their skills. For this purpose, they were to cross-check each other’s progress through organizing “creative reviews” (*tvorcheskie prosmotry*), “creative reports” (*tvorchesliie otchety*), and participation in both large and narrowly thematic exhibitions. Thus, during 1951-1953, the decorative-applied section of LSSKh organized four exhibitions: the exhibition of decorative-applied art for the time period 1951-1952; the exhibition of the production of the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory; the exhibition of the State Wallpaper Factory; and the exhibition of porcelain artist Grigorii Zimin. In addition,

⁷⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, 386; RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2475.

⁷¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 15.

the section conducted 44 “creative reports” and 10 meetings of the section’s Bureau (governing board) in Leningrad factories and in LVKhPU. In addition, 71 intra-group Bureau sessions were held in these three years. They were devoted to selecting new members, organizing exhibitions, debates on social and everyday life questions, and reports on the passed exhibitions of decorative art in Moscow.⁷² The main directive of all these activities was for the section to assume extensive control over decorative art making in Leningrad. The artists were expected not just to participate in numerous artistic councils, but to control all the commodity production. For this reason, the section suggested selecting “responsible persons” from the section’s Bureau for supervision (“*shefstvo*”) over the work of factories where applied artists were employed.⁷³ As architect and monumental artist Kirill Iogansen expressed it, “The aim is to make the section the headquarters of decorative-applied work and enter industry; and when our population is able to buy *beautiful* commodities, *beautiful* porcelain, *beautiful* paintings, and to look at *beautifully* made advertisement – then the task will be fulfilled [highlighted in the original].”⁷⁴ Therefore, at the start of the aesthetic turn, the task to improve Soviet material environment was formulated in terms of beauty, understood as visual appeal (further developments of the concept of beauty will be discussed in the following chapters).

Realistic voices, however, insisted that the task was too big for the forty members of the section; it could oversee maximum 2-3 factories.⁷⁵ One possible solution was to use the section’s strong contact with the Leningrad city department of beautification (*otdel*

⁷² TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 386, l. 6.

⁷³ Among the members of the sections of decorative-applied art were the artists employed at (or “attached to”) factories, and the so-called “free” artists, working by commissions, designing public interiors, exhibitions, shop windows, product labels, etc. They totally depended on the USSR Union of Artists and the commissions distributed by the Artistic Fund. TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 5.

⁷⁴ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 20.

⁷⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. 13.

blagoustroistva) as a lever to affect the USSR Chamber of Commerce and the Ministries of Trade and Light Industry. It was stressed that, doing so, the applied artists would gain authority in decision-making.⁷⁶ Another suggestion was to push the leadership of factories to redesign artistic councils, so that artists and architects would predominate there – or, in most difficult cases, to request the change of a factory administration itself.⁷⁷ Decorative artists were also called for active intervention into the affairs of the Leningrad section of the USSR Art Fund. Artist Alexei Balashov argued that it was actually possible to control many factories through expansion of the section by attracting and properly guiding new staff, mostly from LVKhPU graduates.⁷⁸

The most radical proposal came from artist Rozanov – organizing “the institute of planning decorative-applied art” (*“institut proektirovaniia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva”*). It was then just a rough idea:

This problem should be put onto a state basis, because this is a problem of state significance. The question of artistic guidance of all our industry with all its factories and enterprises has long ripened... It should be entrusted to the people of political mindset, perhaps it should be discussed elsewhere.⁷⁹

Rozanov repeated the same suggestion right before the momentous XX Congress of the Communist Party. At the section’s meeting on February 1, 1956, he complained that the state did not pay proper attention to decorative-applied art, and that the section’s influence upon actual production was still miserable. Even worse, many artists were employed at factories not as artists, but as technical specialists. All these problems, he insisted, were caused by the lack of a single organizing center for “art industry.”⁸⁰ Calling

⁷⁶ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385, l. l. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid., l. 15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., l. 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid., l. 41.

⁸⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, l. 33.

for creating such center even more insistently, Rozanov pondered on how to do it without suppressing the interests of local artists. This means, first, that little had been improved in Soviet art industry for the past three years, and, second, that new questions had emerged. Rozanov's complaint at the 1956 meeting was supported by art historian Nina Iaglova, who reminded that the artists, employed in industry, were not provided with proper working conditions. Thus, she emphasized, the slogan of the First All-Russian Conference on Art Industry (1919)⁸¹ - "Artists into production!" - had still not been fulfilled.⁸²

But was there indeed no change at all from February 1953 to February 1956, in the sphere of decorative art? Even though the real situation remained unfavorable for applied artists, there was the beginning of an important theoretical development. For the first time since the early 1920s, a consistent discussion of applied art appeared in the official press. Notably, the decision was initiated by a representative of the Stalinist art establishment. In the January-February issue of the major Soviet art journal *Iskusstvo* from 1954, the President of the USSR Academy of Arts, Aleksandr Gerasimov, announced the tasks for development of Soviet art, including decorative art.⁸³ In the style of self-criticism (*samokritika*), typical for Stalin's time, Gerasimov admitted that the Academy of Arts had been ignoring applied art and advertisement. Many artistic organizations also considered applied art as a "low" art. Now, according to the Party's directive to improve art industry, the Academy must change its policy: "We must engage in the problems of advertisement, decoration [*khudozhestvennoe oformleniie*] of commodities, labels, marks, etc. It must not

⁸¹ Lev Orshanskii, *Khudozhestvennaia i kustarnaia promyshlennost SSSR 1917-1927* (Leningrad: Izdaniie Akademii Khudozhestv, 1927), 74.

http://www.somb.ru/downloads/fulltexts/rare_books/art/art_and_cottage_industry_ussr_1917-1927.pdf
accessed 26.01.2013.

⁸² TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, l. 36.

⁸³ Aleksandr Gerasimov, "Nashi zadachi," *Iskusstvo* 1 (January-February 1954): 7-11.

be completely entrusted to factories and trade organizations.”⁸⁴ As Gerasimov added, when random people, without proper qualification, dealt with applied art, it led to low quality and petty-bourgeois tastes. He saw the Academy of Sciences as a center for guiding the development of art industry, like that proposed by Rozanov. Gerasimov particularly urged the Academy’s Research Institute of History and Theory of Visual Arts (functioning since 1947) to pay more attention to artistic industry (*khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost’*) as well as folk art.

This was, however, a formal official statement, following the Party line, without touching upon the specific problems of applied art. The first professional discussion on this topic appeared in *Iskusstvo* in the second (March-April) issue of 1954. In their article “The experience of creating artistic decorative fabrics,” artists Inessa Tumanian and Ivan Florinskii called for “development of the methods for producing structurally and ornamentally complex decorative fabrics in the conditions of mass-scale industrial production.” However, they stressed, no artistic organization was concerned with this task, leaving it to factories, which had neither highly qualified artistic staff, nor recourses for research. As a result, “the produced fabrics are often monotonous in structure, and the ornaments are insipid and boring. Devoid of their own style, they often copy not the best West European examples.” Therefore, the authors argued, elaboration of basic theoretical principles of textile design was of primary importance.⁸⁵ In the same issue, art critic Sergei

⁸⁴ Gerasimov, “Nashi zadachi,” 10.

⁸⁵ Inessa Tumanian and Ivan Florinskii, “Opyt sozdaniia khudozhestvennykh dekorativnykh tkanei,” *Iskusstvo* 2 (March-April 1954): 39-42.

Temerin presented a survey of the recent exhibition of Hungarian folk crafts.⁸⁶ After that, applied art did not figure as a subject in this journal until 1955.

In April 1954, Leningrad hosted an exhibition of Estonian applied art.⁸⁷ Estonia, together with other Baltic republics, served as immediate example of higher quality commodities, and the exhibition was received enthusiastically by both specialists and the general public (it attracted approximately 10 thousand visitors).⁸⁸ Discussing the event in LOSKh, Leningrad applied artists regretfully admitted that they had much less production facilities to experiment and professionally develop, than their Estonian colleagues. They expressed a wish to follow Estonia's example of masterful modernization of folk ornaments and in their creative use of various textures. A comparatively high attendance at the exhibition made one artist conclude that "applied art begins to be loved by the audience; in fact, it had been loved before, but somehow escaped attention of certain artistic circles."⁸⁹ Meanwhile, in the first half of 1954, Moscow received exhibitions of contemporary Czech and Lithuanian applied art.⁹⁰ However, *Iskusstvo* ignored these events.

December 7, 1954 became a landmark of the aesthetic turn: Khrushchev attacked irrational, historicist constructions at the All-Union Convention of Soviet Builders and Architects.⁹¹ As a contemporary of the events, art historian Iurii Gerchuck, describes it, Khrushchev's

⁸⁶ Sergei Temerin, "Vystavka vengerskogo narodnogo prikladnogo iskusstva," *Iskusstvo* 2 (March-April 1954): 66-72.

⁸⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 387.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., l. 59.

⁹⁰ Ibid., l. 60.

⁹¹ Nilita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *O shirokom vnedrenii industrial'nykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel'stva: rech' na Vsesoiuznom soveshchanii stroitelei, arkhitektorov i rabotnikov promyshlennosti stroitel'nykh materialov, stroitel'nogo i dorozhnogo mashinostroeniia, proektnykh i nauchno-issledovatel'skikh organizatsii, 7 dekabria 1954 g* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1955).

purely economic critique caused, nonetheless, radical aesthetic consequences. It transformed architecture that was denied even the right to be called art. On the one hand, architecture at once rid itself of the burden of archaic fake forms and pseudo-classical traditions, but, on the other hand, it was squeezed into the frames of extremely rude utilitarianism, subordinated to the dictate of primitive technical and economic expediency. And yet the architects were the first in the country who started forming a new artistic language suitable for the transformed spirit of time, who acquired the right (and even the obligation) to widely use hitherto neglected foreign experience. Therefore architecture led the way for the related to it applied and monumental arts and furthered their faster and relatively freer development.⁹²

Catherine Cooke noted that the themes of Khrushchev's 1954 criticism, such as the call for type-plans and industrialized building methods, the requirement for architectural theory to directly serve the practice, and the denunciation of individual architects who had led the profession before the war, had been familiar to the architectural communities in European countries, who had to deal with the task of post-war reconstruction. As Cooke argued, "Even his [Khrushchev's] statement that 'not everything the constructivists did was bad' was a heart-warming gesture to those pioneers of European modernism who were now trying to implement a social vision for architecture."⁹³ Thus, even before the famous denunciation of the "personality cult" at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev initiated and encouraged the shift of architectural practice towards the more open international direction, even though, as Cooke later added, the information about Western architectural tendencies was scarce. Closely related to architecture, decorative art also thus received an official sanction to improve and update.

This policy change prompted the beginning of serious professional discussion of applied art in the official Soviet art press. In March 1955, *Iskusstvo* published a groundbreaking article by an art historian Alexander Saltykov, a prominent specialist on

⁹² Iurii Gerchuk, *Krovoizliianiie v MOSKh, ili Khrushchev v Manezhe* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie), 13.

⁹³ Cooke, "Modernity and Realism," 173.

decorative art of Soviet republics. The article explained the key principles of decorative art, distinguishing it from painting, sculpture, and easel graphics.⁹⁴ In the July-August issue of *Iskusstvo*, Leningrad art critics Nina Iaglova and Helene Kuma presented their review of the exhibition of the applied art of three Baltic republics, which was currently taking place in Tallinn.⁹⁵ In November 1955, this exhibition was brought to Moscow, and reviewed by Saltykov in *Iskusstvo*.⁹⁶ This were the beginning of external contacts of Soviet Russia's artists – the Baltic countries demonstrated more advanced design culture and were the accessible example to emulate.

In the September-October issue of *Iskusstvo* of the same year, Sergei Temerin gave a rigorous analysis of the MOSKh-organized exhibition of decorative arts, where he argued against the pejorative use of the term “applied.”⁹⁷ He plainly stated, that painting, sculpture or graphics cannot be simply “applied” to utilitarian objects, because making such objects “is a special type of artistic creativity, a special kind of art,” which “embraces the process of creating everyday objects, satisfying people's aesthetic and utilitarian needs.” This specific activity, he explained, includes “all the totality of artistic labor,” whereas an applied artist often combines skills of architect, sculptor and painter. In essence, Temerin described industrial design, not “applied art” in the sense of hand-making of fancy domestic objects. This very term, as well as “decorative art,” had become problematic by then: artists

⁹⁴ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 2 (1955): 30-34. It must be noted, however, that already in November 1954 Saltykov discussed applied art in the context of commodity culture, in the specialized periodical about Soviet trade. Alexander Saltykov, “O khudozhestvennom kachestve promyshlennykh tovarov,” *Sovetskaia Torgovlia* 9, 1954, 22-31.

⁹⁵ Nina Iaglova, and Helene Kuma, “Dekorativno-prikladnoe iskusstvo sovetsoi Estonii,” *Iskusstvo* 4 (July-August 1955): 54-57.

⁹⁶ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Prikladnoe iskusstvo trekh respublik,” *Iskusstvo* 6 (November-December 1955), 12-18. Unfortunately, Saltykov gives no concrete information in his article about the exhibition's location. But the fact that the review was presented in November by a Moscow art critic allows us to suppose that it was not about the Summer Exhibition in Tallinn, but about recent or current exhibition in Moscow.

⁹⁷ Sergei Temerin. “Iskusstvo bytovykh veshchei,” *Iskusstvo* 5 (September-October 1955): 13-21.

were debating whether “everyday art” (“*bytovoe iskusstvo*”) would be better. For Temerin, this debate seemed a waste of time: what matted is the wide recognition of the importance of the art, related to everyday needs.⁹⁸

By the mid-1950s, open professional discussion of decorative art was under way. Socio-political situation was favorable to this process: Krushchev saw the problem of mass housing as crucial. The post-war Soviet Union experienced catastrophic shortage of living space, with barracks and communal apartments as standard habitats for the large majority of urban dwellers. The housing program was developed already by the Stalinist leadership, and between 1944 and 1954 some measures were taken. Yet the construction was then on a limited scale. As Mark B. Smith explains it, “the agencies of the late Stalinist Party, following Stalin himself, lacked any sustained interest in the way that the individual citizen lived, or certainly any interest sufficiently advanced to generate widespread practical effects.”⁹⁹ I would argue that the applied artists’ main concern was precisely how the individual citizen lived, and with Khrushchev’s intensified housing program, they could express this concern openly, as it became relevant.

The first manifestation of the new housing policy was the criticism of “excess” in December 1954. In November, 1955, this criticism was entailed in the famous Party and governmental resolution “On Liquidation of Excesses in Planning and Building.”¹⁰⁰ The Resolution called for developing uniform types of building, rational use of materials and rejection of embellishment in favor of convenience, echoing the modernist maxim “form

⁹⁸ Temerin. “Iskusstvo bytovykh veshchei,” 13.

⁹⁹ Mark B. Smith. “Khrushchev’s Promise to Eliminate the Urban Housing Shortage: Rights, Rationality and the Communist Future.” In Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev* (London-New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

¹⁰⁰ The Resolution of the CPSU Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers from November 4, 1955 No. 1871 “On Liquidation of Excesses in Planning and Building”<http://www.sovarch.ru/postanovlenie55/> accessed 28.08.2011.

follows function” and thus giving room for industrial design to legitimately develop. Just before the acceptance of this resolution, in October 1955, the Soviet delegation headed by the Minister of Construction I. K. Koziulia made a five-week visit to the U.S. for studying construction methods of prefabricated housing.¹⁰¹ The first step of the mass-scale housing program took place between the beginning of 1955 and July 31, 1957, when the Party housing decree was issued. It recognized the right to housing as belonging to all Soviet citizens and promised to overcome the housing shortage within ten, or maximum twelve, years. By then, every Soviet was to be provided with a separate, though small, apartment.¹⁰² With this second step of a global housing program, the very concept of domestic space had to be reconsidered. People were gradually moving into their new apartments and needed to domesticate them, to furnish them with appropriate commodities. Therefore the experts’ advice became needed, which, in turn, prompted rigorous development of design theory, not to mention that mass production of high quality commodities became a critical task. Soviet Russia badly needed industrial designers.

Definitely, Khrushchev’s famous “Secret Speech” at the XX Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956 also greatly affected the development of Soviet design. However incompletely, de-Stalinization stimulated the liberalization of culture and provided opportunities for rethinking Soviet aesthetics. There were two directions: learning from contemporary Western experience and a cautious revival of the ideas Russian avant-garde, including productivist art. Within the artistic community, it became possible to challenge certain dogmas, as was done by a young Leningrad art critic Moisei Kagan in

¹⁰¹ Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 130-136.

¹⁰² Smith, ‘Khrushchev’s Promise,’ 26-27.

April 1956. Responding his claim about the “architectural” and non-depictive nature of applied art, Kagan’s colleagues made references to the decisions of the XX congress, such as the call for innovation in art and rendering art accessible to everyone.¹⁰³ With his daring, for that time, views on applied art, Kagan provoked a published response from another young art critic Nikita Voronov, a “passionate propagator of the ‘Thaw’ art.”¹⁰⁴ Voronov’s criticism in *Iskusstvo* was quite heated, but Voronov was obviously interested in clearing the meaning of applied art and setting design principles, not in hitting “the adversary.”¹⁰⁵ This was not the battle between the artistic Stalinism and artistic liberalism of the “Thaw,” but a lively, engaging discussion of two open-minded young professionals. Voronov’s article argued for the complexity of applied art and pointed to the necessity of a special forum, dedicated to this art’s problems. At the same time, art figures of the Russian painterly avant-garde could now be partially rehabilitated. Thus, together with Voronov’s critique, *Iskusstvo* published an article by art historian Serafim Druzhinin, an employee of the State Tretyakov Gallery, devoted to a Cezannist painter Ilia Mashkov (1881-1994), whose work had been earlier condemned as formalist.¹⁰⁶ These debates and re-introductions in *Iskusstvo* signaled the growing scholarly interest in applied art, emerging in 1956. The majority writings on aesthetics issued in 1956 - if not all – devoted at least several pages to applied art.¹⁰⁷ Most prominent of them are *Problems of Aesthetic Education* by Nina Dmitrieva and *Content and Form in Art* by Viktor Vanslov.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 39, ll. 62, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Gerchuk, *Krovoizlianiie v MOSKh*, 285-286.

¹⁰⁵ Nikita Voronov. “O nekotorykh voprosakh spetsifiki prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 4 (July-August 1965), 18-22.

¹⁰⁶ Serafim Druzhinin, “Ilia Mashkov,” *Iskusstvo* 4 (July-August 1956), 23-27.

¹⁰⁷ Boris Shragin, “Za desiat’ let,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1967): 38.

¹⁰⁸ Nina Dmitrieva, *Voprosy esteticheskogo vospitania* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1956), 115; Viktor Vanslov. *Soderzhanie i forma v iskusstve* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1957), 188-189. These books were immediately reviewed in Moisei Kagan, “Estetika i prikladnoe iskustvo,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 37-40.

As this survey suggests, by 1957 the aesthetic turn in Soviet Russia had been well under way. The necessity for creating a comprehensive theory of socialist industrial design was recognized, bolstered by the political and socio-economic reforms. It was time to conceptualize the profession of designer.

1. 3. From Applied Art to Design (1957 – 1962)

A key event for the growth of the professional design discussion was the First All-Union Convention of Artists, taking place in Moscow during a week from February 28 to March 5, 1957.¹⁰⁹ This Convention did not only complete the process of organizing the Union of Artists of the USSR. It also sanctioned the functioning of decorative art on par with other arts. Decorative artists granted importance to this event: it was their chance to speak out in front of their colleagues and superiors. Thus, as early on February 1, 1956, at the meeting of Leningrad section of decorative-applied art, Abram Lapirova called for the vigorous presentation at the Convention and suggested, for this purpose, to unite with Moscow applied artists.¹¹⁰ His colleague Iakov Nikolaev was, however, less optimistic: “Nothing will be said at this Convention, it will be just a fine showy event.” Yet his skepticism eventuated in a reasonable suggestion:

...we have a different means and... not only the section's Bureau, but we all, as artists, should take measures. Nowadays all press organs are instructed to provide a creative platform [*tvorcheskuiu tribunu*] for artists... So let us raise questions in the press about everything abnormal we have, about everything that hinders our art... I believe in the power of the press. If earlier no astute question appeared in the press, then now all such questions do appear, and they will provoke certain response. All directors lend the attentive ear to the press, and this is enough for all our city's Party organizations to take appropriate measures. The press is still a powerful weapon.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 1-2, l. 1.

¹¹⁰ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, l. 18.

¹¹¹ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, l. 60.

A minute earlier, Nikolaev assured his colleagues that in 1955 LOSKh sent more requests, than ever before, to different authorities: the Ministry of Culture, the CPSU Central Committee, Leningrad regional and city committees.¹¹² Yet, he added, the core problem is the poor work of the artists themselves. Therefore his appeal to open a discussion in the press can be also interpreted as a call for open criticism and self-criticism. This practice goes back to intra-group discussions and the press of Stalin's time¹¹³ – and this pronouncement was made still before Khrushchev's "Secret Speech." However, Nikolaev's suggestion indicates a new tendency for open discussion, for using the press as the public sphere, where hitherto suppressed questions can be raised and debated, for ultimately achieving practical results.

In spite of Nikolaev's skepticism about the Convention, Leningrad applied artists decided to actively use it, too, as a platform for their agenda. They composed an address to the Convention. It opened with an assertion:

Ideological-artistic significance of this [decorative-applied] art is in no way smaller than that of painting or sculpture, for it has a much greater mass scale, it surrounds a person in her daily life. Also, the interest, provoked by Soviet decorative-applied art at Soviet and international exhibitions, is widely known. Therefore the neglect of the needs of decorative-applied art is, in fact, neglect of the needs of our people, and the problems of this art are strictly political.¹¹⁴

As one can see, it was argued that applied art is loved and needed by all Soviet people, and therefore its support is a crucial political issue. The poor quality of available Soviet commodities is a shame, the addressers continued, and concrete appropriate measures must be urgently taken. Their proposal can be summarized as follows. First, a

¹¹² TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, l. 59.

¹¹³ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Alexei Kojevnikov. "Rituals of Stalinist Culture at Work: Science and the Games of IntraParty Democracy circa 1948," *Russian Review* 57, No. 1 (January 1998): 25-52.

¹¹⁴ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 391.

governing body should be established under the central Soviet and republican Councils of Ministers, which would supervise all enterprises and organizations, producing “works of applied art.” The guidance of this body must be both “ideological-artistic” and “organizational-technical.” Second, all ministries, agencies and big enterprises, related to art industry should have special artistic councils, where highly qualified artists and art critics would predominate. Third, the position of Art Director or Head Artist, who is also the Head of an artistic council, should to be established at all enterprises which manufacture artistic production. Artists employed at factories should be subjected to special regulations, determined by the character of their work. They need to be provided with experimental workshops and laboratories; the copyright of their designs must be protected; the general labor and wages regulations should not be applied to them. Fourth, art industry should be exempt from the gross planning of production (*plan po valu*). Planning, standardization and financing of the art industry enterprises must be determined by the demand to raise quality and broaden the assortment of production. The price list system, which makes production of complicated expensive commodities more profitable, should be abolished. Finally, industrial artists should be given all possibilities for professional development, such as participation in design competitions, field trips [*tvorcheslie komandirovki*] both within the USSR and abroad, and visits to museums of applied art, which should be created in Soviet republics, while the All-Union applied art museum in Moscow should be reopened. One of the concluding suggestions was organizing a special periodical on applied art.¹¹⁵

Evidently, this address was sent to the Organizing Committee of the Union of Soviet Artists, which ran the event. It is unlikely that the address was presented at the Convention.

¹¹⁵ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 391.

The Soviet Minister of Culture, Nikolai Mikhailov, was strictly concerned about ideological purity of the event and the “danger” of formalist influence. In his report from January 21, 1957, he spoke only about “outstanding painters and sculptors of Moscow Leningrad and Kiev” as appropriate delegates to the Convention.¹¹⁶ Supposedly, he omitted applied artists as potential propagators of “bourgeois formalism.” According to the memory of art critic Karl Kantor, there was one presentation on applied art, by Alexander Saltykov.¹¹⁷ Probably, there were several representatives of decorative artists who, however, did not speak. So it is improbable that a Leningrad applied artist, too, would present the cited address on the spot. Yet, very likely, Saltykov brought similar suggestions in his presentation, because applied artists in Moscow – and, clearly, everywhere in Soviet Russia – faced basically the same problems, engendered by the central planning of economy and its centralized administration. Saltykov could be familiar with the address of his Leningrad colleagues and incorporate their suggestions in his speech, so that they were widely heard by Soviet artists. As we will see, they found practical response in a few years.

Most probably, the record of Saltykov’s presentation was lost – at least, according to the later recollection of his colleague, philosopher Karl Kantor. Therefore, one can rely only on Kantor’s memory about this important speech.¹¹⁸ Saltykov called for widening the borders of applied art, including traditional handicrafts of Soviet republics, which Saltykov painstakingly studied and knew very well. At the same time, he argued for including

¹¹⁶“Zapiska ministra kultury SSSR N. A. Mikhailova o vliianii burzhuaaznoi kul’tury i ideologii na khudozhestennuiu intelligentsiu Mosky i Leningrada,” not later than January 21, 1957, Personal archive of Aleksandr Iakovlev, f. 5, op. 36, d. 48 ll. 16-24 <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/almanah/inside/almanah-doc/55509>

¹¹⁷ “Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora,” *DI* 3-4 (2003), http://www.di.mmoma.ru/history/articles/fragment_zapisi_vospominanij_karla_kantora/ accessed 03.08.2012.

¹¹⁸ “Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora.”

applied art on equal terms with painting and sculpture into the complex of visual arts. This is worth doing, he opined, because through making objects a human being becomes a co-participant in the world of objects and doubles him- or herself in this world.¹¹⁹ Thus, Saltykov was a proponent of developing craft and unifying all arts, rather than industrial design – an approach, reminiscent of the initial Bauhaus program to “merge all arts and crafts into an ideal unity.”¹²⁰

Saltykov’s speech made its effect: he was elected into the new Secretariat of the USSR Union of Artists’ governing board. Decorator Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, a pupil of Kazimir Malevich, became another representative of decorative artists in the Secretariat.¹²¹ Other results of the Convention, beneficial for applied artists, were the creation of the “committees on decorative art”¹²² in the governing boards of the USSR Union of Artists and the Art Fund, and founding of a special journal on decorative-applied art.¹²³ The latter was especially important in terms of creating comprehensive design theory. Kantor attributed the idea of this journal to Saltykov, although, as we have seen, it had been also proposed by the Leningrad *prikladniki*. Saltykov hoped to become the chief editor of the new journal, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR (Decorative Art of the USSR, henceforth DI SSSR)*. But Mikhail Ladur, the main decorator of Moscow since 1947 and the Head of the MOSKh section of decorative-applied art, more actively aspired for the chief editor’s position. Having gained titles and a solid reputation by 1957, plus being a

¹¹⁹ “Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora.”

¹²⁰ Description of the permanent exhibition on the Bauhaus-Archiv Museum für Gestaltung, Berlin.

¹²¹ “Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora.”

¹²² In this period, terms “decorative,” “applied” and “decorative-applied” were often used interchanging, because the choice of best term for the art, related to mass production, was a subject of debate of specialists.

¹²³ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2514, l. 2.

Party member, Ladur had power to influence the Party authorities.¹²⁴ As a result, the Central Committee of CPSU appointed him the chief editor. Ladur was entrusted to set up the editorial staff, and he selected people whom he knew as appropriate specialists, but also took advice on selection from his colleagues. Those employed were mostly young art professionals, not experienced in journalism (there was only one professional journalist in the editorial staff).¹²⁵ For example, Liudmila Kramarenko, a Leningrad art critic educated in the Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, was a distinguished specialist on ceramics, glass and textile; she visited many enterprises and was well familiar with production. Stella Bazaziants specialized on monumental art, Konstantin Rozhdestvinskii – on decoration art (*oformitel'skoe iskusstvo*). Philosopher Karl Kantor became a deputy chief editor, responsible for handling everyday tasks.

According to Kantor's post factum interview, it was him who suggested broadening the frames of the journal's discourse, including there not only applied, monumental and folk art, but also industrial art and industrial production of commodities.¹²⁶ Kantor corrected the editorial, written by Saltykov for the debut issue of *DI SSSR* (December 1957), shifting the emphasis from crafts to industry: "Our art industry has been enriched with a number of new branches, techniques and materials. Fabrics and plastics, metals and silicates, new

¹²⁴ Ladur's is a vivid example of the career of a Soviet artist, working in the different parts of the USSR. He graduated from Odessa Artistic Institute in 1930 and started his career as a theatre artist and interior designer in Odessa, Kharkov and Kiev. In 1935 he was responsible for the design of the first Soviet carnival in Moscow's Central park of Culture and Recreation (TsPKiO). In 1938-41 Ladur worked on the interiors of several pavilions for the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV). For the pavilion "Siberia," he received the Badge of Honour in 1939. At the same time, he also designed parades of physical culture. During the war, Ladur worked in the Karakalpak ASSR, designing sets for theatre performances, city parks and public interiors, including the National Theatre in Nukus, the capital of the Karakalpak Republic; he gained the title of Honoured Artist of this republic. In 1947 Ladur became the Head decorator of Moscow. From 1950 to 1955 he was also the chief decorator of the pavilion "Ukraine" at VSKhV. His main post achievements were the designs of Soviet pavilions for Youth Festivals in Budapest in 1949 and Berlin in 1951. RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2475, ll. 54-55.

¹²⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, l. 6.

¹²⁶ "Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora."

transportation means and furnishings, etc, raise many new problems, creative as well as technical and organizational ones, for the employees of these branches, first of all, artists.”¹²⁷ Thus, the development of Soviet design theory from the early 1950s to 1957 was also, in a way, similar to the trajectory of Bauhaus philosophy – from emphasis on arts and crafts to the new unity of art and technology. As the Boris Shragin, employee at the Research Institute of History and Theory of Visual Arts, recalled some time later, the journal’s founding was motivated by the shift in the consciousness of the Soviet public (*obshchestvennost’*). Clearly, Shragin referred to the active community of builders, architects, economists, artists and art critics, who by 1957 realized that Soviet aesthetic standards were irrelevant for modern housing. This resulted in a “point of convergence between economic-practical and aesthetic hopes.”¹²⁸

Initially, the journal circulated in 2700 copies, and by the end of 1958 its circulation increased up to 5000. Thus, it could not reach wide readership and was oriented primarily to professionals and art lovers. But this non-numerous readership proved to be responsive. They sent their opinions about the journal not only to the editorial board, but also to the Party’s Central Committee. The latter approved the policy of *DI SSSR* after a year of the journal’s functioning, notwithstanding minor criticisms. Some foreign countries subscribed to the journal, including those outside of the socialist bloc, for example, France and Guatemala. The small circulation was intended to be compensated by practical activity beyond publication. “First of all, we decided to base our strategy upon the key contemporary question: connection to life. As we know, nowadays this is very fashionable,

¹²⁷ “Krasotu v zhizn’,” *DI SSSR* 1 (December 1957): 3.

¹²⁸ Shragin, “*Za desiat’ let*,” 38.

and this is much talked about, but little has been done yet.”¹²⁹ One such practical undertakings was the support of the campaign on the beautification of Dnepropetrovsk, Ukrainian SSR. In November 1958, the deputies of the local Ispolkom announced the competition of urban beautification and invited Dnepropetrovsk’s competitors in economic achievements - Kharkov, Zaporozhie¹³⁰ and Saratov – to take part. If we are to believe Ladur’s report, the Kharkov leadership felt their pride hurt, because it was not them who initiated the competition. This feeling pushed them to create a detailed beautification program, involving the governing boards of the Party regional and city committees, the leadership of the city Ispolkom, the leaders and members of the local Unions of Artists and of Architects, workers of municipal services and trade workers (the latter were responsible for improving shop windows). Ladur and some of his journal colleagues participated in the meeting, where the program was discussed, and saw preparations for practical measures under way; they were impressed and learnt from this example. The Kharkov program stipulated the introduction of contemporary methods of beautification such as the active use of small architectural forms and green spaces in new city districts, and establishment of artistic council within the Ispolkom of the city soviet, consisting of cultural workers, employees of various enterprises, and scientific organizations. Ladur’s emphasis that artists would predominate in this council even provoked the reaction of Boris Smirnov: “This is impossible!” Ladur, however, assured then that this program is run by “quite reputable comrades,” adding that Zaporozhie was planning to organize a “garden city.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, l. 8.

¹³⁰ I use Russian spelling of the cities names, like it was used in the cited discussion and in the publications of *DI SSSR*. Ukrainian spellings of these cities names, used in allophone press today, are Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv and Zaporizzsia.

¹³¹ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, ll. 8-13.

However unfeasible these Ukrainian projects may sound (and obviously, not everything was realized), they inspired Ladur and his colleagues to write addresses to the Heads of Ispolkoms of the Soviets of People's Deputies of all big Soviet cities. These addresses described the project of mass-scale improvement of material culture in four main parts. The first was the arrangement of green spaces and improvement of architectural landscape. The second was what Ladur called the "creation of the aesthetics of production" which should involve not only applied artists, but also engineers, physiologists, and psychologists, in order to carefully study the environment's influence upon people's well-being and capacity for work (even a special interdisciplinary meeting was prepared in Moscow in January 26, 1959). At this point, importantly, Ladur spoke about the "tendency to organize a special designing [*proektnogo*] institution, which would deal with the problem of aesthetics in production." This both recalls the earlier suggestions of applied artists and points to the development of Soviet design in the next decade.

The third part, where Ladur had a special competence, was the design of festivities, which would include not only decoration of streets and design of the processions or other activities, but also design, production and selling of gifts – "objects of very high quality." Finally, the fourth part called for the promotion of handicrafts and folk art, which, as Ladur insisted, cannot be rejected and "pushed off the historical arena," but, on the contrary, should be promoted.¹³²

This daring project is indicative of the progress that began in Soviet management of material culture after 1957. Five years later, *DI SSSR* thus evaluated this moment:

That time the fundamental transformations which were unfolding in Soviet architecture started affecting the sphere of decorative art. They consisted not only of the liquidation of excesses: that was the struggle for the wide implementation of

¹³² TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, ll. 14-18.

industrial methods of building, the struggle against the discrimination between unique, lavishly decorated edifices and “all the rest,” that satisfies the utilitarian but not aesthetic needs of a human being. In short, that was the struggle for overcoming the gap between architecture “as art” and [real] life. Similar tasks were proclaimed in the sphere of decorative art. To break the old borders of applied art, to spread the sphere of applied art onto all the objects of labor and everyday life (*byt*) – such a statement was seen as the only correct one that time.¹³³

From a marginal activity, applied art turned into the vehicle of cultural, social and even political transformations, and thus into an object of wide professional interest. From 1957 it was shown at art exhibitions along with painting, easel graphic art and sculpture. The first of such exhibitions, which included applied art, was the All-Union Art Exhibition dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution. Reviewing this exhibition in *DI SSSR*, Saltykov complained that these items are mostly unsuitable for mass production. The majority, he claimed, are “not industrial in their form and technology.”¹³⁴ Whereas for a fine artist the exhibition is the end point of work, for an applied artist it is only the beginning; the latter must learn how to hear and understand an industrial worker. Here Saltykov tacitly revived the rhetoric of the productivists¹³⁵ and describes the objective of an industrial designer. However, unlike the productivists, Saltykov found an artistic image a necessary element of a mass produced object, as it made the commodity human-oriented.¹³⁶

This was the key problem for applied artists of the late 1950s: combining of an original artistic image with the mass character of production. *DI SSSR* devoted many pages to the discussion of this difficult task. To summarize, it was argued that the solution of the problem lay within the inherent qualities of materials, including new ones, such as plastics.

¹³³ “Na pervom vsesoiuznom soveshchanii rabotnikov promyshlennogo iskusstva,” *DI SSSR* 9 (September 1964): 1.

¹³⁴ Saltykov, “Massovost’ i unikalnost’,” *DI SSSR* 3 (March 1958): 1-5.

¹³⁵ Cf., for example: Osip Brik, “Ot kartiny k shtsu,” *LEF* 6 (1924): 27-30.

¹³⁶ Saltykov, “Massovost’ i unikalnost’.”

The attention to materials and proper treatment of them, it was believed, renders ornamentation unnecessary, while moreover, modern technology gives the artist wide opportunities for creativity.¹³⁷ By the end of the 1950s, enthusiasm about rational forms became widespread, and it was supported and even boosted by *DI SSSR*. As art critic Boris Shragin would explain a decade earlier, the journal's discussion of that time suffered from utopianism and naïve belief in the power of technology, because that was the stage of restoring the "lost ABCs of decorative-applied literacy"; presumably, the author meant that this "literacy" was lost during Stalin's art dictatorship.¹³⁸ Moscow and Leningrad applied artists traveled to the countries of Eastern bloc, first of all East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland, for studying their more advanced methods of industrial design and design education.¹³⁹ However, in reality, the fruits of their efforts still rarely went beyond discourse and exhibitions of innovative commodities.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, local industrial enterprises – factories, trusts, district plants, and small producer's *artels* – kept producing commodities of low quality and, according to critics, bad taste, so that the stores were flooded with them.¹⁴¹ Consequently, central control over commodity production was badly needed – and this was understood also on the Party and governmental level.

Already the XX Party Congress issued directives to "broaden the assortment and improve the quality of consumer products," and to "organize production of new kinds of consumer products and objects of cultural-domestic purpose [*predmetov kul'turno-*

¹³⁷ Boris Smirnov, "Khudozhestvennyi oblik veshchi i sposob ee izgotovleniia," *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 19-20.

¹³⁸ Shragin, "Za desiat' let": 39-40.

¹³⁹ RGALI f. 2460, op. 1, d. 188; RGALI f. 2460, op. 2, d. 220.

¹⁴⁰ Saltykov, "Massovost' i unikalnost'"; RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, ll. 52-56; RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2554.

¹⁴¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 517

bytovogo naznacheniiia].”¹⁴² Three years later, in January-February 1959, the XXI Party Congress approved the Seventh Five-Year Plan, which included the tasks of increasing the production of domestic goods and mechanizing domestic appliances and, in general, raising the life standard of the population.¹⁴³ This new task already required the work of industrial designers, not traditionally-thinking applied artists.¹⁴⁴ As recent scholarship demonstrated, mass production of high-quality commodities, including household appliances, was the Soviet Union’s strong weapon in the Cold War. It promised to generate what political scientist Joseph Nye termed “soft power” – values, belief systems and moral authority.¹⁴⁵ Aspiring for soft power was, obviously, a driving force for signing the Soviet-American Cultural Agreement on January 28, 1958. In this context, the American National Exhibition, opened in Moscow in the midsummer of 1959, appears as a clever strategic move. It has been described in detail by several historians, with emphasis to the famous “Kitchen Debate” between Khrushchev and the U.S. Vice-President Richard Nixon, which made obvious the significance of domestic consumption as a factor of political power.¹⁴⁶ Greg Castillo suggests that Khrushchev wisely used the American exhibition as a “wake-up call” for disorganized Soviet manufacturers.¹⁴⁷ Agreeing with this explanation, I add that it reinforced the desperate wake-up calls from applied artists like Saltykov: the calls to create feasible designs, not for exhibitions, but for people’s homes.

¹⁴² TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 389, ll. 35-36.

¹⁴³ *Vneocherednoi XXI S'ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza: 27 Ianvaria-5 Fevralia 1956 Goda. Stenograficheskii Otchet* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1959).

¹⁴⁴ Castillo, *Cold War at the Home Front*, 168.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

¹⁴⁶ Castillo, *Cold War at the Home Front*, pp. 148-170; Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Iron Curtain: Propaganda, culture and the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996): 151-215; Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika*, 9, No. 4 (2008): 855-903.

¹⁴⁷ Castillo, *Cold War at the Home Front*, 163.

Domestic exhibitions of consumer goods, on their part, aimed at educating popular taste in a “proper” modern way. Susan E. Reid stresses these exhibitions’ dual function: disseminating expert advice - through display, - and monitoring consumer opinion – through visitors’ books. This had been characteristic for Soviet community of applied artists from the beginning of the 1950s: an intertwined didacticism and praise of peoples “inherent sense of beauty.”¹⁴⁸ The biggest and most ambitious of such exhibitions was “Art into Life” (*Iskusstvo v byt*”), organized in the spring of 1961 in the Moscow Central Exhibition Hall “Manège.” It was conceived as a showcase for designs of proper modern interiors, suitable for happy new settlers in small but separate apartments.¹⁴⁹ It was planned for 1960, yet it took about a year more to handle numerous questions of coordination, production of exhibits and payments for all participating artists.¹⁵⁰ The resulting exhibition demonstrated the range of commodities – glassware, ceramics, furniture, lamps – arranged in model interiors. Simple geometric forms, open bright colors and subtle treatment of folk traditions were predominant. Perhaps, the most emphasized feature was mobility – transformable and movable furniture allowed functionally rearranging one room in several ways.¹⁵¹ “Art into Life” enjoyed popularity (even though it was attended predominantly by Muscovites)¹⁵² and responses, both positive and critical. The latter were related to visitor’s perception of some items as not convenient enough, not suitable for communal flats where most of Moscow population still lived, or simply not available on sale.¹⁵³ Clearly, by 1961,

¹⁴⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, l. 72-89.

¹⁴⁹ Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home,” *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 47, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2006): 254-255.

¹⁵⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78 op. 1. d. 440, l. 4.

¹⁵¹ Sergei Gurov, “Dlia vashego doma” (Central Red Banner Studio of Documentary Films, 1962), RGAKFD, ed. khr. 18199.

¹⁵² Reid, “Khrushchev Modern,” 265.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 254-255, 264.

consumer demand had been formed, and a professional design institution was necessary to establish.

As we have seen, this idea was advanced and discussed by applied artists throughout the 1950s. With the opening of the new decade, Soviet design discourse was enriched by a new – or, more precisely, rehabilitated from the 1920s – topic: aesthetics of the machine. In March 1961, Hungarian émigré critic Ivan Matsa (Mácsa János), who in the 1920s had been active in Central European leftist circles, asked in *DI SSSR*: “Can the machine be a work of art?”¹⁵⁴ This question provoked a big discussion on the journal’s pages, and most of the participants demonstrated, more or less, deference to and an enthusiastic attitude for technics.¹⁵⁵ In June of the same year Karl Kantor, the propagator of industrial aesthetics from the journal’s beginning, questioned the established art taxonomy with the article “Where is the border of applied art?”¹⁵⁶ For him, this border was not the machine, because, as a part of a Soviet person’s working environment, the machine should bear artistic qualities in order to humanize labour, to raise it to the level of creativity. Neither was this border the non-figurative character of an object. As Kantor believed, the emotional impact of an object is not necessary related to its figurative content, as is clear in music and architecture. Therefore, the critic suggested, applied art embraced the whole totality of objects, which a person deals with on a daily basis, and is very distinct from fine art in its principles. This understanding of “applied art” is distanced from the traditional one and close to the definition of industrial design. With such discussions, the journal’s profile shifted from considering folk crafts and decoration methods in relation to mass production,

¹⁵⁴ Ivan Matsa, “Mozhet li mashina byt’ proizvedeniem iskusstva?” *DI SSSR* 3 (March 1961):14-16.

¹⁵⁵ For example: A. Gorpenko, “Iskusstvo i tekhnika,” *DI SSSR* 4, 1961: 20-22; Boris Shragin, “Protiv privyshnykh predstavlenii,” *DI SSSR* 5 (May 1961): 26-28.

¹⁵⁶ Karl Kantor, “Gde zhe granitsa prikladnogo iskusstva?” *DI SSSR* 6 (June 1961): 21-23.

to propagating terse machine aesthetics and rationally calculated comfort. Thus, a distinct, “secessionist” branch ripened within Soviet art theory. It dealt with the aesthetics of machines and machine-made goods and was indifferent to problems of ornament, including abstract decoration.

Around 1962, as design critic Leonid Nevler explained it slightly later, there started “a very different movement”: trade workers and factory managers finally realized the potential benefits of industrial design. Those trade organizations, which provided commodities for export, showed interest in the commodity culture in West Europe, especially Britain. At the same time, factory managers were interested in increasing labor efficiency.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the above mentioned Iurii Soloviev, Head of the Architecture and Art Bureau, worked hard on preparing the basis for a central design institution. His aim was to achieve recognition and nationwide use of the methods he practiced in his Bureau. In the beginning of 1961, on the wake of Soviet-British exchange of Trade Fairs (where capital and, to a lesser extent, consumer goods were showcased), Soloviev travelled to England for learning design ideas and practical approaches to industrial design.¹⁵⁸ Upon his return, he managed to convince the stubborn Soviet authorities that industrial design was worthy of patronizing as “a powerful tool to improve the standard of living without substantial investment,” stressing its utilitarian usefulness.¹⁵⁹ Already in autumn 1961, his

¹⁵⁷ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2192, l. 10.

¹⁵⁸ British Trade Fair, jointly sponsored by the Association of British Chambers of Commerce and the All-Union Chamber of Commerce of the USSR, and organized by Industrial Trade Fairs Ltd, was opened in May 1961 in Sokol’niki Park in Moscow, where the American National Exhibition had been held in 1959. Soviet Trade and Industrial Exhibition was held in Earl Court in London on July 7-29, 1961. “Selling to Russia,” *Design* 145 (January 1961): 67; “USSR at Earl Court,” *Design* 154 (October 1961): 42-49.

¹⁵⁹ Azrikan, “VNIITE,” p. 48. Because of his power to influence the authorities, and his privileged social position, Soloviev is a controversial figure in the history of Soviet industrial design. Both experienced and young designers still express this ambiguity, revealing the desire to dissociate the activities of designers from power games (See the comments on the review of Soloviev’s 2004 autobiography: <http://kak.ru/columns/designet/a1517/>) Nonetheless, his outstanding role in developing Soviet industrial

position of the forthcoming institution for design coordination was officially approved.¹⁶⁰ Thus, by 1962, the interests of industry-oriented applied artists, engineers, factory managers and trade workers met and produced the basis for institutionalization of industrial design – despite the fact that the political climate still did not allow them to use this foreign term.

1.4. VNIITE and the Formation of the Soviet System of Design (1962-1968)

On April 28, 1962, the USSR Council of Ministers issued the Decree No. 394, “On perfection of the products of machine-building industry and commodities of everyday purpose by the means of implementing methods of artistic engineering.”¹⁶¹ It was prepared by the State Committee on Science and Technology and formulated mostly by Iurii Soloviev.¹⁶² First and foremost, the decree sanctioned the opening of the All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE) in Moscow, subordinated to the State Committee of the Soviet Union. The role of VNIITE was to oversee and control all design production in the USSR. Quite expectedly, Soloviev became the new institute’s director.¹⁶³ Thus the Decree fulfilled the lasting dream of applied artists. As long-time VNIITE employer Dmitrii Azrikan explains it, the first VNIITE team “was recruited among engineers, representatives of applied arts, art researchers, critics, historians, experts in labor theory, psychologists, philosophers, architects, graphics, model-makers and other design enthusiasts and fans.”¹⁶⁴ The organizational structure of VNIITE was under development

design is undeniable. He appeared as the agent of institutional change at the time when Soviet art theory was ready to embrace industrial aesthetics.

¹⁶⁰ “USSR at Earl Court,” 49.

¹⁶¹ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171. l. 3.

¹⁶² Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 229.

¹⁶³ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, l. 15-16.

¹⁶⁴ Azrikan, VNIITE, 50.

throughout the whole decade. To summarise, all its units constituted four major clusters: theoretical, design proper (subdivided into sections of industrial, consumer and public environment design), experimental (preparing technical documentation and prototypes) and the cluster which combined and supported all this activity.¹⁶⁵

By the end of the 1960s, there were altogether fourteen VNIITE departments, such as design theory and history, design promotion, ergonomics, materials, color and finish, transportation design, consumer product design, research and development, etc. – altogether about 500 employees. The VNIITE publishing house was established in 1964 for supplying all Soviet designers “with design literature, periodicals, VNIITE transactions, brochures, catalogs, recommendations, methodologies, guidelines, guidebooks, dictionaries, state decrees and laws related to the field, and many other things.”¹⁶⁶ The Department of Information, staffed with over thirty employees, studied and interpreted new professional sources (books, magazines, catalogues, slides, videos, patents, etc)¹⁶⁷ from different countries. The staff included interpreters from major languages for providing translation. Regarding patents, there were many cases of very close adaptation of foreign models which can be considered plagiarism, and is described by some today’s Russian designers as a shameful experience.¹⁶⁸ This problem was recognized by Soviet design critics as early as in 1958: Soviet “industrial artists” were suspected of plagiarizing the car designs seen in the Russian-language illustrated journal *Amerika*.¹⁶⁹ Plagiarism was

¹⁶⁵ Azrikan, VNIITE, 50.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶⁸ For example, see the discussion “Dizain, kotorogo ne bylo” from 13.03.2011, published on 12.04.11 on <http://gogol.tv/video/122> ; accessed on 10.03.2013.

¹⁶⁹ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, l. 24. This journal was issued by the U. S. State Department in 1945-52 and by USIA in 1956-1995, for distribution in the Soviet Union as a part of cultural exchanges. Chris Rasmussen, “The Limits of *Amerika*: A Case Study of an official Cold War Cultural Exchange,” Paper presented at the

definitely a problematic issue for VNIITE throughout its existence until 1991, and it is not clear whether designers themselves perceived it as such, or rather as creative re-interpretation. This certainly important legal and ethical question is, however, beyond the focus of this dissertation.

The Decree No. 394 responded to another desperate artists' request, sanctioning a fundamental regulation: all industrial companies had to officially set the position for "artist-engineers" (*khudozhniki-konstruktory*), that is, industrial designers. Design management was to be organized by the regional principle, in accordance with Khrushchev's reform of governance, initiated in 1957. Instead of centralized control of the economy through branch ministries, Khrushchev introduced regional economic councils – *sovnarkhozy*.¹⁷⁰ Decentralization of the economic system required strong regional centers for coordinating research in industrial design. Therefore, together with VNIITE, the Decree No. 394 authorized the establishment of "special artistic-engineering bureaus" (*spetsial'nye khudozhestvenno-konstruktorskie biuro*, SKhKB) under the seven biggest *sovnarkhozy* of the USSR: those in Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Kiev, Riga, Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi.¹⁷¹ This measure was perceived as "the turning point in the solution of the problem of connecting art with production," and the SKhKBs as "essentially a new effective, flexible and promising form of artists' relation to production."¹⁷² The SKhKBs were to be cost-accounting (*khozraschetnye*) organizations, working on contracts with industry, engineering enterprises and research institutions. These new bodies were assigned multiple

international conference "East-West Cultural Exchanges and the Cold War" at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, on 14-16 June 2012.

¹⁷⁰ On *sovnarkhozy* see Graeme Gill, "Khrushchev and Systemic Development" in McCauley (ed), *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism* (London: McMillan Press, 1987) 30-45.

¹⁷¹ RGALI f. 2802 op. 2 d. 2154, l. 16; V. Sisnev, "Tekhnicheskuiu estetiku – na sluzhbu proizvodstvu," *Nauchno-Tekhnicheskoe Obshchestvo SSSR* 6 (1965): 17-23.

¹⁷² RGALI f. 2802 op. 2 d. 2154, l. 17.

tasks: to design all industrial products of the corresponding *sovnarkhozy*, including industrial equipment and transportation; to propose the withdrawal of outdated and poor quality models from production, and also to summarize and propagate best examples of Soviet and foreign design. Another important function of the SKhKBs, perhaps even the most important, was the securing of the legal status of the artists in industry. One of the most popular complaints of applied artists throughout the 1950s had been the absence of the official position of artist at many factories, so that artists had to register as engineers, technicians, even accountants, which limited their rights and opportunities. Now the previously marginalized “applied artists” were to turn into fully respected industrial designers. The SKhKBs were conceived as guarantees of the collective work of designers of different profiles.¹⁷³

The organization of SKhKBs was taking place slowly, especially beyond Moscow and Leningrad, yet there was certain progress and optimism. At the beginning of 1964, the leadership of the USSR Union of Artists stated: “Today the main focus of artistic creativity in industry is shifting from the enterprises to the [special art-industrial] bureaus.”¹⁷⁴ The stress on scientific calculation and functionality was characteristic for VNIITE, which guided all SKhKBs in terms of methodology and hence exerted the strongest impact. The regional Unions of Artists were responsible for determining artistic aspects of the bureaus’ work. Thus, we see certain dualism in Soviet industrial design services: they had to combine guidelines from engineers, represented by Soloviev’s team, on the one hand, and from the Union of Artists, on the other hand. This dualism was reflected even in the name of the expert body of SKhKBs: “artistic-technical councils” (“*khudozhestvenno-*

¹⁷³ RGALI f. 2802 op. 2 d. 2154, l. 17.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

tekhnicheskie sovery”). They were under control of VNIITE and, on the regional level, of the inter-branch artistic-technical sections of the *sovnarkhozy*’s technical-economic councils. Heads of the SKhKBs’ laboratories, highly qualified designers,¹⁷⁵ architects, engineers and art critics (as well as the SKhKBs’ Party and trade union representatives) made up the councils’ staff. Meeting at least monthly, the artistic-technical councils surveyed, evaluated and selected designs and prototypes, presented by the SKhKBs and enterprises of machinery construction, heavy engineering, electrical engineering, woodworking and light industry; then handed the approved items over to industry or to further consideration by the regional intra-branch artistic-technical sections. These councils were expected to “provide scientific approach and objectivity in aesthetic evaluation of industrial products, design projects and research.”¹⁷⁶

Departments of “artistic engineering” were established in art and technical schools, often on the basis of already existing units. Thus, at LVKhPU the Department of Industrial Art (*kafedra promyshlennogo iskusstva*) was created in 1963 out of the section of artistic metalware, which had been a part of the Department of Sculpture. Iosif Vaks became its head.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, at MVKhPU, the Department of Artistic Engineering (*kafedra khudozhestvennogo konstruirovaniia*) was established within the Department of Metalware on May 27, 1964. It was headed by Aleksandr Korotkevich.¹⁷⁸ These departments became

¹⁷⁵ I use the term “designers” for clarity, but the primary sources use the term “artists” or “artists in industry.” In the 1960s, the terms “design” and “industrial design” were known by Soviet experts and even, with reservations, used in professional literature, but it was unacceptable in the official use, clearly, by ideological reasons.

¹⁷⁶ RGALI f. 2802 op. 2 d. 2154, l. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Mirzoian and Helmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-peterburgskaia shkola dizaina*, 238.

¹⁷⁸ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, l. 45. The rector of MVKhPU at that time was Zakhar Bykov, a graduate of Vkhutemas, where among his professors were famous constructivists Alexandr Rodchenko, and Liubov’ Popova. Bykov was usually present at the defenses of diploma projects at the department of artistic engineering, http://archi.ru/events/extra/event_current.html?eid=4025 accessed 10.03.2013; RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 837, 459a.

models for educational institutions throughout the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁹ The LKhPU Department of Industrial Art and personally Iosif Vaks took active part in organizing the SKhKB of the Leningrad *sovnarkhoz*. The newly created departments of “industrial art” and “artistic engineering” in Soviet educational institutions were the primary providers of new personnel to the SKhKB’s and design positions in industry.

A “scientific approach” was the cornerstone of VNIITE design policy. Evidently, it was prompted by modernization drive and the tendency to dissociate design from the traditionally understood applied art. This approach also determined the profile of the bulletin *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika*, issued by VNIITE Publishing House since January 1964. Conceived as *the* design journal of the USSR, *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* put emphasis on scientific methodology and indifference to applied art and decoration. It published articles from Western design journals, translated and slightly modified by VNIITE members, and included summaries in English in every issue. The chief editor was, of course, Iurii Soloviev. In the opening article of the very first issue, he explained the meaning of the journal title: technical aesthetics is a science, but a very young one, and therefore it does not yet have a fixed definition. Generally, technical aesthetics “is a science of the principles of artistic creativity in the sphere of technics, which it reveals, studying interconnection between a person and the material objects of her creation.”¹⁸⁰ Soloviev compared it with other new sciences, such as biochemistry and astronautics, in terms of its interdisciplinary character. As he went on to explain, technical aesthetics analyses “numerous sociological, economic, technical, psychological, physiological, hygienic and aesthetic factors,” “elaborates complex tasks” and, as an outcome, “discovers principles on whose basis it

¹⁷⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 636.

¹⁸⁰ Iurii Soloviev, “O tekhnicheskoi estetike,” *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* 1 (1964), 1.

formulates the requirements to the environment and the world of objects.”¹⁸¹ It is noteworthy that Soloviev listed aesthetic factors last, as if the artistic part of technical aesthetics’ genealogy was purposefully downplayed for rendering it a more “serious” discipline, based on precise calculations. Throughout the 1960s, VNIITE projects were marked by a penchant for tables, graphs and schemes.¹⁸² Ergonomics was enthusiastically embraced as a universal means of achieving comfortable environment.¹⁸³

On May 25, 1964, VNIITE opened the First All-Union Meeting of the Workers of Industrial Art in Tbilisi (thus Moscow was not always the center of design events). It gathered delegations of designers from all over the USSR and from the COMECON members. The problems discussed were economic development, design personnel training, coordination of research, and development of comprehensive design terminology – which, as we have seen, was a lack in Soviet design discourse – and others. The meeting presented the operational definition of industrial design, though termed there “artistic engineering”: “... the method of making a project of industrial item. This method is based on the principles of *collective creativity of different specialists* (representatives of different professions, including psychologists, artists, not to mention technicians). *Only such a method of designing [proektirovaniie] provides the complex quality of the product* (highlighted in the original).”¹⁸⁴ This definition corresponded to the global task of

¹⁸¹ Soloviev, “O tekhnicheskoi estetike,” 1.

¹⁸² For example: Russian State archive of Scientific-Technical Documentation (RGANTD), f. 281 “VNIITE”, op. 1-1, d. 209 “Explanation note to the sketch project of the new composition and form of the automobile-taxi for giving technical commission to the factory-producer,” 1967; Central State archive of Scientific-Technical Documentation in St. Petersburg (TsGANTD SPb), f. 146 (“Leningrad filial of VNIITE”), op. 2-1, d. 13 “Report of Research topic No. 301 ‘Elaboration of methodology (expertise) and conducting of the expertise of industrially produced object according to requirements of design,” part 4, 1965.

¹⁸³ RGANTD, f. 281, op. 1-1, d. 198. Section of ergonomics. “On anthropometric factors in industrial production”; S. Gellershtein, “Ergonomika – soiuznik khudozhnika-konstruktora,” *Tekhnicheskaya Estetika* 2 (February 1964), 17-18.

¹⁸⁴ “Na pervom vsesoiuznom soveshchanii rabotnikov promyshlennogo iskusstva,” 1.

improving quality of commodities, which required teamwork and, in the conditions of a planned economy, rigid control over all design services. As *Technicheskaiia Estetika* propagated it during the decade, Soviet, and by extension, socialist, design was to be based on technical laws and rational calculations and improving the deep structure of an object in terms of functionality, ergonomic parameters, convenience of exploitation, maintenance and repair.

VNIITE's scientific approach met certain criticism and resistance from the USSR Union of Artists. "Artistic creativity" was for the Union of Artists a crucial element of industrial design, and the "artistic control" over the SKhKBs' work was seen as a means to avoid the "infantile disorder of obsession with science" ("*detskaia bolezn' nauchnosti*"). At the beginning of 1964, a representative of the Union of Artists complained in his report that the "artistic factor" is underestimated in almost all SKhKBs. "The necessity to strongly coordinate projects with functional tasks and with technological and economic requirements should not lead to the loss of aesthetic merits or to a superficial "functionalist" stylization."¹⁸⁵ It was not the attention to function that was criticized, but the imbalance in favor of function, which could become a fetish and lead to a superficial styling – precisely what the U. S. design was frequently blamed for by Soviet designers. By the same token, narrowing of design tasks was also problematized by the designers affiliated with the Union of Artists, such as the tendency to limit "artistic engineering" only by the products of machinery, noticed in 1964. Ideally, Soviet design was to be a complex activity, not only based on teamwork, but also embracing all industrial products: transportation, machine-tools, domestic appliances, furniture, clothes, etc.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ RGALI, f. 2802, op. 2, d. 2154, l. 18.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., ll. 30-33.

From 1965, an alarm about excessive rationalism of Soviet design came from the *DI SSSR*. In January 1965 the journal's chief editor Mikhail Ladur called in his editorial for returning poetry to industrial design that became too much obsessed with rationality and function.¹⁸⁷ This, he argued, resulted in a grim urbanism of new city districts like Moscow's "New Cheremushki." Later Ladur added that unified houses, flats and commodities implied unified consumers and thus jeopardized diversity, a fundamental need of humanity.¹⁸⁸ VNIITE initiated research of consumer demand in 1964,¹⁸⁹ but it had a little influence upon design projects. Designing for particular groups according to age, sex, occupation, education level, residence, etc. did not develop until the 1970s.¹⁹⁰ In the second half of the 1960s, recognizing the diversity of the Soviet consumer meant diversifying the assortment of commodities through bringing artistic intuition back into design process. A good designer had to rely upon his or her intuitive artistic skills in order to "perceive the spiritual constitution of the person-consumer and give it appropriate expression."¹⁹¹ In 1966, Ladur called for creating more "degrees of freedom" for consumer choice, for confidence in the consumer's ability to use this freedom for revealing their individuality.¹⁹² From 1965, in contrast to *Tekhnicheskaya Estetika*, *DI SSSR* broadened its thematic scope, paying greater attention diverse folk crafts of different world regions, exhibition design and the world-wide development of monumental art, especially Mexican muralism. Notably, in the second half of the 1960s, in the context of extended Soviet internationalism, Soviet monumental

¹⁸⁷ Mikhail Ladur, "Zametki redaktora," *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1965), 1.

¹⁸⁸ Mikhail Ladur, "Zametki redaktora," *DI SSSR* 8 (August 1965), 1.

¹⁸⁹ Study of consumer demand was, to a limited extent, practiced by shop and trade organization in the Soviet Union already in 1930s (See Randall, Amy. *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s*. Basingstoke-New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1930). In 1950s it attracted more attention and interest as a tool of planning (See Reid, Khrushchev Modern, pp. 49-50).

¹⁹⁰ Kos'kov, *Predmetoe tvorchestvo*, 65-77.

¹⁹¹ Shragin, "Za desiat' let," 44.

¹⁹² Mikhail Ladur, "Redaktsionnye zametki," *DI SSSR* 11 (November 1966), 1.

artists, together with Soviet architects, became actively involved in the work on public buildings in Guinea and Algeria, sometimes transferring there the ideas inspired by the Mexican examples.¹⁹³ Thus Soviet Union came to play an important role in the circulation of decorative art trends within the Third World – this topic deserves a special research.¹⁹⁴

Meanwhile, the system of Soviet industrial design went through transformations and “corrections” during the second half of the 1960s. On May 31, 1965, The USSR Academy of Arts and the Union of Artists submitted to the CPSU Central Committee a proposal for new regulations of design services. Now the position of designer in industry was described with greater detail. To summarize, depending on the character of production and amount of work, enterprises and organizations introduced different forms of design service: design laboratories, artistic sections, artistic groups, and the positions of senior artists, chief artists and rank-and-file artists.¹⁹⁵ The Soviet design system was further restructured after the abolition of *sovnarkhozy* in October 1965, in the framework of the Party’s new economic course after Khrushchev’s dismissal. Regional SKhKBs were transferred under the control of the USSR Ministry of Machine Construction. In March 1966 they were transformed into VNIITE subsidiaries and subordinated to the State Committee of Science and Technology.¹⁹⁶ By this time, VNIITE had ten regional branches in the USSR: in Leningrad, Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), Khabarovsk, Kiev, Kharkov,

¹⁹³ Irina Azizian, “Stenopis’i prostranstvo,” *DI SSSR* 6 (June 1967): 2-7. On the cultural dimension of Soviet expanding internationalism under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, in particular Soviet interest to Latin American architecture, see Tobias Rupprecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁹⁴ The work of architects of socialist countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia has been recently discussed in the special journal issue: “Socialist Networks and the Internationalization of Building Culture after 1945,” ed. by Lukasz Stanek, *ABE Journal* 6 (2014).

¹⁹⁵ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, ll. 15-16

¹⁹⁶ Kos’kov, *Predmetoe tvorchestvo*, 11.

Minsk, Vilnius, Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku.¹⁹⁷ Thus, only three VNIITE branches, including the Head institution, were located within Soviet Russia: the “second capital” with its strong traditions of both art and engineering;¹⁹⁸ the one responsible for designing all manufactured products in the highly industrialized regions the Urals and Siberia; and the one providing design services in the Far East, including machine construction and commercial fishing industry.¹⁹⁹ At the same time, a network of SKhKB was organized in attachment to the fields of industry and subordinated to respective ministries.²⁰⁰ As it will be discussed in some detail in Chapters 3 and 4, VNIITE systems extensively developed methodologies for design and expert evaluations of design products, thus performing not only consulting, but also expert and controlling functions in soviet industry. When in 1967 the USSR Soviet of Ministers introduced State Quality Mark for certifying best quality products and thus stimulating the effectiveness of Soviet production system, VNIITE took the decisive role in the awarding process.²⁰¹

The 1960s was a time of active interaction between Soviet industrial designers and their colleagues from both socialist and capitalist parts of Europe, and the U.S. From its creation, *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* regularly published surveys of industrial design institutions and practices in European countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the spring of 1964, VNIITE invited the British Council of Industrial Design (CoID) and the Central Office of Information to bring the exhibition of British Industrial Design to Moscow. It was conceived as “an exhibition of case histories, of methods and techniques

¹⁹⁷ Azrikan, *VNIITE*, 60-61.

¹⁹⁸ Kos'kov, *Predmetoe tvorchestvo*, 5-10.

¹⁹⁹ Azrikan, *VNIITE*, 60-61.

²⁰⁰ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 231.

²⁰¹ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 233.

rather than of goods,”²⁰² which was of primary importance for Soviet industrial design at the first stage of its post-war incarnation. The CoID Head, Sir Paul Reilly, reacted positively: “This didactic character and these educational activities were specifically requested by the Russian CoID, and willingly agreed by the British one, not only in the long term interests of peace and understanding, but in order to hasten natural process of equalization, since design, like water, will eventually find its own level and a two-way traffic of ideas will develop.”²⁰³ While VNIITE and CoID were co-organizing the exhibition, *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* familiarized its readers with the history and contemporary activity of CoID.²⁰⁴ The exhibition “The Role of Industrial Designer in British Industry” was open in Moscow from August 20 to September 20, 1964. It was oriented not toward consumers, but toward designers and design teachers, and was accompanied by a symposium, consisting of a number of seminars. Soviet designers attended the symposium with interest, but its presentations and discussions revealed significant differences in Soviet and British visions of industrial design and material environment in general. The Soviet group was eager to learn from Britain and, evidently, recognized its lag behind.²⁰⁵ Yet *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* published criticism of the British approach by a prominent design critic Larisa Zhadova; her main point was the British “bourgeois attitude” to design as the form of setting the rule of commodities, as opposed to Soviet design, ultimately aiming at spiritual transformation of the Soviet person through

²⁰² Paul Reilly, “Anglo-Russian Exchanges,” *Design* 7 (July 1964): 23.

²⁰³ Reilly, “Anglo-Russian Exchanges.”

²⁰⁴ “Britanskii Sovet to tekhnicheskoi estetike,” *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* 6 (June 1964), 23.

²⁰⁵ Sisnev, “Tekhnicheskuiu estetiku – na sluzhbu proizvodstvu,” 17.

the harmony of things. Nonetheless, Zhadova concluded with the call for effective learning from the best foreign experience in design.²⁰⁶

VNIITE worked hard on integrating the international design community and to catch up with Western colleagues. In 1965 VNIITE became a member of International Council of Societies of Industrial Design.²⁰⁷ In February 1967, VNIITE was involved in another major foreign design exhibition. As a part of the U.S. – USSR cultural dialogue, the USIA (the U. S. Information Agency) together with prominent American industrial designers sent to the USSR an exhibition “Industrial design USA” (In translation it appeared as “Industrial Aesthetics of the USA”).²⁰⁸ The American “impresario of modernism”²⁰⁹ George Nelson took the leading organizational role. The exhibition was supposed to raise a question: “when, in the development of a country, does a modern profession like industrial design become necessary and feasible?”²¹⁰ Before the exhibition opened in Moscow in February 25, James R. Mellow, the chief editor of the U.S. journal *Industrial Design*, briefly told to its readers about Soviet Russia’s short design flourishing in the 1920s and mentioned such names as “Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, El Lissitsky, Kandinsky,” who “rose to positions of prominence, became effective forces in the technical institutes and produced some of the most daringly modern product, graphic and architectural designs.”²¹¹ Remarkably, Soviet Russia (and the Soviet Union at large) was here presented not as a backward country to be educated, but as a partner with certain experience in design, which now should be reinvigorated through assistance. According to

²⁰⁶ Larisa Zhadova. “Obmen opytom,” *Tekhnicheskaya Estetika*, No. 11 (November 1964): 10-13.

²⁰⁷ Lavrentiev and Nasarov, *Russian Design*, 172.

²⁰⁸ James R. Mellow, “The Americans Are Coming,” *Industrial Design* 14, No. 1 (January-February 1967): 49.

²⁰⁹ Greg Castillo, *Cold War at the Home Front*, 39.

²¹⁰ Mellow, “The Americans Are Coming.”

²¹¹ Mellow, “The Americans Are Coming.”

Mellow's report, Nelson, though somewhat skeptical about VNIITE's current position, expected its fast professional growth: "On the time line of technological evolution, the Russians are about 30 years behind the West, but he hardly sees this as a cause for complacency: they are catching up rapidly."²¹²

The exhibition was arranged by the principle "before and after," showing old product models, such as Model T Ford, together with their model counterparts, such as the 1967 edition of Buick Riviera. The purpose was "to show the evolution, through design, of a wide variety of manufactured products, the new 'look' developed from technological advances, and the consumer influence in product design."²¹³ Mellow proudly noted that "Industrial Design USA" was different from other "cultural exchange" USIA exhibitions in the USSR, heavily charged with ideological propaganda.²¹⁴ Obviously, this exhibition, too, cannot be evaluated as completely free from propaganda, by the very fact that it presented best U.S. consumer products. Yet Soviet designers found it useful and left positive reviews in *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika*.²¹⁵ After Moscow, the exhibition was shown in Leningrad and Kiev. During the exhibition's work in Moscow, Nelson had a chance to familiarize with the work of VNIITE. He was surprised by the number of invitations he and his team had from Soviet designers to give lectures.²¹⁶ The staff of *DI SSSR* also did not miss the chance to talk to Nelson about the problems of modern design. Notably, in this conversation Nelson gave some criticism (albeit moderate) to present-day Western

²¹² James R. Mellow, "The Soft-Sell on the Cultural Exchange," *Industrial Design* 6 (November-December 1967): 95.

²¹³ Mellow, "The Soft-Sell on the Cultural Exchange."

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ V. Proshutinskii, "Promyshlennaia estetika SShA," *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* 5 (May 1967): 32; V. Aronov, "Vystavka 'Promyshlennaia estetika SShA,'" *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* 7 (June 1967): 24-25. (In this and further cases, when the first name of the author is difficult to find, I use only the initial of the first name).

²¹⁶ Mellow, "The Soft-Sell on the Cultural Exchange." (In this and further cases, when the first name of the author is difficult to find, I use only the initial of the first name).

consumerism, which should have been appealing to Soviet design critics with their ideal of overcoming commodity fetishism and creating harmonious, human-centered environment.²¹⁷

Therefore, by 1967, the system of Soviet industrial design basically took its shape, and designers of Soviet Russia engaged into a productive international dialogue, even though most innovative VNIITE designs still remained on paper.²¹⁸ At the same time, the applied artists' turn from industrial aesthetics back to decoration and folk-inspired forms affected design sphere too. On August 27, 1966, Central Educational-Experimental Studio (TsUES) was opened on the basis of the design seminar, which had been functioning for two years at the lake Senezh near Moscow. The new studio was subordinated to USSR Union of Artists.²¹⁹ It was concerned with experimental design with the emphasis on creativity, as opposed to VNIITE's orientation toward concrete tasks for industry, which was reflected in the new term "artistic projecting" (*khudozhestvennoe proektirovaniie*), also translatable as "art design." The studio's head Evgenii Rozenblium criticized a rigid division into theory and practice and argued that intuition is actually a strong instrument for elaborating design methods.²²⁰ The ambition was also to consider design in a very broad context, in its connection with various socio-cultural problems, and studied with the tools of sociology, anthropology and semiotics. The seminars, organized by TsUES in 1968, were devoted to such topics as "Semiotics of a thing [*veshch*] in different cultures"; "Relevant problems of folk art," "Contemporary Western mass art, its aims, methods,

²¹⁷ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2192.

²¹⁸ Azrikan, *VNIITE*, pp. 68-77; Author's interview with Mikhail Alexeevich Kos'kov, recorded in St. Petersburg 16. 04. 2011.

²¹⁹ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 1, dd. 2197, 2209.

²²⁰ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, l. 38-42.

means of problem-solving,” or “Anthropological method in contemporary science, creativity in science.”²²¹ The creation of TsUES can be considered a symptom of what designer Vladimir Paperny called “The Great Disappointment in Functionalism” of the late 1960s. According to him, this disappointment affected also VNIITE employees.²²² Yet they still had to think about ultimate results of their work, depending on the current tasks of industry. TsUES members, on their part, considered the designer project not as the first stage of work, but a self-sufficient artistic genre, a “cultural model,” aimed at influencing the thinking and world perception of both designers and consumers.²²³ They spent much time doing painterly exercises, experimenting with forms and colors.²²⁴ However, some of their projects, related to urban planning and beautification, were realized.²²⁵

To summarize this part of the chapter, the end of the 1960s is marked by two design trends in Soviet Russia: one was oriented toward industry, represented by VNIITE and its subsidiaries; another was close to art, represented by the TsUES, and the Artists’s Unions of the USSR and the RSFSR. This division is illustrated by the acceptance of the USSR Union of Artists as a member of ICSID in November 1971.²²⁶ However, it was not a clear bifurcation: many prominent designers and theorists worked both in Senezh Studio and in the VNIITE structure. Nonetheless, as designer Viacheslav Glazychev recalled, the existence of two important and different design organizations in Moscow provided the

²²¹ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, l. 38-42.

²²² Vladimir Paperny, “Kak ia byl dizainerom,” *Iunost’* 1 (January 1984): 103.

²²³ Ibid., 101.

²²⁴ Author’s interview with Mikhail Alexeevich Kos’kov.

²²⁵ Viacheslav Glazychev. “Opyt senezhskoi studii” [“The Experience of Senezh Studio”], http://www.glazychev.ru/publications/articles/2004-03-11_opyt_senezh_studii.htm#1 accessed 27.10.2013; Tom Cubbin. “Artistic Design on the Edge of Utopia: Senezh Studio 1964-1974,” unpublished paper presented at the conference: *Modernity, Socialism and the Visual Arts*, Akademie der Künste Berlin and MS Greta van Holland, 6-11 October 2013.

²²⁶ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 6. d. 1422, ll. 6-14.

atmosphere of creative competition, favorable for intensive development.²²⁷ The Senezh studio activity expanded in the 1970s, at the next stage of the development of Soviet design.

Conclusion

The period of the 1950s – 1960s can be characterized as a stage of formation of design as an officially recognized, institutionalized profession in Soviet Russia. Its beginning was engendered by engineer's intention to improve transportation and other industrial products, on the one hand, and by applied artists' growing self-consciousness and aspiration for control in art industry – mass production of objects, traditionally associated with domestic sphere, such as kitchenware and furniture. By the mid-1950s these two aspirations found state and Party support due to the unfolding housing reform, which required the efficient reconsideration of material environment. The result was, first, the opening of the forum for professional discussions of design problems; second, active exhibiting of design projects and models; and, finally, establishment of the network of industrial design institutions. The latter were open for professional growth and international contacts. In spite of the designers' and design critics' striving to harmonically unite art and engineering in their activity, there was always certain dualism in Soviet industrial design, illustrated by different agendas of VNIITE and the USSR Union of Artists. This continuing dualism can be interpreted positively as the room for a diversity of Soviet approaches to design. Looking at design discourse the 1950s and 1960s closely will shed light on this diversity.

²²⁷ Viacheslav Glazychev, "Opyt senezhskoi studii," the website of Viacheslav Leonidovich Glazychev, http://www.glazychev.ru/publications/articles/2004-03-11_opyt_senezh_studii.htm#1 accessed 27.03.2015.

Chapter II: Realism Reconsidered

In the history of art, the Stalin era in the Soviet Union is widely known as the era of socialist realism. Not even a style (its eclectic character is often emphasized)¹ but a method, after 1934 (the date of its formulation at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers) socialist realism became a ubiquitous and unavoidable requirement for the artists in all fields – including decorative arts. Despite its totalizing rhetoric, socialist realism was not something monolithic. In fact, it had different faces depending on the artist, the genre, and the medium.² It even did not preclude artistic individuality – just think of Alexander Deineka and Alexander Laktionov, painters so different yet both within the framework of socialist realism.³ Nonetheless, as regards visual arts, socialist realism had a common feature: according to the official formula, an artist was expected to portray reality “in its revolutionary development”⁴ – that is, to create an aesthetic-ideological construct by the means of depicting recognizable life forms in the desired composition.

This dictate of this artistic method did not end with Stalin’s power, but, as any historian of Russian/Soviet art knows well, lasted well until perestroika. This implies that Khrushchev’s reforms of material culture in general and applied arts in particular were also conducted under the banner of socialist realism. How, then, could socialist realism with its

¹ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

² Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³ On Deineka see Bown, op. cit; Christina Kiaer, “Was Socialist Realism Forced Labor? The Case of Alexander Deineka in the 1930s,” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, No.3 (2005): 321-345. On Laktionov see Susan E. Reid, “Modernizing Socialist Realism in the Khrushchev Thaw: The Struggle for a ‘Contemporary Style’ in Soviet art,” In Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (London: Routledge, 2006), 209-230.

⁴ From Andrei Zhdanov’s formulation at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August of 1934. “Pervyi Vsesoiuznyi S’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei. Stenograficheskii otchet,” (Moscow, 1934), 175. Quoted in: Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarnoe iskusstvo* (Moscow: Gallart, 1994), 86.

fixation upon narrative, topicality, and figurative depiction, be reconciled with what Susan E. Reid calls “Khrushchev Modern”⁵ - the move towards mass industrial production of commodities and mass consumption? I suggest that in order to update applied art (and, broadly, material culture), the concept of realism was to be updated too. It needed to be refilled with a new meaning, as distinct from the art of high Stalinism as from the art of the 19th century “critical realism” of the “wanderers” (*peredvizhniki*). This chapter looks at how this difficult task was handled by artists and critics in the 1950s and 1960s.

2.1. Compromises with Representation (first half of the 1950s)

The tapestry is truly decorative, beautiful and restrained in tender colors. At the same time, it is clear that in his work, the young artist did not proceed from decorative spots and ornamentation, but the subject matter itself thrilled him deeply, and he tried to reveal it in the clearest and artistically soundest form possible. Depicted on the tapestry is a ceremonial procession of Leningraders reporting on their triumphs, [and this is] distinctly shown to the viewer, exciting his empathy.⁶

This is the evaluation of the diploma work by a Mukhina School graduate, A. Kirillov – the pattern for the tapestry devoted to Leningrad workers – given by critic V. Kalinin in 1953. The evaluation is a part of a survey of the graduate projects by Mukhina School students, defended in summer 1953. The typewritten copy of the survey is preserved in the archive, in the file of the “decorative-applied art” section of Leningrad Department of the Russian Republic’s Union of Artists (LOSKh). Corrected in ink above the typewritten text, presumably by the author, but also possibly by a censor, the survey looks like a report to the LOSKh administration. Or perhaps it was a draft article for a local

⁵ Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 4, nos.1-2 (January-June 2006): 227-268.

⁶ V. Kalinin, “Budushchie mastera dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” 1953, TsGALI, f. op. 4, d. 533, l. 6. The article marked as “authorized typescript” (“*avtorizirovannaiia mashinopis*”) and contains later corrections in ink; I am quoting according to the original, typewritten text.

newspaper, or a wall newspaper. This document is important to consider by two reasons. First, in the official press there was hardly a serious discussion on the problems of decorative, applied, and, as it was termed, “industrial” art, until 1955. Therefore, for earlier years, archival materials are the main sources of information in this field of art. Second, Mukhina School, or Mukha, as it was (and still is) popularly known, together with Moscow “Stroganovka” (Higher School of Art and Industry, former Stroganov School of Technical Drawing), were the model schools of this kind for the whole Soviet Union.⁷ The very title of the survey, “Future masters of decorative-applied art,” indicates the important role assigned to Mukhina School by Soviet art establishment. These reasons allow me to dwell on this survey.

Thus, the student Kirillov’s tapestry depicting a group of marching Leningraders, praised by the art critic Kalinin, must have reflected certain ideas of what an appropriate decorative art should look like, generally characteristic for the time not long before Stalin’s death. In particular, the fact that this oeuvre was evaluated as excellent by the State Examination Committee points to the importance of topicality in decorative art of the early 1950s. Kalinin emphasizes that, although the color composition is of a high level, it is the topic and its potential to affect the viewer that matter the most. In their works, students of decorative and applied art were expected to render the powerful positive image of a contemporary – a type (*tip*); this was an unavoidable requirement of Stalinist artistic policy, spreading from literature to all the visual arts. The purpose was to portray the “correct type”

⁷ Resolution of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR No. 256 “On Preparing Cadres for Artistic Industry and Artistic-Trimming Works,” RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1, d. 337. Resolution of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR No. 256 “On Preparing Cadres for Artistic Industry and Artistic-Trimming Works.”

of a Soviet personality, the model for identification, while all the decorative techniques – use of light, color, material, texture – were just the means to achieve it.

Thus, the use of the stained glass in the early 1950s was explained as the way to add concrete, figurative imagery to architecture, art non-figurative by nature. At that time, Moscow Research Institute of Decorative and Applied Art elaborated new techniques of stained glass decoration, such as etching, and engraving, and producing counter-reliefs. According to Kalinin, these elaborations opened the opportunity to “render more adequately and realistically life-affirming images of our reality, first of all, images of Soviet people in the fullest of their spiritual wealth.”⁸ Consider two examples the author uses to illustrate his point:

Stained glass by the [female] student V. Statun, depicting a collective farmer girl laboring, is carried out in a gold yellow, sunny range of colors, which perfectly expresses its ideological content – free labor in our country as a source of joy and abundance. The stained glass is rich in chiaroscuro transitions without tincturing. (...)

Subtle mastery of executing various techniques is shown by [student] Galazova in her stained glass “Abundance of Ukraine,” rich and bright in color, designed for the Kharkov bus station.⁹

What is noteworthy here is not the heroic/celebrative imagery – a universal and predictable feature of late Stalinist art – but the role given to the specific, narrowly professional means in the official critique. Inherent qualities of glass are connected (or, rather, subordinated) to Soviet symbolism of cheerfulness, prosperity, and abundance. The old type of decorative art has been used in a new way: now it produces not the transcendent, supernatural imagery of saints as in gothic churches, but expressly earthly, hyper-natural portraiture of Soviet idolatry – “free labor,” “abundance,” etc. Ironically, here the

⁸ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 533, l. 4.

⁹ Ibid., l. 5.

transparency of glass should also produce an effect of a miracle – a miracle fulfilled, according to the Soviet mythology.

By the same token, students of artistic ceramics employed traditional forms for rendering distinctly Soviet content. Kalinin marks as the most important among the Mukhina School graduate works of 1953 a pair of porcelain vases with the portraits of Lenin and Stalin (co-authored by S. Bogdanova and K. Kosenkova). According to Kalinin's description, the vases' "well-composed and sublime" form refers to antique amphorae; at the same time, their bodies serve as the ground for the subtly painted portraits in the frames of "festive gold ornament" – perfectly in tune with classicistic sympathies inherent in socialist realism. As a properly "orthodox" artwork, the vases were exhibited in State Hermitage Museum.¹⁰

Evidently, framing a realistic – or, rather, idealistic – portrait with symbolically appropriate ornamentation was a tendency in the decorative art of late Stalinism. In the case just described, the ornament is classic; very often, though, it was folk, or folk-like. In the course of the post-war active revival of and research on folk arts and crafts, the two key tasks were, first, the adaptation of folk forms and motives to the contemporary urban environment, and, second, the invention of tradition in order to spread all decorative arts throughout all the Soviet republics. It is likely that, for both tasks, the introduction of figurative details, including portraiture, was seen as an effective means. For example, at the meeting of Moscow textile artists in September 1953, Natalia Kaplan (a representative of the Research Institute of Artistic Industry) spoke of modernizing rug weaving. Artists of the Institute's rug laboratory designed patterns for the weavers to fulfill, both for the regions

¹⁰ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d.533, l. 5.

with the strong tradition of rug weaving and for those regions where this tradition was interrupted or just never existed. Traditional motifs, revived or invented, were being fused with the depiction of contemporary life, often within the same artwork. As a positive example Kaplan demonstrated the rug made according to the pattern by artist Novikov, with the portrait of a Dagestani *ashik* (amateur poet-bard) Suleiman Stal'skii in the framework of traditional Dagestani ornamentation. Evidently, this was a vivid illustration of the off-quoted formula of Soviet culture: “national in form, socialist in content”:

In this rug, artist Novikov, with the help of the rug laboratory's consultants, managed to creatively interpret Dagestan's ornaments without breaking the frames of traditional Dagestani ornamentation. Artist Novikov created a new object (*veshch*), because, as you know, there had never been rugs with realistic portraits in Dagestan. (...) Moreover, the artist succeeded in... organically including the portrait into the system of surrounding ornaments. An attentive look reveals that this is a filigree, fine work, absolutely new in its detail; the artist introduced new moments, new elements into reality, [and as a result we see] not the old, but the Soviet Dagestan, and in the whole this is a perfectly Dagestani rug.¹¹

Kaplan also noted that Novikov's rug had been demonstrated at the exhibition of decorative art of Russian Republic (RSFSR), was highly evaluated and included into all the exhibition reviews and the catalogue. This observation suggests that updating and ideologizing the tradition through realistic portraiture was that time not just widespread, but highly encouraged. Such an assumption is confirmed by the fact that the same rug was exhibited again in summer of 1955, at the show organized by the Moscow section of the Artists' Union, together with similar artworks. As was recounted by art critic Sergei Temerin, the exhibited rugs were of diversity: ornamental rugs, rugs with a subject matter (*siuzhetnye*), rugs devoted to significant jubilee dates, rugs for children with the depiction of fairytales'

¹¹ RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2470, l. 13.

protagonists, etc. Temetrin opined that such rugs as N. Ereemeeva's "Feat of Harvest" or Novikov's Stal'skii rug had been universally recognized as outstanding oeuvres.¹²

Yet one should not overestimate the role of figurative elements in late Stalinist - early post-Stalinist decorative art. Though encouraged, realistic depiction was not unavoidable. First, purely ornamental decoration was justified as based on folk – thus "people's" and "democratic" – art. Second, not all realistic motives were indiscriminately praised, but only those which the critics saw as masterfully adapted to the medium. Moreover, the critique of "easel style" (*stankovizm*) in applied and decorative art was present as early as in 1953 and became stronger with the unfolding of "Thaw." Thus, in the aforementioned survey of graduate projects, Kalinin cited *stankovizm* among the shortcomings of Mukhina School educational practice since its establishment in 1946. This unfortunate *stankovizm* Kalinin explained by the widespread misunderstanding of decorative art's specificity, particularly characteristic for painters and sculptors who had recently come to teach applied art students. For instance,

The lack of understanding the specific character of monumental-decorative painting from the side of some students has led to big failures and misfortunes at the defense of graduate works in 1952. Taking the designing of decorative panels with historic-revolutionary themes as diploma tasks, these students tried to solve them in the manner of easel painting. As a result, they succeeded in producing neither easel pictures, nor monumental-decorative painting.¹³

This is a novel and important claim: a heroic, perfectly "Soviet" subject matter, even together with an artist's depictive skillfulness, does not yet guarantee a successful result. The medium should be taken seriously – hence the urge to elaborate new technology of stained glass making; hence, in general, the growing attention to the qualities of different

¹² Sergei Temerin, "Iskusstvo bytovykh veshchei," *Iskusstvo* 5 (October-November 1955): 13-21; 16.

¹³ Kalinin, "Budushchie мастера," 1.

materials. Though mainly emphasizing realistic orientation of the young artists in their work, Kalinin sometimes shifts the accent from the “progressiveness” of the content to the richness of the medium: “In their projects, graduates of the metalwork department strived towards the fullest use of decorative qualities of metal, combining it with other materials – color stone, glass, plastics and ceramics of various sorts. The result is the artworks, rich in texture, demonstrating diverse materials and methods of their treatment.”¹⁴ Albeit marked by Stalinist penchant for pomposity and eclecticism, this discourse also reveals professional considerations with the special attention to *techné*.

In 1955, a pioneer text of this kind appeared in the spring issue of *Iskusstvo*, an official journal of the Artists’ Union of the USSR. This was an article by a prominent art historian Alexander Saltykov, entitled “Problems of the development of decorative-applied art,” where the author explicitly criticized the imposition of the figurative, descriptive method onto decorative and applied art. The latter, Saltykov argued, demands a different methodology of depiction than easel art. The very beauty of an object, its form and its tectonics serves the basis for decoration, and this decoration should not be a depiction with atmospheric perspective. The object should be organically connected with decoration, and therefore the imitation of easel painting is not acceptable. Instead, “of primary importance are the foreground [Saltykov would better say “the only ground”] and clear, expressive contours; rhythmically arranged and harmonized silhouettes” [my emphasis].¹⁵ This is, evidently, the beginning of substituting the notion of *the organic* for the canonical concept of realism in the sphere of decorative and applied art – I will return to this issue later.

¹⁴ Kalinin, “*Budushchie mastera*,” 1. 3.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 2 (March-April 1955): 30-34, 30.

But, in this text, Saltykov keeps the notion of realism, criticizing its simplistic perception as just an illusory depiction. Boldly enough, Saltykov reasoned that decorative art is not psychological; its artist chooses and arranges real phenomena “with great freedom,” and sometimes even selects only certain elements of these phenomena. Decorative compositions can be very close to illusory depiction but can also sufficiently differ from it. And altogether, “one of indispensable qualities of a decorative artist is wide and daring fantasy.” How liberal for 1955! But there is more (never mind the usual terminological confusion): “In applied art with its specific means... the striving to imitate easel art by all means leads, in industrial practice, to distortions of valuable models and to the appearance of kitsch (*poshlost*).”¹⁶ Thus, the article makes clear that socialist realism is by no means a universal method; that it can even turn into kitsch and platitude when misapplied, and, obviously, that there are noble cases when it needs to be revisited.

Elaborating this point further, Saltykov satirically describes the examples of such *poshlost*, “created” by ardent followers of realist principles:

“A glass factory in Diat’kovo [a town in Bryansk region] produces flower vases out of opal glass, of ugly forms, with the depiction of a monumental statue “A tractor driver and a woman collective farmer” (from the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition), copied from a photo. The depiction is connected neither with surrounding ornaments nor with the object itself, and these vases can serve examples of bad taste. Leningrad glass factory of lead tableware fabricates similar vases, depicting upon them the monument to [the General Aleksandr] Suvorov, almost unrecognizable and also unrelated to the vases’ shapes. “Mosstamp” factory produces metal cigarette cases with the bas-relief depiction of three epical heroes [from the famous 1898 painting] by [Viktor] Vasnetsov. Not much remained from the heroes [*ot bogatyrei malo chto ostalos*’], their distorted figures are in disharmony with the case, and the object indeed looks defective.”¹⁷

Saltykov then multiplies the examples of awkward transferring of the famous painting images (mainly by late 19th century realist painters, the so-called “wanderers”

¹⁶ Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

beloved by the Soviet art establishment) to the works onto powder cases, purses, writing-pads, and lacquer boxes. In the latter items “poor drawing, distorted color, the impossibility to render deeply psychological image in the technique of lacquer miniature painting lead to the saddest results: boxes’ covers look like parodies on big art and vulgarize sublime images.”¹⁸ Note that Saltykov, an ardent proponent of decorative art, still cannot avoid opposing it to the “big art.” Yet through this opposition, through the graphic description of kitsch, Saltykov defends self-sufficient creative space for decorative and applied art, free from the dictate of its “big brother” – easel painting.

To be sure, in two cases Saltykov allowed use of illusory motifs in decorative art: if the original’s appearance is not being distorted, and if the depiction does not contradict the form and function of an object. “Quite relevant, say, is to apply some good-quality reproduction onto the cover of postcard album; but it is absurd to place tragic subjects [of famous paintings] like Prince Ivan’s death or Menshikov’s exile on ladies’ cosmetic boxes, as it is often being done, or to use Pushkin monument as a repeating pattern for textile, as we have seen it at the exhibition in 1952...”¹⁹ Thus, sarcastically, Saltykov argued against profanation of both the fine and the decorative. Yet he did not offer decorative artists any clear advice on positive creative methodology.

About a year later, *Iskusstvo* published the polemical article by a young Leningrad philosopher and art historian Moisei Kagan entitled “On the specificity and essence of decorative-applied art,” its significance for the artistic community being comparable with Saltykov’s.²⁰ Though disagreeing with Saltykov on certain points, Kagan, too, contended

¹⁸ Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” 31.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Moisei Kagan, “O spetsifike i sushchnosti prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 1 (January 1956): 16-21.

that applied art is not illusory by nature and does not represent anything but fulfills concrete practical needs. In this respect it is kindred to architecture. Of the two functions of architecture and applied art – practical and what Kagan calls “ideological-aesthetic” – the former predominates in importance. Artistic content and aesthetic form – the elements fulfilling ideological function – are subordinated, *applied* to the practical (utilitarian) function. Thus, Kagan dared concluding, architecture is also one of applied arts, distinct just by its monumental character.²¹

Nevertheless, what interested Kagan the most was not the practical purpose of applied art, but its content. Similarly to Kalinin and Saltykov, Kagan was concerned not so much the medium itself as with the way this medium produces artistic image and emotionally influences the viewer (who is usually also a user). For him, the difference between applied and fine (figurative) art lies precisely here. In constructing the argument, Kagan’s key term is *essence*. A painter, a sculptor and a graphic artist should not just make an illusory repletion of an object/a phenomenon, but to reveal its *essence*, through “expressing his attitude [to this object/phenomenon], thoughts and feelings that had emerged from the perception of this life’s phenomenon.”²² In applied art, says Kagan, this basic law is actually similar, it just works differently. “The applied artist constructs the artistic image first of all upon revealing the essence and purpose of the object, trying to render this essence visible and obvious. At the same time, he gives to this object a certain emotional tune, certain meaning, as if “investing” in it, reflecting in it his thoughts, feelings, moods.”²³ Thus, Kagan’s applied artist is a master of the invisible just like a painter or

²¹ Kagan, “O spetsifike i sushchnosti,” 17-18.

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Ibid., 18.

sculptor, but (s)he discloses this invisible not through depicting recognizable life forms, but through creating utilitarian forms – like an architect. Kagan’s scheme is a sort of romantic utilitarianism.

Further, Kagan reiterates his idea of the “architectural” character of applied art (the idea by no means new or peculiarly Soviet, as it well known to date back to the nineteenth-century theoreticians of architecture Viollet le Duc and Gottfried Semper). Now he focuses more precisely on the *methodology* of constructing the artistic image. In applied art, as he explains, this image

is by nature non-figurative, congeneric to the artistic image in architecture. Then it is not surprising that in its form the artistic image in applied arts is also very close to the architectural image. Or, more precisely, *it is being constructed according to the same principles, as the artistic image in architecture*, through the same means, just in a different scale. From these means the most important are the relation of volumes and planes, form, proportions, tectonics, rhythm. If we have concluded that architecture is a monumental applied art, then now we have a full right to restate this idea, calling applied art “architecture of minor forms.” Like an architect, a master of applied art seeks for such a concrete solution of the volumetric-spatial and color relations of the construction of a furniture item or a tableware object, such a solution of proportions, such rhythmical structure, which in their totality would produce an object not just fine or beautiful, but emotionally expressive and ideologically sensible [emphasis in the original].²⁴

In this way Kagan levels applied art and architecture without reducing the former to the formal “no excess” approach, associated with the 1955 Party-governmental resolution. At the same time he protects the domain of applied art from the dictate of figurative representation, without challenging the official requirement for art to be accessible for “the people,” intelligible and “ideologically sensible.”

In fact, Kagan reifies the tendency that had been already there in the late Stalin period. Besides figurative representations by Mukhina School graduates, Kalinin appreciated the projects that foster a certain positive mood. This could be done through

²⁴ Kagan, “O spetsifike I sushchnosti,” 18.

decorative motives - most popularly floral – or the material itself. Take, for example, the wine set by student Antonova, whose explanatory paper Kalinin cites in his review: “Creating my set, I wanted to express a bright and joyous perception of life, therefore I named it “Spring” [*“Vesennii”*].” Kalinin specifies that the set is designed for mass production and, indeed, it gives the impression of spring freshness. “Light and refined in its pattern, this set is made out of transparent cut-glass; delicate blossoms of bird cherry tree are engraved onto the clear-cut facets of all the articles of the set.”²⁵ Remembering that it is a wine set, we have almost a hedonistic picture, perhaps exceeding the standard image of joyful-life-in-the-free-country.

Another example is from the discussion of the exhibition of Estonian applied art, taking place in Leningrad in 1954, by the applied artists and art historians of Leningrad Section of the Artists’ Union (LOSKh). The red thread of the discussion was, of course, that Estonian art is popular, true to the tradition and thus good; yet the emotional effect of the exhibits was also emphasized. Thus, art historian Nina Iaglova admired the decorative fabric “Oats and Wheat” by Helga Alling: “The author succeeded in bringing to the viewer the spontaneous feeling of the piece of a simple, unvarnished nature. Certain stylization is relevant and justified.”²⁶ The not-so-realistic mode of depiction is less important than the viewer’s genuine sensation.

Obviously, none of the cited authors challenged the canon of realism – rather, the idea of realism proved to be flexible enough to include not just heroic, celebratory and “politically correct” imagery, but also images of simple joys and unsophisticated feelings and even trivial sentiments. Illustrative for this point is the praise which Alexei Balashov,

²⁵ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 533, l. 5.

²⁶ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 387.

the head of the decorative-applied section of LOSKh, gave to his women colleagues in 1953 (probably, on the occasion of March 8, the International Women's Day, and then actually around the date of Stalin's death). Balashov proudly announced that the artists of the famous Leningrad Porcelain Factory - Tamara Bespalova, Liudmila Protopopova, and Lidiia Lebedinskaia - created a number of big decorative vases with the subjects, devoted to "great constructions of Communism," some of them specially for the decoration of Leningrad Pavilion at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. But then he emphasized as "extremely important" that "Lebedinskaia, Bespalova and Protopopova not only create unique oeuvres, but also make items for mass reproduction; for example, Lebedinskaia completed a wonderful set "Golden Oak" [*Zolotoi dubok*], and artist Bespalova completed sets entitled "Little Flower of May" [*Maiskii Tsvetochek*] and "Garden Flax" [*Sadovyi len*"].²⁷ Balashov mentioned these artists again in the final report, summing up the achievements of the LOSKh's section of decorative-applied art for 1951-1953. Noteworthy is his listing of works: "For the Hero of Socialist Labor," "For the Laureate of Stalin Prize", "Builders of Communism," "Red Square," etc. (names of the unique large decorative vases and cups) are followed by "rose peony," "little raspberry" and "wild strawberry" (typical names for mass-produced porcelain items).²⁸ The latter imagery may remind of post-war Stalinist *meshchanstvo* – petit-bourgeois taste cultivated by new Soviet middle class, famously described by Vera S. Dunham, embodied in such notorious objects as polka-dot teacups and orange lampshades.²⁹ But Lebedinskaia, Bespalova and Protopopova were experienced artists who must have shared the stance against kitsch and

²⁷ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 23, l. 97.

²⁸ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4 d. 386, l. 18.

²⁹ Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

meshchanstvo with their colleagues. Their sentimental floral images were borne by the objects of high quality, at least at the level of exemplary models (the shortcomings of industry was definitely not the artists' fault).³⁰

All these “little flowers” were justified as proper subject insofar as they were suited for mass reproduction and thus contributed to constructing, using Balashov words, “truly realistic everyday life [*byt*]”³¹ – after all, cute flowers and sweet berries are too an undeniable part of our reality. Thus, already in the first half of the 1950s the notion of socialist realism was not as rigid as one may think of Stalinist art. In this period heroic, “epic” socialist realism was supplemented with its everyday, “lyric” part that gave room for elementary coziness and unpretentious joys.³²

2.2. Challenging the Visual Canon (around 1956)

The “modest face” of socialist realism became more visible after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, where Khrushchev famously denounced the cult of personality in his “Secret Speech” on February 25, 1956. This is commonly believed to be the starting point (or, by alternative view, the important landmark) of the “Thaw” - the period of relative liberalization and modernization of political, social and cultural life, though not without its “freezes” and contradictions.³³ For applied and decorative artists this meant a broader field of opportunities to seek for and speak about new means of expression.

³⁰ Saltykov, “*Voprosy razvitiia*,” p. 32.

³¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 23. Alexei Balashov. “*Tvorcheskoe sodruzhestvo*,” l. 128.

³² “Epic” and “lyric” realism are the terms of my suggestion, and in all further cases I use it as the terms of mine, not of the critics discussed.

³³ Martin McCauley, ed., *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism* (London: McMillan Press, 1987); Elena Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy 1945-1964* (Moscow: Izdatel'skii Tsentr “Rossiia molodaya”, 1993); Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (London: Routledge), 2006; Mark Petrov, “Years Joined Together to Make an Era,” in Yevgenia Petrova et al., eds., *Times of Change: Art in Soviet Union, 1960-1985*, an Exhibition Catalogue of State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2006), 11-29.

Probably, it was the post - XX Congress atmosphere that inspired applied artists and art critics of LOSKh to gather and discuss in detail the already published article by Moisei Kagan on April 9, 1956.³⁴ Kagan (a member of the section of art critique and art studies) basically restated the main points of his article that his colleagues had already known for three months. But, curiously, his talk turned out to be agitating, if not outraging. Among the LOSKh critics and art historians Kagan represented a younger generation, who came to age at the time when avant-garde art movements had been officially condemned. By that time, the almost 35-years-old art historian already had a PhD degree in art studies (*kandidat iskusstvovedeniia*) and taught in Mukhina School. Yet in comparison with his colleagues Kagan was still a young and not-so-experienced scholar without sufficient authority to influence the audience of the artists who had professionally matured during Stalinism. On the one hand, he was kindly given an opportunity to repeat his opinion in the “here and now” regime: his elder colleagues chose to open creative discussion rather than just publish a scathing response in *Iskusstvo*. On the other hand, probably, after this open discussion he was ultimately expected to perform the typical Stalinist ritual of criticism and self-criticism (*kritika I samokritika*).³⁵ This he did not do anyway, insisting instead upon the two main points: that applied art is architectural in nature and that it is not and does not have to be figurative. Moreover, he presented his version of the “everyday” socialist realism, different from “cozy” realism of floral tableware and fabrics. Kagan’s is a laconic, “honest” socialist realism:

I believe that one of the main principles of applied art and one of the requirements of socialist realism is a particular simplicity, laconism, modest use of decorative means, which are opposed, on the one hand, to the decorativist (*ukrashatel'skomu*)

³⁴ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 390.

³⁵ Alexei Kojevnikov, “Rituals of Stalinist Culture at Work: Science and the Games of IntraParty Democracy circa 1948,” *Russian Review* 57, No. 1 (January 1998): 25-52.

style that until recently prevailed in our architecture and applied art, and on the other hand, to the asceticism of Constructivism that absolutely rejects any use of decorative means.³⁶

This also looks like an attempt to set the “middle ground” between asceticism of the 1920s and Stalinist “excess”– perfectly in the fashion of dialectical materialism, according to the scheme “thesis – antithesis – synthesis.” A good Marxist, Kagan virtuously used forms of authoritative discourse to update the notion of socialist realism – *mutatis mutandis*, this could be applied to state socialism, in the spirit of de-Stalinization. His objective was to correct the misdeeds of the recent past, arguing against the corrupt Byzantine grandeur, going back to the original Bolshevik ethos but avoiding the extremes of the avant-garde’s asceticism. Stalinists and “ancients” of art were not slow to respond.

The main counterattack came from Nina Iaglova, a Professor in the Repin Institute of Fine Arts, a generation (16 years) older than Kagan, definitely an authority among Leningrad art historians (however, not a Party member).³⁷ The basis of Iaglova’s outrage was Kagan’s denial of figurativeness in applied art, and her main purpose was to prove the opposite – that applied art *is* figurative, because it is always based on some recognizable motive, even if often indirectly. This argument Iaglova illustrated with diapositives of ancient artifacts (pre-Scythian, Scythian, Egyptian, Russian artifacts of the 17th century) – vessels resembling birds, tables with “animal” legs, etc. Justifying her choice, Iaglova claimed that the earliest stage of art’s development is the clearest in demonstrating the connection between artistic ideas and real life processes, cited Marx and Engels’s “German Ideology” where art is explained as objective reality passed through consciousness.³⁸ The only two contemporary examples given by Iaglova were art pieces of late Stalinism:

³⁶ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 390, l. 14.

³⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 38.

³⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 390, ll. 22-29.

lacework “Squirrels” (the artist is not recorded in the text) and machine-made wall rug by artist Eremeeva “The Feast of Harvest” – both are nice examples of what can be called “lyric” realism, which soon will be viewed as Stalinist kitsch by applied art’s “moderns.” These two examples also perfectly illustrate two faces of late Stalinist realism. “The Feast of Harvest” is designed for a public interior and depicts “a big topic” - “the unity of the peoples of the Soviet Union.” And this is how Iaglova describes “Squirrels” (the work from 1951):

This object is meant to live in our *byt*, to bring warmth and joy into our life. The artist achieves this impression through the topic of Russian nature, which, maybe, could be expressed in painting far more concretely, but applied art, [in particular] lace, has its own means, and we enjoy looking at this poetic image of Russian nature... Every type of art has its own degree of closeness to nature, its own measure of conditionality.³⁹

Warmth, enjoyment and poetic feeling are the attributes of “lyric” realism; thus, Iaglova’s artistic Stalinism appears as moderated, verging on the disguised ideology of Stalin’s middle-class domestic comfort.

Kagan countered Iaglova with the question: is figurativeness a compulsory element for applied art, “does the object – tableware or furniture - cease to be a work of art if it does not have birds’ heads?” Clearly, the question was sarcastic and rhetorical. Kagan ridiculed all Iaglova’s examples of “beasty” furniture legs and bird-like vessels made no sense to him – they are all from the ancient past, and this naïve animism appeared anachronistic.⁴⁰ As for contemporary examples, he probably ignored them precisely as anachronistic (or this part of his answer was simply not recorded). For Kagan, image [*obraz*] and portrayal [*izobrazheniie*] should not be confused; all the arts are image-bearing [*obraznye*] in their

³⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 390, l. 32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 98.

own ways, but far not all of them figurative [*izobrazitel'nye*]⁴¹. Applied art is definitely not.

At the end, Kagan rejected both “epic” and “lyric” versions of socialist realism, offering instead the way I would call “practical”: “I love art, but a chair is made for sitting, a cup – for drinking, clothes – for wearing, architecture – for living. And when this elementary and prosaic fact is forgotten, there appear various aesthetically unpleasant things.” Not just form follows function, as Louis Sullivan had it, but *artistic image* follows function – otherwise we have kitsch.⁴²

Kagan’s presentation can be seen as a symptom for the emerging modernizing urge of young Soviet designers, whose starting point was the idea of “practical” realism. Yet the “lyric” current came to develop parallel with it – and that not necessarily in favor of figurativeness. Illustrative here is a talk “Form and Content in Applied Art,” presented in January 1957 by art critic Semion Rappoport to the applied artists of MOSKh.⁴³ Basically, in this lecture Rappoport tried to solve a dilemma of form and content as related to applied art – his attempt does not look successful, judging by its terminological confusion. However, some nontrivial thoughts are discernible – first of all, Rappoport’s accent on emotional effect. What Kagan called *artistic image* in Rappoport’s scheme appears as *artistic content*, which is at the same time an emotional content and essential idea [*ideinoe soderzhaniie*]. The latter should not be confused with *literal* ideological content:

We all know well, that our mass consumer has a little need in the sets with the depiction of heroic motives. None of my acquaintances’ families would buy set with the depiction, say, of [Grand Prince] Alexander Nevskii, or the battle for Moscow [in 1941-42], etc. Why? Because people prefer not those sets, on which human faces are drawn, but those sets, which gladden the eye and rejoice the hearts.

⁴¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 390, l. 90.

⁴² Ibid., l. 107.

⁴³ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2518.

For the artistic contests we produce sets with heroic portraits, but for themselves buy the sets without such depictions.⁴⁴

Not a trifling admission: “epic” realism is for the façade (a contest, an exhibition, an official ceremony and so on), while “lyric” realism is for the home, and this is what people actually enjoy. Therefore claiming that the “epic” realism is more realist is misleading up to being absurd: “I remember, once a student’s work was rejected as defective just because they it did not have [explicit] ideological content, and compelled the student to draw the emblem of VLKSM [Communist Union of Youth]”.⁴⁵ But while Rappoport implicitly argued for divorcing applied art’s imagery from state ideology, he advocated what I would call “everyday ideology” – the control of domestic environment through experts producing useful objects.⁴⁶ “Under Communism, aesthetic requirements must accompany every step of a person. In this respect the position of applied art is very high. It should enter *byt*, flesh and blood of our life [*bytie*] and become something extremely sublime and significant [*prevratitsia v nechto chrezvychaino vysokoe I bol’shoe*].”⁴⁷ While this may sounds frightening, Rappoport’s further argumentation suggests that everyday ideology will be very human-sympathetic, “making our life more pleasant,” and provoking joyous emotions by non-figurative means. In this regard, for Rappoport, applied art is close to music and poetry, since both are based on non-objective imagery, in contrast to the well-composed plot of a classic novel.

These challenges to the visual canon do not, of course, totally purify applied art of figurative imagery – this will remain until the end of Soviet Union and after, in more or

⁴⁴ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2518, l. 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ This “everyday ideology” may be compared, at least in some aspects, to the Foucauldian mechanisms of power. For the discussion of state’s reliance on experts for organizing domestic environments see Reid, “Khrushchev Modern.”

⁴⁷ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2518, l. 11.

less conventional form. But there was certain tendency of de-ideologization and humanization. In 1958, in the newly founded journal *Decorative art of the USSR*, Saltykov – the same author who had attacked *stankovizm* – criticized contemporary applied art for the lack of human images. But what he suggested as examples for imitation is not easel painting but “wonderful Greek and Chinese vases, majolica painting of the Renaissance, West-European and Russian porcelain” as well as traditional Chinese and Iranian fabrics and contemporary Indian fabrics. This is hardly a discourse on “epic” realism, but, rather, an appeal to professional tradition.⁴⁸

The examples cited are, of course, not exhaustive. But the fact that they are fixed in stenographic records and, moreover, published in the official press indicate the tendency to challenge the Stalinist visual canon. But, as I have tried to demonstrate, this challenging took place within the official discourse of socialist realism, not from without. Michel de Certeau spoke of “the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations,”⁴⁹ and this is partially true for Soviet applied artists of the 1950s. In the situation of Soviet art policy, they did not possess and could not create their own space for discussion and (creative) action, and their only option was what de Certeau terms “making do” with what was at stake. But their activity was not even resistant – I would rather characterize it as adjustment, for many of them likely believed that socialist realism was generally fine, it just ought to be modified and divorced from the cult of personality. If their challenge was political, it was within the common aspirations of the “Thaw.”

⁴⁸ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Massovost’ i unikal’nost,’” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 3 (March 1958): 2.

⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 18.

2.3. The Theme of “Organic” and Its Variations (1957-1970)

I have discussed the “genetic” modifications of socialist realism – its “lyric” and “practical” types. Now I will try to demonstrate the tactic of shifting away from the notion of realism without openly rejecting it by using the term “organic” in relation to techniques, forms and compositions in decorative art. Throughout the 1950s, articles and debates on decorative art frequently employed the rhetoric of “organic,” usually in the connection to folk art, folk ornament, or ornament in general in its relation to the form, or to other decorative details. Thus, for example, the cited rug with the portrait of Suleiman Stal’skii was praised because artist Novikov managed to “organically include this portrait into the system of ornaments.”⁵⁰ In 1954, the textile artists complained in *Iskusstvo* that none of artistic bodies is interested in theoretical work on designing textile patterns of the new time, which could “express contemporary ideas” and at the same time “*organically* match with other art types – architecture, painting, sculpture.”⁵¹ Saltykov, in his groundbreaking 1955 article, spoke of “*organic* artistic unity” of the object as a principle of ensemble (of dress, interior, etc) and as the key aesthetic requirement for applied art. On the level of a single object, he mentioned “indispensable tight *organic* bond between the purpose, form and material of an object, on the one hand, and the graphic, painterly and sculptural depiction that decorate this object, on the other hand.”⁵² Later he uses the term organic in still different sense: motifs of other cultures (one might guess, folk motifs) should be actively used in Soviet applied art, but they have to be creatively reinterpreted and “*organically*

⁵⁰ RGALI, f. 2493, op. 1, d. 2470, l. 13.

⁵¹ Inessa Tumanyan and Ivan Florinskii, “Opyt sozdaniia khudozhestvennykh dekorativnykh tkanei,” *Iskusstvo* 2 (March-April 1954): 39-42.

⁵² Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia,” 31.

included in emotional and ideological order of our art.”⁵³ Again in *Iskusstvo*, praising the works of Estonian decorative textile in 1955, Nina Iaglova and Helene Kuma saw there “*organic* tie of all the ornamental motifs into a single whole.”⁵⁴ In 1958, prominent art historian Nikita Voronov argued for adapting folk traditions to contemporary art in a new periodical *DI SSSR*. This adaptation was desired because of the main features of folk art are universally good: involvement into *byt*, vividly expressed expedient forms, and “*organic* fusion of form and decoration,” that together produce “integral [*tselostnoe*] artistic impression.”⁵⁵ Examples can be multiplied; what is evident is that “organic” was always used in an unambiguously positive sense, though with different nuances of meaning, but also as the result of an artist’s masterful arrangement. Often “organic” was used in the sense of “harmonic,” or alongside this term. When not used, it was implied – form should correspond to function and decoration, as the in the folk art.

For the applied artists and critics of the 1950s, “organic” was broad but useful term: useful as both a reaction to Stalinist pomposity and an intellectual tool to criticize formalism. In the late 1950s, the popularity of this term was furthered by artists’ growing interest in the inherent qualities of materials and their interconnection with the logic of form-giving. In some cases, “organic” appeared in professional discussions not as a term but as a theme, expressed by the terms “live” (“*zhivoi*”) and “liveliness” (*zhivost*), or in references to forms and principles of nature, as well as natural qualities of materials used by artists. Even though this theme was maintained within the (now broadened) framework of socialist realism, it was by no means specifically Soviet. While the notion of “organic”

⁵³ Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia,” 33.

⁵⁴ Nina Yaglova and Helene Kuma, “Dekorativno-prikladnoe iskusstvo sovetsskoi Estonii,” *Iskusstvo* 4 (July-August 1955): 54.

⁵⁵ Nikita Voronov, “Narodnye traditsii i ovremennoe iskusstvo,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 8.

itself has a long and complex history,⁵⁶ it has also a particular connection with art theory through the theme “organicism.” According to Caroline van Eck, organicism “is based on the conviction, generally held in the artistic theory from antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century, that art should imitate nature, not with the aim of producing perfectly faithful copies but with the aim of creating the illusion of life, of conferring the qualities of living nature upon the products of man, in the hope of effectuating the metamorphosis of dead matter into a living being.”⁵⁷ Organicism was especially important in the aesthetics of the eighteenth-century Romantics, who used the notion of organic growth as a metaphor of creative process.⁵⁸ This attitude was reinterpreted in the architectural theory and practice of the 19th century, when organicism functioned as a strategy for justifying stylistic choices without generating a self-sufficient style. The advent of modernism at the end of the 19th century stimulated the reformulation of the meaning of organicism from the tool of mastering the styles of the past to the careful approach to the challenges of the present.⁵⁹ Instead of imitating forms of nature, the advocates of organic architecture, most famously Frank L. Wright, professed planning and buildings in harmony with nature and social

⁵⁶ To put it shortly, the term “organic” goes back to the 16th century Europe in the sense of engine or tool, very close to *the mechanical*; in the 18th and especially the 19th century it came to be contrasted with *the organized*, much due to the development of natural history and biology; as Raymond Williams puts it in his “Keywords,” “it was this development in biology and the ‘life sciences’ which laid the basis for the distinction between the former synonyms *organic* and *mechanical*” [highlighted in the original].⁵⁶ As he explains, this distinction was developed first in Germany, by the Natural philosophers – it is there that organic became associated with the whole. In the 19th and the 20th centuries the concept of organic was also applied to the society: basically, “an organic society was one that was ‘grown’ rather than made’,”⁵⁶ and this idea was used in social thought of different kinds and was taken by theorists of architecture – from Hugo Haring to Frank Lloyd Wright to Bruno Zevi and Peter Bundell Jones. See Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 227-229.

⁵⁷ Caroline van Eck, *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture: An Inquiry into its Theoretical and Philosophical Background* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 1994), 18.

⁵⁸ Isabel Wünsche, “Organic visions and biological models in the Russian avant-garde,” in Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche, eds., *Biocentrism and Modernism* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 127-152.

⁵⁹ Caroline van Eck, *Organicism in Nineteenth-Century Architecture*, 259-267.

needs, so that architecture becomes “expression of life.”⁶⁰ This new “organic architecture” can be seen not only as the reaction to the eclecticism of the 19th-century organicism, but also as the alternative version of modernism, based not on predetermined rationalistic plans, but on sensitivity to natural surroundings. As different general and case studies of modernist architecture suggest, organic architecture was not a distinct style, opposed to modernism, but an approach within modernism, and it shared many of the latter’s objectives of rationalizing space and making it maximally functional.⁶¹ Organicist trends can be also distinguished in modernist art and design, including Russian avant-garde: thus, Christina Lodder discussed specifically “Organic Constructivism” of Vladimir Tatlin and Piotr Miturch,⁶² while Isabel Wünsche more recently emphasized “organic visions” in the painting of Malevch, Mikhail Matiushin and Pavel Philonov. In 1940, the exhibition of domestic furniture titled “Organic design” was famously held by MOMA in 1940. The curator Elliot Noyes stated in the exhibition catalogue: “A design may be called organic when there is a harmonious organization of the parts within the whole, according to structure, material, and purpose. Within this definition there can be no vain ornamentation or superfluity, but the part of beauty is none the less great -- in ideal choice of material, in visual refinement, and in the rational elegance of things intended for use.”⁶³ Essentially,

⁶⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright, “An Organic Architecture,” in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (ed.), *Frank Lloyd Wright. Collected Writings* (Rizzoli/ New York: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1993).

⁶¹ Bruno Zevi, “Meaning and Scope of the Term Organic in Modern Architecture,” *Towards an Organic Architecture* (London, Faber & Faber, 1950): 66-76; Sarah Williams Goldhagen, “Something to Talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64, no. 2 (June 2005): 144–67; See the discussion of organic attitudes in Soviet architecture of the 1960 in a recent dissertation: Daria Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern: A History of Architectural Profession in the USSR, 1954-1971” (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2014), 197-254.

⁶² Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Wünsche, “Organic visions and biological models in the Russian avant-garde.”

⁶³ Elliot Noyes. *Organic Design in Home Furnishings* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1941), inside cover, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=wm#inbox> accessed 27.03.2013.

this definition is quite similar to the way Soviet reformist critics described the principles of applied art since the 1950s.

In analyzing “organic” theme in the context of Soviet Russia, I find it useful to rely on the concept “Organicist Modern,” suggested by anthropologist Krisztina Fehérváry in her article on home décor in socialist Hungary.⁶⁴ According to Fehérváry’s argument, the state’s 1960-s campaign on mass housing and furnishing in “contemporary style,” promoted in magazine articles, newspaper editorials and at exhibitions, produced a set of materialities, images and attitudes which she calls “Socialist Modern.” In the 1970s, the mass disappointment with “Socialist Modern” as lived experience prompted its transformation into “Socialist Generic” – the criticism of poor quality and alienating effect of mass-produced apartments and furnishings. This change, in turn, generated the formation of “Organicist Modern” – the trend to appreciate “authentic” Hungarian material culture and organic materials, shapes and colors. Intellectuals, in particular professional architects and designers, embraced and propagated “Organicist Modern” as the alternative to compromised “Socialist Modern”: they offered cozy and healthy environments as a response to impersonal and shoddy spaces, dictated by the state. Fehervary suggests that certain political dissent was disguised beyond this aesthetic shift:

Replacing or covering up “man-made” materials with so-called natural materials aligned with popular condemnations of the socialist state’s modernist “experiment” and its godlike ambitions: of exerting total control over the future through central planning, insisting on man’s dominance over nature, and attempting to eradicate beliefs in any power above the scientific principles of Marxism-Leninism. The socialist project of privileging the material and repressing the spiritual was a denial of the existence of forces more powerful than human industry and scientific knowledge.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Krisztina Fehervary, “From Socialist Modern to Super-Natural Organicism: Cosmological Transformations through Home Decor,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2012): 615–640.

⁶⁵ Krisztina Fehervary, “From Socialist Modern to Super-Natural Organicism,” 627-628.

In the Hungarian context that Fehérváry analyzes, the interest to organic had clear nationalist, or traditionalist, overtones and thus acted as the resistance to Soviet Union's aesthetic dictatorship. However, I would argue, "Organicist modern" did not necessarily have follow the logic of a particular cultural nationalism as opposed to Soviet internationalism.⁶⁶ For instance, in her incisive study of the history Soviet architectural profession in the time of late socialism, Daria Bocharnikova demonstrates how a group of young Moscow architects in the 1960s employed the idea of organic environment with the aim to improve, rather than reject, the ideals of Socialist Modern.⁶⁷ The book by Aleksei Gutnov and his colleagues, recent graduates of Moscow Architectural Institute, titled *New Element of Settlement. On the Road to the New City*, was published in 1966. Its authors addressed the problems, generated by the current Soviet approach to urban planning, and suggested the new toolkit for achieving a harmonious urban environment. As Bocharnikova emphasizes, these young architects conceptualized the New Element of Settlement (NER) as a living organism, as opposed to mechanical urban schemes, predominant in the 1960s both in the socialist bloc and the capitalist Euro-Atlantic world. They defined their objective as finding "a structure that responds organically to the social and economic functions of new urban life."⁶⁸ Without rejecting the modernist vision of architecture, and, in particular, its socialist version, so-called "Socialist Modern," Gutnov et al attempted to correct its pitfalls such as the monotony of urban landscape, or an understanding of the city as mechanical combination of architectural "pieces." Instead, the

⁶⁶ As Isabelle Wünche argued, already in the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde organicism could be combined with international artistic outlook, rather than specifically in Russian folk art. Wünche, "Organic visions," 128.

⁶⁷ Bocharnikova, "Inventing Socialist Modern," 197-254.

⁶⁸ Andrey Baburov et al., *Novyi Element Rasselenia. Na Puti K Novomu Gorodu* (Moskva: Stroiizdat, 1966), 8, quoted in Bocharnikova, "Inventing Socialist Modern," 227.

books' authors called for the diversification of building types, thinking in terms of integral space, and plasticity as the leading principle of architecture and planning, with the ultimate goal to create the "world of human curvature,"⁶⁹ where buildings, zones and transportations of different kinds would be organically interconnected. Just like Fehérváry's Hungarian architects and designers, Bocharnikova's Moscow NER group employed the concept of "organic" as the instrument for rethinking the ideas of modern functionality.

I suggest that similar conceptual development took place in the sphere of decorative arts in Soviet Russia, whereas socialist realism appeared a particular variation of Socialist Modern in need for correction. If in the mid-1950s architectural profession in the Soviet Union was greatly affected by the state campaign for mass construction, visual artists were still, like in the Stalin period, expected to follow the method of socialist realism. In both cases, "organic" was taken as a rejuvenating force. I suppose that indeed, the theme of "organic" provided a relatively free creative space *within* the dominant artistic field and allowed downplaying ideological claims of socialist realism. In what follows I analyze three variations of this theme: a professional debate on the notion of "liveliness"; the "organic" treatment of porcelain by prominent Leningrad artist Anna Leporskaia; and, finally, the vision of the relations between nature and designer's work presented by artist, architect and designer Boris Smirnov.

⁶⁹ Baburov et al., *Novyi Element Rasselenia*, 106. Quoted in Bocharnikova, "Inventing Socialist Modern," 230.

Zhivost': Conceptualizing the Expression of Life in Useful Objects

On January 30, 1959, the art historian Aleksandr Chekalov delivered his lecture, “Peculiarities of life reflection in artistic-industrial items,” at the meeting of MOSKh’s section of decorative-applied art.⁷⁰ Like Kagan, Chekalov belonged to a young generation of historians and theoreticians of art (*iskusstvovedy*) – he was just 31 in 1959 but, most likely, already had a *kandidat* degree in art history.⁷¹ And, similarly to his Leningrad colleague, Chekalov undertook an attempt to shake the canon using its own terms. At the beginning, he brought forward three major questions for discussion:

1. What are artistic-industrial items – art or non-art? If [they are] art, can they be ascribed to visual art? *Where is the border between artistic and non-artistic?* [My emphasis].
2. Can the term “realism” be used in regard to decorative-applied art? If yes, how should we deal with the notions of typicality (*tipichnost'*), artistic image and so on? Because, you know, we have to speak of the standard (*tipovoi*) [items], but this is a different matter.
3. If we speak of realism, should we then speak of the opposite notions – formalism or abstractionism? Can we, for example, call “abstract” geometrically-shaped items of decorative⁷² art?⁷³

Chekalov’s agenda can be viewed as arranged from the general philosophical question – “Where is the border between artistic and non-artistic?” – to the more particular problem of resolving canonical requirement of realism with practical tasks of industrial (but also decorative) art, the latter, as he emphasized, being more important for current state of affairs. Essentially, all the three questions were concentrated into one: how can concrete

⁷⁰ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550.

⁷¹ I did not find precise information on Chekalov’s biography, but, given that in 1961 his first monograph came out (Aleksandr Chekalov, *Iskusstvo v bytu* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv, 1961), it is reasonable to assume that he either finished or was about to finish his PhD dissertation by 1959.

⁷² Here Chekalov demonstrates the very “terminological confusion” that so upset Kagan: “decorative” and “applied” are used as interchangeable.

⁷³ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 2.

forms of life be reflected in the items that are “constructive and non-figurative”? This “particular yet large” question is the least elaborated in our aesthetics, regretted Chekalov.⁷⁴

In order to solve the puzzle of an unlikely marriage of realism and decorative and “industrial” art, Chekalov proposed a “revisionist” theory of realism. He proceeded from explanation of aesthetic evaluation that sounds as the opposition to Kant’s theory of disinterested aesthetic judgment:

However ingenuously we perceive this or that object of decorative art – a rug, a statuette, an architectural decoration, wallpaper, furniture, a toy – we always mentally evaluate it. The basis of this evaluation is our general impression of this object, depending on which we call it beautiful or non-beautiful. Even the most superficial analysis allows realizing that we associate the beautiful with the live. Our eye distinguishes between “live” and “dead” forms, between colors and lines [which are] intensive, taut, or, on the contrary, languid. We always prefer bold, melodious, rich details and reject those looking dry, stiff and stunted. The living is for us is a kind of a synonym for the artistic.⁷⁵

Clearly, a speaker downplays the concept “realism” by replacing it with the notion of “liveliness” (“*zhivost*”) and equating it with beauty. This notion is convenient because, first, it rhymes with the typically Soviet cult of health, cheerfulness and physical culture, and, second, it is flexible enough to be extended onto stylized figurative and even non-figurative images. Thus, Chekalov argued, characters of Greek vase painting or grotesque figures of birds and animals which decorated ancient and folk vessels are not less “live” than highly realistic art forms. Furthermore, geometrically shaped objects, geometric ornaments and even “one-color yet texturally expressive fabrics” are as “live”!⁷⁶ Note the parallel with Iaglova’s reasoning: if for her the animalistic forms of ancient artifacts were an argument in favor of figurativeness, for Chekalov they are valuable because of their stylized character, a certain abstraction from nature. More precisely, as the art historian

⁷⁴ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid., l. 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid., l. 3.

explains later, the ancient custom to render concrete forms of nature to the objects was naïve and originated from animism. In modern time this method became even more nonsensical – Chekalov does not use the term “kitsch,” but it is implicit in his speech.⁷⁷ As his argument goes, often the applied art works with very naturalistic forms or patterns are the worst. Naturalism is to be opposed to the “live beauty” that always consists in only slight semblance of reality, in the relative connection to reality, in allowing the viewer to think up the image.

Actually, such a position pertains to the orthodoxy of visual art – a late Stalinist – early post-Stalinist campaign against naturalism in painting, recorded on the pages of *Iskusstvo* and reflected in discussions by art critics and art historians.⁷⁸ However, Chekalov’s critique goes beyond that – he manages defending abstraction almost without using this word: “Even simple checks and chequers can be extremely ‘live’ and full of artistic content, but they can be also dry, rigid, and ‘dead’ like a technical drawing. It depends on intention and implementation.”⁷⁹ In art, close semblance to life is deadly and repulsive – Chekalov does not see a contradiction here. By his explanation,

We like the lively, the vital, but our taste requires that this living, sensible, concrete certainly become more abstract, lose its immediate concreteness, in a way, die as a particular phenomenon and then it becomes reborn in a completely different quality – as something absolutely not resembling reality, built according to different principles. And only such a converted form is perceived as ‘live’; it suddenly gives us a new wonderful idea of the whole sensible, concrete, genuine life in all its beauty and variety.⁸⁰

In order to justify the odd claim that the living should symbolically die and resurrect in art, Chekalov relies on Marx’s authority – but, peculiarly, that of a young Marx. Evidently,

⁷⁷ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 1. 12.

⁷⁸ For example: “Sovetskoe Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu. O Vsesoiuznoi khudozhestvennoi vystavke,” *Iskusstvo* 1 (January-February 1953): 3-4; TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 435.

⁷⁹ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 5.

⁸⁰ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, ll. 5-6.

Marx's 1844 "economic and philosophical manuscripts," in particular the part on alienated labor, became the important point of reference for the "Thaw" generation of art critics. Special attention was given to the passage when Marx compares the production processes in animal and human world. While the animal produces only according to the immediate need of itself or of its young, man can produce also "free of physical need"; if the animal builds according to the standard of its species, man creates "according to the laws of beauty." Thus man's production is creative; it is the means of self-production "not only intellectually, as in consciousness, but also actively in a real sense" as man "sees himself in a world he made."⁸¹ Drawing on this point, Chekalov portrays an art objects as a "real product of conscious human labor," as man's self-expression with spiritual dimension, including one's aesthetic views.⁸² Consequently, any man-made - or, for that matter, man-designed and machine-made - object is an expression of real life, real creative labor. We evaluate objects of "everyday art" (*bytovogo iskusstva*) by human measure, and therefore good objects are those which correspond to our ideas of convenience and beauty alike, - concludes Chekalov, anticipating Soviet designers' obsession with ergonomics.⁸³ From precisely this point of view he appreciates folk art - its forms are organic and functionally justified.⁸⁴

From the idea of *zhivost'* followed representation of an object as "organic," "living" according to its function. Hence Chekalov's emphasis on expediency as both humanistic and aesthetic quality: "An object without real function is devoid of human content and hence also of artistic meaning." [12] But "organic" also meant an organic combination of

⁸¹ Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Hackett Publishing, 1997), 293.

⁸² RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 8.

⁸³ Ibid., l. 9.

⁸⁴ Ibid., l. 19.

function, construction, outer appearance and emotional content – that is, perfection. Here Chekalov combined Kagan’s “architectonic” vision of applied art and Rappoport’s comparison with poetry and music. Perfect objects provoke “poetic associations,” their forms are subdued to “musical-rhythmical principle,” yet construction and the qualities of the material – “steadiness, solidity, plasticity,” – are also extremely important.⁸⁵

Approaching the issue of contemporary industrial production, Chekalov points to the problem of the improvement of architecturally-constructive qualities of objects at the expense of individuality. He admitted that “the image of objects gradually becomes more and more general, so to say, international. It more and more shows an abstract person, a human being as such.... Material culture knows no borders.”⁸⁶ This is a striking confession for 1959, surprisingly devoid of the usual for that time reservations about irreconcilability between socialist and capitalist values. But what bothers Chekalov is not the danger of bourgeois consumerism but the threat to artistic individuality. In order to avoid it, the art historian suggests for artists such methods as learning and revealing better intrinsic qualities of material, varying color and treatment of surface, creative use of color, etc. It is amazing how picturesque is the language when the speaker describes the diverse qualities of an object’ form:

Mass in the ready article is already not just a quantity of material but also a certain quality of a volumetric form: monumentality or delicacy, lightness, completeness or openness and so on. The borderline of mass is not only the boundary of volume, but also an artistically found contour. The line itself becomes expressive – not just straight or curved, but flexible or restless, rhythmic or melodic. All the elements of form appear as if in the endless clash and movement and at the same time in harmonic coordination and unity. It is precisely this that we perceive as “live” in the best items of everyday art.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 14.

⁸⁶ Ibid., l. 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid., ll. 14-15

This passage is noteworthy for two reasons. First, there is virtually no official cliché, no trace of authoritative discourse. In a way, this is a hint on what an ideal, professional discourse of Soviet applied artists would be like – the one desired but impossible in public space (press, Artists Congresses, etc.) that demanded a compromise.⁸⁸ Second, there is evident (even of unintentional) echoing of the description of Vladimir Tatlin's famous project of the Monument of Third International produced by a prominent art historian Nikolai Punin in 1919: "The form wants to overcome the matter, the force of gravitation; the force of resistance is big and massive; straining the muscles, the form seeks for emancipation along the most resilient and dynamic lines the world only knows – the spirals. They are full of movement, striving, running, and they are tight like creative will and strained muscle."⁸⁹ Just like two counter-spirals of Tatlin's Tower, the elements of form of Chekalov's "perfect object" are in constant clash and movement; Chekalov's organic metaphor reminds of Punin's portraying of Tower as a Promethean man, and, broader, the avant-garde's obsession with drawing parallels between organic world and industrial art.⁹⁰

Finally, Chekalov forecasted the two ideas which will become very popular among Soviet designers in a decade – design of environments and research on consumers' opinions. First, he claimed that true applied artist humanizes not only a single object of his

⁸⁸ This type of discourse is used nowadays by applied artists and professors of Art Studies – at least, as shows the example of St. Petersburg Artistic-Industrial Academy (successor of Mukhina School).

⁸⁹ Nikolai Punin. "Pamiatnik III Internatsionala, in Vasilii Rakitin and Irina Punina, ed., *Nikolai Punin. O Tatline* (Moscow: RA, 1994), 20.

⁹⁰ In the light of the resonance to Wilhelm Röntgen's experiments in Russia, the iron frame could be associated with the skeleton. As Olga Matich and John E. Bowlt argue, "the artists of the avant-garde were fascinated to discover mechanical parallels between zoological structures made clear with the X-ray and the industrial frames of the new iron buildings towering above Moscow and St. Petersburg." John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, Introduction. In John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds. *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian avant-garde and cultural experiment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 12.

making, but “the whole sphere of activity related to this object.” Thus, a gunsmith does not just produce a rifle but he “organizes the entire process of hunting,” while “sometimes human life depends on the form of his items.” By the same token, a tailor not just fits the seams – he is responsible for making the client a better person by giving her a proper outfit. The same applies to the designer of a pavilion, a bus, a canteen – or so the argument goes.⁹¹ Second, according to Chekalov, the humanism of the new art was in its openness, allowing a consumer to actively participate in art-making – hence life-constructing – through creating ensembles of interior, dress, and so on. Yet this explanation of humanism has a didactic note – “every person is obliged (*obiazan*) to be an artist, to have an active artistic taste.”⁹² Thus, being invited to participate in the creative process, an imagined consumer was at the same time pressed to accept taste standards worked out by experts. In his concluding remarks Chekalov called the artists to “break the customs” and reflect in their art the “new pulse of life” and equated realism with functionality and feasibility, while formalism, respectively, with pretentiousness and uselessness.⁹³

The discussion, provoked by Chekalov’s theory of the lively, was lively too. Some repudiated his re-conceptualizing of formalism and accused the speaker precisely in this artistic “sin.” Maria Nazarevskaja, for example, reminded of the danger coming with abstract art works that had been exhibited in Moscow during International Youth Festival in 1957 and were currently shown at the exhibition “Art of Socialist Countries” in the Manege exhibition hall.⁹⁴ She argued that many artists turn to the West as the source of

⁹¹ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 10.

⁹² Ibid., l. 28.

⁹³ Ibid., l. 30-31.

⁹⁴ Susan E. Reid, “Art of Socialist Countries, Moscow 1958-59, and the Contemporary Style of Painting,” in Susan Emily Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 101–32.

fashion just out of fear to look vulgar. Nazarevskaya went so far as to compare the adoption of the geometric patterns of West European design to the widespread usage of swastika in Europe as a visual symbol of Nazi propaganda in the 1930s (a strange position from the VKhUTEIN graduate, whose textile patterns of the 1930s, though figurative, were sufficiently stylized, based on expressive geometric lines).⁹⁵

But there were sympathizers with Chekalov's views as well: art historian Sergei Temerin called the colleagues' attention to the fact that nature itself contains abstraction to some extent, and it is thus absolutely appropriate for practically useful artworks. His uncertainty about the borders of abstractionism-cum-formalism was explicit. Pointing to the art works exhibited right there, in the meeting room, Temerin remarked: "There is a rug, it is pictorial (*izobrazitel'nyi*), but if a contemporary artist, a Soviet artist exhibited a picture like this, he would be torn in pieces (*ego by v klochia razorvali*) for showing pure formalism."⁹⁶ Artist Rabotnova admitted that she liked the idea of "lively" and "deadly" objects and in this connection recalled a talk of Saltykov when he gave an example of a vase, perfect in formal criteria, but "without a soul – like a silly handsome man" (*kak glupyi krasavets*).⁹⁷ Rabotnova clarified her idea of the "live": "I believe that one of the necessarily conditions of any art work is an inner rhythm, melodiousness of lines [*pevuschest' linii*]. It may be in a vase's silhouette, it may be even not an ornament but one color accent – harmony of proportions and harmony of color." She goes on: "Why folk art so charms us?

⁹⁵ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, ll. 45-47. Nazarevskaya's creative biography is discussed in: Maria Blumin, *Vliianie iskusstva avangarda na ornamental'nye motivy tkanei 1910-kh – 1939kh godov: na promere stran Zapadnoi Evropy i Rossii* (PhD Dissertation : St. Petersburg State Academy of Art and Industry, 2006) ; *avtoreferat* is available at <http://www.dissercat.com/content/vliyanie-iskusstva-avangarda-na-ornamentalnye-motivy-tkanei-1910-1930-kh-godov-na-primere-st>, accessed 08.11.2011.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 57.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 64.

Because there this harmony is fulfilled with maximum strength.”⁹⁸ This is a vivid example of “liveliness,” “harmony” and “folk art” coming together. But, Rabotnova argues, such harmony, especially in regards to color range, is evident in the works of today’s textile artists, who, on her view started to design “amazingly”. And even the majority of Western geometric fabrics should not be labeled (bad) abstractionism – their ornamentation “acceptable” by virtue of its rhythmical and coloristic harmony. Only those artworks where rhythmical balance is disturbed and asymmetry predominates are indeed “abstract” – they do not reflect the function honestly, they look like errors, deviations, and thus cannot gladden the eye. That is why Rabotnova, with the mainstream, condemned Polish abstractionism: “For me, these pictures provoke physically unpleasant feelings”⁹⁹ - indeed, the abstract, that is, the non-organic, is physically perceived as alien.

The artist Zamskikh objected to this claim, stating that it does not matter whether an object’s form or ornament is symmetrical or not; what matters is how this object is combined with other objects (the principle of ensemble): “The structure of ornament can be non-rhythmical, the whole [ensemble] should be rhythmical.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, he claimed that the current ideas of realism and decoration are outdated. First of all, they are too narrow and reductionist:

The point is that if we observe all our fabrics, we will see virtually the same motifs everywhere, repeated in endless variations – these will be geometric, animalistic or floral ornaments. But our world is much richer. When contemporary artist, in particular Western artist, starts reflecting today’s world in a wider diapason, it seems unusual at first glance, and many think that it is non-realistic. Currently I am working on decorating the pavilion “Science” [for the All-Union Exhibition of People’s Economy], and when I encounter drawings and photos of microorganisms, I see there a lot of amazing motifs for textile patterns. Take various sections that we can see through the microscope; take animal organism,

⁹⁸ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 67.

⁹⁹ Ibid., l. 67-68.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., l. 79.

some mollusks or shells – these are amazing things, but we do not see and do not repeat them [in our patterns].¹⁰¹

Thus the ideological dichotomy “realism versus abstractionism” is being questioned: abstract can be also organic – and therefore also realistic.

Nikolai Musatov, an interior decorator and a VKhUTEIN graduate, interpreted Chekalov’s hypothesis as an effective update of the concept of socialist realism – the concept, evidently, much compromised in the eyes of applied artists by the end of the 1950s. Notably, Musatov appreciated the talk for “the originality of formulations” and “completely new language”: “We are used to this expression, ‘socialist realism.’ What is ‘socialist realism’? Where does it exist in our art? But after this talk I feel like seeing an answer [A vot v etom doklade ia pochuvstvoval otvet]. [Chekalov] speaks in the simplest language; he speaks about dead and live art” [My emphasis].¹⁰² As if Chekalov finally resolved the puzzles of authoritarian discourse that had obscured the idea of realism in particular and true art in general, reducing both to a number of formulations. Supposedly, Chekalov’s presentation was not his personal breakthrough but a symptom of the common implicit demand of de-ideologizing the art discourse. That is why it provoked resonance. Now realism could mean not only standard tirade “Party-mindedness, ideological content and people’s spirit” (*partiinnost’*, *ideinnost’*, *narodnost’*), but also the lively, the expressive, and even the exciting. As Musatov suggested, “it is [precisely] this contemporary, intense, and exciting art, which is *the* realism that affects us today.”¹⁰³

Remarkably, Chekalov’s lecture took place at the same time as Soviet architects voiced criticism of current building and urban planning practice in the Soviet Union and

¹⁰¹ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 78.

¹⁰² RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 72.

¹⁰³ Ibid., l. 72.

abroad.¹⁰⁴ In particular, P. Volodin warned against taking the “road of oversimplification” in mass construction and insisted that an architect’s attention should not be limited to technological questions, but should include broader artistic issues. Volodin called for “diversity, variety and irregularity” in urban design¹⁰⁵ – similarly to Chekalov’s and Zamskikh’s defense of asymmetry as a particular characteristic of “liveliness.” It is notable, too, that the notion of “plasticity” that Volodin and his colleagues presented as desired characteristic of urban design, also appeared in Chekalov’s speech, though in a slightly different sense: as the quality of the material which needs to be masterfully revealed by decorative artist, so that the final artwork would be “lively.”¹⁰⁶ The notion of “plasticity” was frequently aligned with the notion “organic” in evaluations of artistic strategies and products, especially in case of such “plastic” materials as ceramics and glass. Evidently, the criticisms of mass construction and of socialist realism, which developed in parallel from mid-1950s on, featured similar themes. This can be interpreted as a general tendency for challenging limitations of Socialist Modern in its different manifestations.

Though the concept “*zhivost*” per se did not generate a clear-cut artistic trend of late Soviet art, it nonetheless offered the possibility to critically approach the characteristics, or guidelines, of new Soviet modernism that were being formed in the late 1950s. This critical view, in turn, affected actual artistic production, divergent from the strict requirements of standardization and utility. In the next sub-section of this chapter I consider the particular variant of such modification of Socialist Modern in the sphere of artistic porcelain.

¹⁰⁴ Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern,” 231-232.

¹⁰⁵ RGALI, f. 674, op. 3, d. 32, l. 200-201; 204. Quoted in Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern,” 231.

¹⁰⁶ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2550, l. 14.

Anna Leporskaia's Porcelain: Organicism as Post-Suprematism

The repository of the Museum of the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg has a whole drawer filled with monochrome vessels, predominantly vases, teapots and jugs of simple but not rigid shapes. Their smooth outlines and “soft” silhouettes produce the effect of “plasticity” and an invite to a tangible experience (Fig. 2.1). The curator of the Soviet porcelain collection, Natalia Sergeevna Petrova, insisted that there was no need to photograph these pieces, because all of them are reproduced in high quality in several books and catalogues. Some of them are also exhibited in the museum.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, I photographed the vessels arranged in a row, in order to capture the rhythmic structure generated by repeated curves of the porcelain body. The biological metaphor is employed not accidentally: the peculiar “organicism” of these porcelain works is important for my analysis of the “organic” version of socialist realism. The author of these “plastic” vessels, Anna Leporskaia, is relatively well-known, but hardly beyond professional circles, and she definitely deserves much more public and scholarly attention.

¹⁰⁷ Conversation with Natalia Sergeevna Petrova at the Museum of Imperial Porcelain Factory, Petersburg, March 20, 2014.



Figure 2.2. Porcelain ware by Anna Leporskaia. Repository of the Museum of the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg.

Notably, porcelain, a traditional material for fine tableware, became a promising ground for modernist experimentation from the mid-1950s. Both young porcelain artists and older ones who traced the pulse of the time, took a new approach to tectonics, looking for an optimal solution of utilitarian form and the refusal of overtly decorative details, not harmonized with the porcelain body. As the art historian Iurii Gerchuk noted in his article from 2000, this was a common tendency in the socialist bloc, in particular Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Poland. A contemporary of the “Thaw” generation of artists, Gerchuk recollected that the “search was on for laconic silhouettes, flowing contours and fluid bends on the surface of a single synthetic form.”¹⁰⁸ He goes on to cite the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory in Leningrad as an active participant in this trend, and singles out Anna Leporskaia as a master of innovative forms.¹⁰⁹ I would like to develop Gerchuk’s argument by focusing

¹⁰⁸ Iurii Gerchuk, “The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64),” in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and material culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 81-100; 98.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

of the “organicism” of certain Leporskaia’s works and placing them within what I call “organic trend of Soviet modernism,” or, to borrow Fehervary’s term, “Organicist Modern.”

Anna Leporskaia’s creative biography is a vivid example of the continuity between the 1920s avant-garde, the art of the 1930s – 1950s, associated with socialist realism, and Soviet modernism of the 1950s – 1960s. She was one of the most faithful students of Kazimir Malevich, the inventor of Suprematism – one of most influential currents of international avant-garde. Born in Chernigov, Kiev Governorate, in 1900 in the family of a teacher of classic languages, Leporskaia spent her childhood and early youth in Pskov, where she graduated from the School for Art and Industry. In 1922, she moved to Petrograd and was admitted to the Vkhutein (not to be confused with the Moscow school of the same name), a successor of the Imperial Academy of Arts, where among her teachers were two prominent artists, painter Kuz’ma Petrov-Vodkin and sculptor Aleksandr Matveev. Because of the deepening clash between tradition and renewal, the Vkhutein curriculum was inconsistent and the free creative spirit not always encouraged. As a result, several students, including Leporskaia, left the institution in 1925.¹¹⁰ In the same year, she became an intern at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKHUK) – Malevich’s brainchild, conceived as a laboratory for studying modern art. There Leporskaia became fully immersed in Malevich’s theories of art. Together with her close friend and later husband, Nikolai Suetin, Leporskaia took part in research on the so-called “additive element” - a universal analytical tool for investigating the development of form, color and composition in modern painting, from Impressionism to Suprematism, a final stage of painting, or, as

¹¹⁰ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 5, d. 117, ll. 29-32; Troels Andersen (ed), *K. S. Malevich. The Leporskaia Archive* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011), 5.

Leporskaia termed it, “the edge of the abyss beyond which there was no place for pictorial description of nature.”¹¹¹ She had an opportunity to implement some of Malevich’s visions of color and form in several designs and color schemes for public interiors. Leporskaia also participated in designing the interiors of Soviet pavilions at World Exhibitions in Paris, 1937 and New York, 1939. Her post-war artistic career until her death in 1982 was connected to the State Porcelain Factory in Leningrad - the successor of the Imperial Porcelain Factory that produced exclusive items for the court.

I would suggest that Leporskaia’s “organicist” approach to porcelain owes much to her internship at GINKHUK. Taking careful record of Malevich’s talks, instructions and analyses of artworks,¹¹² Leporskaia paid attention to his vision of nature as a source for painterly work. Thus, her note from September 1926 states: “Our contemporary epoch is eclectic. Young people look at nature through various lenses. We need a method that would allow looking at nature through all the lenses at once, in order to discover a new point of view, to reveal new sensations of nature’s phenomena.”¹¹³ Such interest in nature might seem surprising for the artist who symbolically buried the objective world in his world-famous “Black Square.” As scholars often argue, Malevich was not interested in the materiality of objects and saw the non-objective world as the only true reality.¹¹⁴ When in 1923 Malevich worked for the State Porcelain factory in Petrograd, designing Suprematic forms and decors, he envisioned de-materialization of porcelain ware, replacing traditional

¹¹¹ Anna Leporskaia, “The Beginning and the End of Figurative Painting and Suprematism,” in *Malewitsch zum 100 Geburtstag* (Köln: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978), 65.

¹¹² Szymon Bojko, “Commentary,” in *Malewitsch zum 100 Geburtstag*, 71.

¹¹³ Anna Leporskaia, “Iz dnevnika,” in Irina Vakar. and Tatiana Mikhienko, eds, *Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Maleviche. Pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika. Vol. II.* Moscow: RA, 2004, 320.

¹¹⁴ Jean-Claude Marcade, “What is Suprematism?,” in *Malewitsch zum 100 Geburtstag*, 189-190; Ekaterina Degot’, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2002), 34.

“applied art” with laboratory work for generating new forms for the future.¹¹⁵ Supposedly, Malevich’s interest to nature was driven not by its concrete, tangible materiality, but by the principles of composition and proportions to be found in the natural world. These principles were primarily important in his art pedagogy. One of his usual assignments for students at GINKHUK was a “prescribed still-life,” where a harmony of similar objects was interrupted by an “alien” body, representing a different painterly culture. Thus, for example, Malevich would include a samovar tube, an element of Cubist universe, into Cezannist still-life with pears, thus challenging a student to overcome the contradiction and logically arrive at the next stage of painterly organization. Even though the final destination of this path through forms was the non-objective world of Suprematism, within the process students could master “contemporary plastic culture” (the expression of art historian Evgenii Kovtun).¹¹⁶ Unlike his older colleague Mikhail Matiushin, who ran the Department of Organic Culture at GINKHUK, Malevich did not give that much importance to research in a natural environment. However, in Leporskaia’s recollection, Malevich frequently visited the village of Nemchinovka in Moscow, where he painted many open air landscapes. According to the entry in Leporskaia’s diary from 1932, Malevich seemed to “completely coincide” with this landscape and once admitted: “To copy nature, to paint as it is – and how beautiful it is! But this painting will be uninteresting. Some addition is needed [*nuzhno chto-to vnesti*].”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ In a letter to art critic Nikolai Punin from July 8, 1923, envisioning the laboratory of new forms at the Porcelain Factory, Malevich insisted: “Non-objective abstraction must overthrow an object as a utilitarian nonsense (*nedomysel*), for only then new technical opportunities can open.” K. Malevich’s letter to N. Punin, June, 1923. Quoted in: Tamara Kudriavtseva, “Vokrug kvadrata,” in *Podneseniie k Rozhdestvu. Vokrug Kvadrata*, Exhibition catalogue (St. Petersburg: State Hermitage Publishing House, 2009), 17-85, 37.

¹¹⁶ Evgenii Kovtun, introduction to L. N. Vostretsova, *Dukh dyshit, gde khochet. Vladimir Vasilievich Sterligov (1904-1973)* (St. Petersburg: Museum, 1995), 7-8.

¹¹⁷ Leporskaia, ‘Iz dnevnika,’ 338.

Leporskaia's special attention to Malevich's non-imitational attitude to nature may have helped her to elaborate her own creative strategies as a porcelain artist.

Precision was always the main guide for Leporskaia in her work, and this is what she most appreciated in Malevich. Suetin, who continued experiments with Suprematic porcelain as the director of the Porcelain Factory's Art Laboratory, adopted and kept this principle even when he had to make concessions to "heroic" socialist realism in the late Stalin period (he died just one year after Stalin, in 1954). In the 1971 collection of ceramic artists' autobiographies and creative credos, Suetin's name is cited many times by thankful pupils to whom he taught precision.¹¹⁸ Leporskaia, in particular, connected this precision with deep, structural understanding of nature: "Work with them [Malevich and Suetin] gave me a sense of the basic origins of the plasticity of any form, its growing like a live natural element, flower or plant, and understanding of this magic 'a tiny bit' ('*chut*' - '*chut*') that can either create amazing harmony of a thing or make it ugly. In the work on form in porcelain it is clear that neither function nor technology should break the main principle – the harmony of an object."¹¹⁹ Such understanding of harmony as a "natural" condition of any object, nature-made or man-made, develops the theme of "harmony" recurrent in art critiques of the 1950s and at the same time points to the continuity of interest in the inherent qualities of materials, characteristic of the Russian avant-garde. Thus, through her focus on proportions, Leporskaia, in a way, synthesized certain elements of two leading movements of the Russian avant-garde, Suprematism and Constructivism into an individual manner of making tangible things for modernized Soviet homes and exhibitions.

¹¹⁸ *Khudozhniki ob iskusstve keramiki. 1954-1964* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971).

¹¹⁹ "Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia," in *Khudozhniki ob iskusstve keramiki*, 148.

Leporskaia's education in artistic ceramics started already in the Pskov School for Art and Industry, where the instructor Alisa Bruschetti-Mitrokhina taught students to understand inherent qualities of faience, majolica and porcelain.¹²⁰ Later Leporskaia recalled from those formative years her pleasure from "pulling" the vessel's form on a potter's wheel.¹²¹ Later, at Ginkhuk, she was surrounded by artists who had experience in porcelain: not only Malevich and Suetin, but also Malevich's famous students Ilya Chashnik and Lazar' Khidekel. In 1940-41 she designed a number of porcelain wares for mass production, such as vases, milk jugs, biscuit dishes and trays.¹²² These pieces, made by hand, were, in essence, miniature sculptures.¹²³ The elaboration of the technology for mass production was interrupted by the war, when the Porcelain Factory was evacuated to Irbit, Sverdlovsk region (Leporskaia remained in Leningrad, working in the Leningrad Headquarters of the Guerilla Movement as a designer of exhibitions and then the Museum of Defense of Leningrad). In 1945 Leporskaia received an offer from the Porcelain Factory (now named after Russian polymath, Mikhail Lomonosov) to develop forms for mass production, which were in urgent need after the war. Her first work in this area was the tea set "Cone" ("*Konus*") of sharp, geometric silhouette and very expressive forms, with the dynamism of diagonal lines and rhythmic repetition of handles, lids and knobs. This is reminiscent of certain examples of early 19th century Russian classicist porcelain, but even more of Malevich's Suprematist experiments in a softened version. Leporskaia's biographer, Marina Tikhomirova, marks out the accordance of all the forms and proportions in this set, as well as the combination of

¹²⁰ Marina Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970), 19.

¹²¹ *Khudozhniki ob iskusstve keramiki. 1954-1964*, 148.

¹²² TsGALI, f. 78, op. 5, d. 117 "Personal File of Anna Leporskaia," 33.

¹²³ Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia*, 35.

diversity and unity, a golden middle between chaos and monotony.¹²⁴ Thus, Leporskaia made a successful debut in designing an integral *ensemble* of objects rather than a single piece – an approach, anticipating the decorative artists’ preoccupation with complexes of things in the 1950s that generated the notion of complex design in the mid-1960s. With “Cone,” Leporskaia affirmed herself as an artist among older and more experienced colleagues, who started their careers in the 1920s and 1930s. The fine geometry of this set in combination with the vividness of outlines can be evaluated as a proto-stage of Leporskaia’s “organicist porcelain.”

In 1948, Leporskaia joined the Lomonosov factory. Even though, after “Cone,” she designed a number of conventional forms and in 1949 even overlooked the design and production of the large vase to be given to Stalin on the occasion of his 70th birthday.¹²⁵ From mid-1954 Leporskaia developed her “organicist” line – a series of objects and sets of clean silhouettes and smooth, melodic lines, devoid of purely decorative attachment. The first step in this direction was, most probably, a jug “Round” (“*Kruglyi*”), designed in 1954 (Fig. 2.2). Its full, roundish body with elegant outline, floating from the neck to the handle and to the bases produces the impression of “organic” integrity, as if one part naturally grows from another. Marina Tikhomirova characterized this model, together with similar Leporskaia designs of the mid-1950s, as the combination of the harmonic form and “vividly expressed utility,” up to a “certain intentional ‘sterility’ of the image.” She hastens to specify that these objects are not “featureless,” but skillfully and deliberately created as neutral.¹²⁶ Indeed, the “Round” jug in its original, undecorated version, does not celebrate anything

¹²⁴ Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia*, 40.

¹²⁵ Vasilii Rakitin, *Nikolai Suetin. 1897-1954* (St. Petersburg: RA; Palace Editions, 2008), 26.

¹²⁶ Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia*, 44.

and does not refer to a particular style of the past. Neither does it offer a radically new formal solution, as Malevich did in his famous Suprematist tea-pot and semi-cup. Rather, it attracts the eye by its roundness, shine and smoothness, and invites us to touch and to use. It also provokes association with the drop of milk – the presumed liquid content of the jug.

A specialist on Russian avant-garde should immediately grasp this jug's similarity with the model of feeding cup, made in 1930 by a Vkhutein student A. Sotnikov, under Vladimir Tatlin's supervision. Tatlin, famous for his designs of useful objects for the new *byt*, elaborated new forms in ceramics from 1923, and from the late 1920s he taught at the department of ceramics at Vkhutein. As Selim Khan-Magomedov notes in his fundamental work on "pioneers of Soviet design," Tatlin was enthusiastic about the plastic possibilities of ceramics and presented to his student a new concept of forming, based on tactile qualities. "Tatlin, with his high attention to the organicism of form and its contact with a human body, saw in porcelain ware new impulses of form-giving," writes Khan-Magomedov, bringing the example of a feeding cup as perfectly "fitting" a human hand (Fig. 2.3).¹²⁷ Khan-Magomedov also cites the prominent design historian Larisa Zhadova, who in her 1979 article on Tatlin compared the feeding cup's form to that of a female breast. "In this case," Zhadova argued, "this is not only new, but a maximally functional adaptation of the eternal form. It appears as a child's vessel-sculpture, a 'live thing,' and a form-image."¹²⁸ While avoiding clear anatomical references, Leporskaia, too, evidently had the contact with human hands as one of the guiding principles in designing her early work of the "organic" series.

¹²⁷ Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995), 55.

¹²⁸ Larisa Zhadova, "Pervaia posuda dlia detei," *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 11 (November 1979), 38.

And, though never directly cooperating with Tatlin, Leporskaia very probably would have been familiar with porcelain designs through her contacts with the avant-garde milieus.

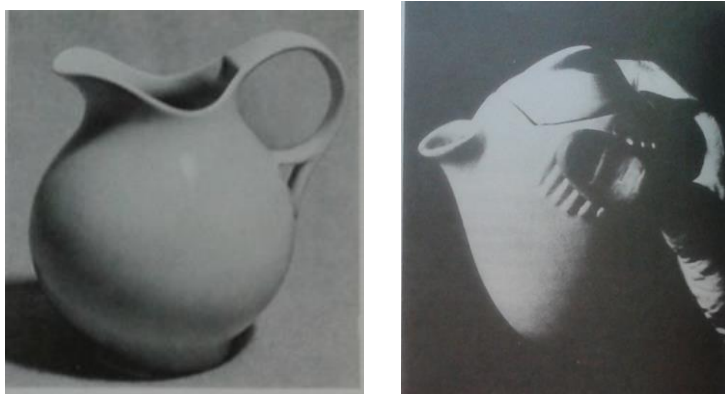


Figure 2.2 Anna Leporskaia, jug “Round,” porcelain, colorless glaze, 1954; Figure 2.3. A. Sotnikov (Vkhutein) under supervision of Vladimir Tatlin. Feeding cup for infants. 1930.

From the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s Leporskaia produced a significant number of models for vases, jugs and teapots. Most of them were reproduced in small editions for sale as utilitarian everyday objects. Their forms are diverse: from highly laconic, like in vases “Novgorodskaja” (1959) and “Birch” (“Beriozka,” 1962), to playful, like in vine vessels “Peasant Woman” (“Baba,” 1960), “Rooster” (Petushok), “Squab” (“Tolstiak”) (both 1961) and many others. But her main attention was dedicated to vases of the variety of forms, and many of them are now preserved in the collection of the Porcelain Factory Museum in St. Petersburg in their original, undecorated versions, which strike a viewer by their “organicist” expressiveness. Nowadays, Leporskaia is famous first of all as an outstanding porcelain sculptor, “the master of white porcelain.”¹²⁹ In fact, most of her forms, especially those which went to mass production and sale, were decorated by the factory’s painters or sometimes by Leporskaia herself. However, she never painted her small-size vases, preferring to show them at exhibitions undecorated in order to stress the plasticity

¹²⁹ Larisa Zhadova, “Belyi farfor Anny Leporskoi,” *DI SSSR* 6 (June 1979): 40-43.

and integrity of form. In particular, Leporskaia's white vessels were awarded gold medal at the International Exhibition in Prague in May 1962.¹³⁰ As for the items and sets for mass production, according to the keeper of the Museum of Imperial Porcelain Factory, Natalia Petrova, they were never white, with the exception of those made of bone china (soft-paste porcelain).¹³¹ Indeed, when artists and trade representatives discussed the guidelines for mass production, white models were rarely mentioned: evidently, painted porcelain was believed to be of consumer preference, while too "abstract" or "cosmopolitan" decoration was unwelcome. There was also a technical reason: mass reproduction of undecorated forms demanded a good amount of high quality raw material, for in the absence of decoration all the deficiencies are immediately visible. But even if good quality undecorated objects were mass-produced, they would be unprofitable, because, in the usual Soviet fashion, the USSR Ministry of Finance set the prices proportionally to the amount of décor on a certain commodity type. As a result, modernist experiments could hardly go beyond the level of exhibitions.¹³² Thus, Leporskaia's white porcelain remained at a conceptual stage, while Soviet consumers, lucky to obtain objects of her design, would in most cases have them decorated. Even though some painters chose tactful decorations that did not obscure the form but accentuated it, in other cases the original "organicism" of Leporskaia's design was lost on the way to the consumer.

Leporskaia's work in porcelain thus exemplifies the tension between conceptual and practical levels of Soviet applied art – or, to say more appropriately to the 1960s, product

¹³⁰ Galina Demosfenova, "Anna Akelsandrovna Leporskaia – dizainer farfora," *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* 5 (May 1979): 25-29; 25.

¹³¹ Conversation with Natalia Sergeevna Petrova in the Museum of Imperial Porcelain Factory, Petersburg, March 20, 2014.

¹³² Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (TsGA SPb), f. R-111, op. 27, d. 526a, l. 5-7; 59-61.

design. White porcelain was definitely very important for Leporskaia's credo as artist and designer as manifestation of the respect for the material. Refusal of decoration gave the opportunity to reveal its beauty in utility as opposed to its traditional association with luxury and exclusivity. At the same time, Leporskaia, by her own admission, painstakingly worked on perfecting forms in order to elevate white porcelain from the status of "raw material" to the medium of art.¹³³ She argued in the late 1960s: "Porcelain, with its amazing whiteness and shine, which produce the impression of jewelry, should take its proper place as modern material with big potential for development and use in architecture."¹³⁴ Leporskaia was not alone in this attitude: from the late 1950s, white porcelain became a significantly popular trend and frequently appeared at exhibitions. According to Tikhomirova, this trend had "deep and organic" roots in artists' striving to maximally reveal the inherent opportunities of materials.¹³⁵ By 1962-63, when Leporskaia had produced the first series of her "organicist" forms, some critics took the extreme position, arguing that painted porcelain does not correspond to contemporary taste and that only the most laconic décor is acceptable.¹³⁶ Leporskaia explained the popularity of white porcelain in the late 1950s – early 1960s by its appeal as "natural" and "external" materials, actively searched for since the post-war years. She also supposed that white porcelain was valued for its association with the whiteness of snow and thus with Russian winter – thus the artist herself stressed the organicist character of her work.¹³⁷ Some critics also suppose that Leporskaia's preference for white forms was inspired by the architecture of the medieval Russian

¹³³ Demosfenova, "Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia," 25.

¹³⁴ *Khudozhniki ob iskusstve keramiki*, 48.

¹³⁵ Tikhomirova, *Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia*, 68.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68; (TsGA SPb), f. R-111, op. 27, d. 526a, l.6.

¹³⁷ Demosfenova, "Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia," 25.

churches in Pskov, where she received her first artistic education.¹³⁸ In any case, the “genre” of white porcelain was for Leporskaia the laboratory for experiment with proportions, tectonics and nature-inspired imagery, as well as the way to express her distinct creativity among the factory employees, yet it hardly became the available “socialist” commodity that could have broad impact at people’s daily activities and relations.

One of most popular and frequently reproduced designs by Leporskaia is the tea- and coffee-set “Drop” (“*Kaplia*,” 1959, Fig. 2.4).¹³⁹ It was demonstrated, most probably, in the white edition, at the international exhibition of Ceramics in Ostend, Belgium, in 1959, and it is logical to presume that “Drop” was designed intentionally for this event. In comparison to “Cone,” based on abstract geometric forms, here an elongated drop, an ephemeral natural shape, is taken as a module. This form is presented in full in the coffee-pot and the vase, whereas in smaller pots, sugar-bowl and cups, we find truncated drops. The same shape is given to knobs, and even handles produce drop-like outlines. Leporskaia’s “cult of proportions,” learnt from Malevich and Suetin, here finds its clear expression. The “organicism” of this set is not of the style of traditional Japanese Raku ware, where the ceramic body is hand-shaped and glaze is let flowing naturally. Instead, this is carefully thought-out organicism: a natural form is used here as the departure point for proportioning. Even though Leporskaia herself participated in the production process, her forms transmit not so much the “live movement of the hand,” as design critic Galina Demosfenova viewed it,¹⁴⁰ but rather clarity of thought and precision of the eye. Similarly to her celebrated teacher

¹³⁸ Demosfenova, “Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia,” 5.

¹³⁹ TsGALI, f. 78, op. 5, d. 117, 25. In the reference, given to Leporskaia by the Leningrad Union of Artists, it is not specified whether the white or decorated version of “Drop” was exhibited. But given the fact that Leporskaia preferred to exhibit her works undecorated, I would presume that was also the case with “Drop” in 1959.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Demosfenova, op. cit., 27.

(who was, though, still a semi-forbidden “formalist” in the 1950s – 1960s), Leporskaia used her observations of nature for her own ideas of form-giving and imagery.



Figure 2.4. Anna Leporskaia, coffee set “Drop,” porcelain, colorless glaze, 1959.

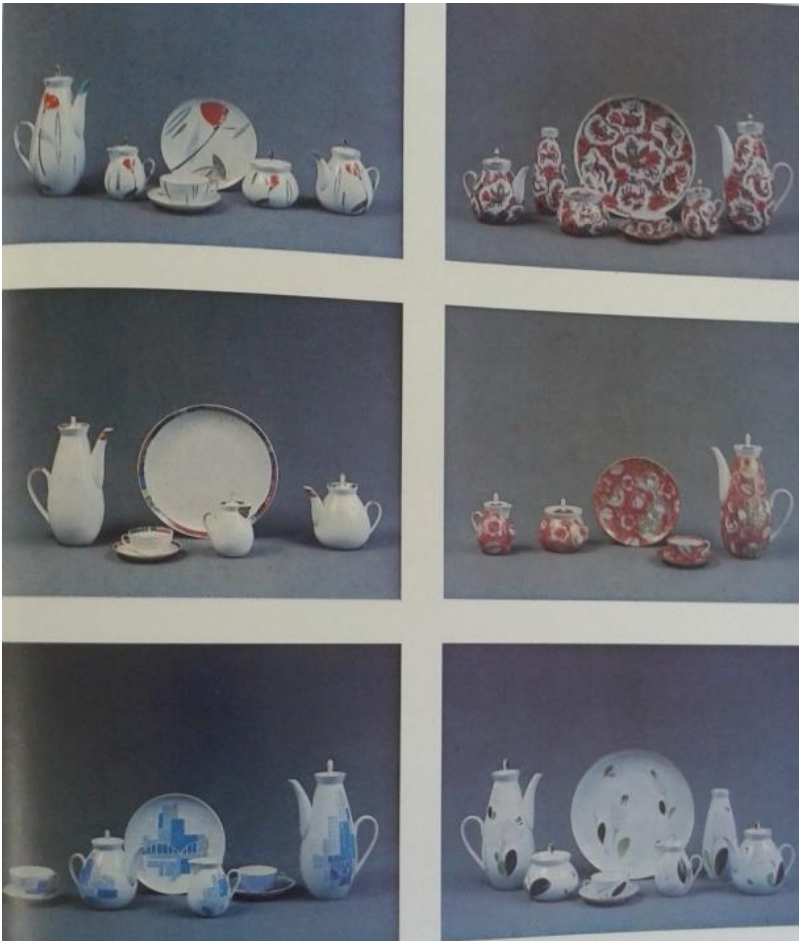


Figure 2.5. Variants of painting of “Drop’ by different artists of the Lomonosov Factory, 1960.



Figure 2.6. Coffee Set "Evening," painting by A. Semionova on the form 'Drop' by A. Leporskaia. Overglaze polychrome painting. 1960.



Figure 2.7. Anna Leporskaia, saucer "Leaf," porcelain, colorless glaze, 1960.



Figure 2.8. Anna Leporskaia, Coffee set "Little Elephant," porcelain, colorless glaze, 1960.



Figure 2.9. Anna Leporskaia, Coffee set “Flowers and Leaves,” colorless glaze, 1966.

A similar method can be seen in later works, such as the saucer “Leaf” (“*List*,” 1960, Fig. 2.7), the coffee set “Little Elephant” (“*Slonik*,” 1960, Fig. 2.8) or the coffee set “Flowers and Leaves” (“*Tsvety i listia*,” 1966, Fig. 2.9). Instead of copying nature in a naturalist manner, the artist “processes” it and produces qualitatively new energetic, intense, vivid forms – very much like Chekalov described it in his lecture. As Natalia Petrova keenly emphasized, Leporskaia’s works appeared “not out of the storm and chaos of sudden inspiration, but as a result of deliberately set and attentively conducted experiment.” This does not mean that “dry theoretic calculation” prevails over “free creativity” – the point is that Leporskaia’s creative process is subordinated to “conscious discipline.”¹⁴¹ Sharing this view, one can term Leporskaia’s style “arranged organicism,” or “conceptual organicism.” This case can serve to the extension of Bruno Zevi’s argument

¹⁴¹ Natalia Petrova, ed., *Zasluzhennyyi khudozhnik RSFSR, laureat Gos. premii imeni I. E. Repona Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia. Vystavka proizvedenii. Katalog* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1977), 3.

about all architecture being both “arranged” and “organic,”¹⁴² or of the thesis of the master of “organic architecture,” Frank Lloyd Wright, that architecture as such is “the organic pattern of all things” and also “the geometric pattern of all things, of life, of social and human world.”¹⁴³ If the relation “arranged vs. organic” is to be envisioned as a scale, then in the sphere of porcelain Leporskaia moved significantly nearer to the second pole than Malevich, who acted against the logic of material in creating his strictly geometric, angular shapes.

Leporskaia’s ability to apply Malevich’s lessons to concrete production and to the requirements of utility brought her to excellence not just as decorative artist, but as product designer. Not accidentally, when Leporskaia’s personal exhibition took place in 1978 in the Leningrad Union of Artists, it was reviewed by two prominent design historians – Larisa Zhadova for *Decorative art of the USSR* and Galina Demosfenova (VNIITE researcher) for *Technical Aesthetics*, and the latter review was pointedly titled “Anna Leporskaia, Designer of Porcelain.”¹⁴⁴ The exhibition strongly impressed the Leningrad art professionals and attracted their colleagues from Moscow, and, probably, of other Soviet cities. Exhibition designer, Leonid Liak, covered exhibition pedestals with bright blue fabric that stressed the whiteness, shine, architectonic clarity of and “organicist” vividness of white porcelain (Fig. 2.10). The exhibition was the personal statement of the aged and experienced artist and designer, and, according to Zhadova, the first manifestation of the aesthetic power of white porcelain. Moreover, Zhadova captured its potential for structuring space: “White porcelain

¹⁴² Bruno Zevi, “Meaning and Scope of the Term *Organic* in Architecture,” In *Towards an Organic Architecture* (London: Faber&Faber, 1950), 66-76.

¹⁴³ Frank Lloyd Wright, “Architecture and Modern Life,” in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer (ed.), *Frank Lloyd Wright. Collected Writings* (Rizzoli/ New York: The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, 1993), 216-249.

¹⁴⁴ Zhadova, “*Belyi farfor*”; Demosfenova, “*Anna Aleksandrovna Leporskaia – dizainer farfora*.”

as material, with its semi-transparent structure, with its inner spatiality, was especially advantageous for the development of the new concept of environment.” This concept could be, evidently, an “organic environment,” as it was actually presented at the exhibition: notably, Zhadova spoke of exhibits in biological terms as “families” of sets and “keens” of vases, cups, and saucers.¹⁴⁵ This observation suggests the trajectory of Leporskaia’s creative work from product design with its technical and institutional limitations (first of all, the inevitability of décor as guarantor of “salability”) to “environment design,” in tune with experimentations of the 1970s, most strikingly represented by the Senezh studio of experimental design near Moscow. Whether Leporskaia’s exhibition had an actual impact on Soviet environment design of the 1970s and 1980s is a question that deserves further research.



Figure 2.10. Leonid Liak, design of Anna Leporskaia’s personal exhibition in Leningrad, 1978.

¹⁴⁵ Zhadova, “*Belyi farfor*,” 42.



Figure 2.11. Anna Leporskaia, 20.08.1964.

Even though it had little effect on consumer practices and the daily activities of ordinary people in Leningrad and beyond, Leporskaia “white porcelain” has significance as revealing the potential of traditional material for modern design thinking and practice. It demonstrates the modern way to adapt natural forms to design and mass production without slipping into kitsch and sentimentality. Importantly, it was also a practical response to the post-war tendency to reflect on a creative process and the artist’s relations with the medium. The next section turns to a particular theoretical response to the same tendency.

Defamiliarization and Inquiry in the Nature of Things

From the beginning, nature gave people the example for creating object reality [*predmetnuiu deistvitel'nost'*]. A human being needed to find in everything that surrounded her (not only at home, in daily life, but also in nature) something transformable, adaptable to her own purposes. The anatomy of an animal, its plasticity and typical movements suggested the utilitarian and aesthetic form of a vessel. “Throat” and “handle,” - the parts of a bird, a beast or even a human being, - underwent creative interpretation and were forever fixed as functional element of a vessel, a bowl (think of Etruscan or Mexican vessels).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Boris Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970), 7.

Such interpretation of an “organic” theme in Soviet aesthetics belongs to Boris Smirnov, a person of diverse talent. An outstanding Leningrad glass artist and pedagogue (he taught at LVKhPU and MVKhPU) and a chief designer of the State Optic Institute in Leningrad, in the 1960s he recognized the necessity to reflect on his 40-year professional experience and, broader, to the meaning of an artist’s work in a contemporary society. The resulting book, published in 1970 in Leningrad, was aptly titled *Artist on The Nature of Things* (*Khudozhnik o prirode veshvhei*) – with the clear allusion to Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*. Appropriately, the author used the line from Lucretius as his first epigraph: “Since it is like that – what we see with the mind like what we see with the eye – it must come about in a like way.”¹⁴⁷ Then Smirnov proceeded to unfold his argument about nature as the ultimate powerful source for even the most sophisticated and abstract artistic forms. For this purpose, the book was illustrated by objects from different cultures and ages, including Smirnov’s own works. After the discussion of particular objects, the author proceeded to reflect on the objectives and methods of designer’s work. Smirnov himself designed the book, including the setup of illustrations, captions and commentaries,¹⁴⁸ thus appearing as an author in two respects and, in a way, implementing the idea of art synthesis that was clearly pronounced in the Soviet art discourse in the 1960s. Today Smirnov’s book is undeservedly little known beyond artistic circles on post-Soviet space, although it is a rare example of a Soviet artist’s extensive analysis of professional activity. In particular, this book-album signals the growing need to inquire into the nature of creative work in the

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Boris Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 3. Smirnov relied on a Russian translation by Fedor A. Petrovskii, first published in 1936 and later several times reprinted. Here I quoted after the English translation by W. H. D. Rouse: Titus Lucretius Karus, *De Rerum Natura* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 335. The quote is line 750 from Book Four, in Latin: “quatenus hoc simile est illi, quod mente videmus atque oculis, simili fieri ratione necesse est.”

¹⁴⁸ Nonna Stepanian, “Boris Smirnov. Flagman i ego eskadra,” *Problemy Dizaina* 4, 2007. I am thankful to Aleksandr Terebenin for bringing this text to my attention and providing me with its electronic version.

second half of the 1960s, which I consider as a particular manifestation of Soviet “Organicist Modern.”

As Smirnov explained in the introduction, the book was about “the creating of a consumer object,” (*“potrebitel’skoi veshchi.”*).¹⁴⁹ “Consumer object” should be a better translation than “commodity,” because Smirnov envisioned an object that is not only practically, but also spiritually useful and user-friendly. The designer of such object was expected to deeply understand nature: “only the one who can see, know and feel the surrounding reality, can create a useful object that will be a consumer’s best friend.”¹⁵⁰ The theme of object-as-friend, or commodity-as-comrade, famously appeared in Aleksandr Rodchenko’s 1925 letter from Paris to his fellow productivist artist and wife Varvara Stepanova: “Our things (*veshchi*) in our hands should also be equal, be comrades, and not black and gloomy slaves like here. (...) Things will be comprehended and become friends and comrades of people; and people will learn to laugh, rejoice and communicate with things.”¹⁵¹ Christina Kiaer noted in her insightful study of socialist objects, that the leading theorist of Constructivism Boris Arvatov characterized proper socialist thing as “co-worker” and the “embodiment of human thought” in contrast to a capitalist commodity that is always a fetish and acts as a substitute for human relations.¹⁵² This “productivist” vision of things as friends and comrades was evidently shared by Smirnov already in the 1920s-1930s, when worked as designer in different spheres and co-produced a number of

¹⁴⁹ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ *Idid*, 6.

¹⁵¹ Aleksandr Rodchenko’s letter to Varvara Stepanova from May 4, 1925, in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Opyty dlia budushchego* (Moscow: Grant, 1996), 152. Rodchenko arrived to Paris in April 1925 for work on decorating the Soviet section of the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts and, in particular, installing his famous morel for Workers’ Club. He wrote to Stepanova almost every day.

¹⁵² Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 34-38.

Constructivist buildings. His turn to this theme in the 1970 was obviously prompted by his ongoing concern with the meaning of consumer object in a socialist society. Yet he did not limit his analysis to socialist objects and avoided a discussion of socio-economic context of the functioning of things, focusing instead on the principles and hidden possibilities of work with different materials and artistic images. According to the recent observation of art critic Nonna Stepanian, Smirnov's book "aspired to become a universal judgment on the world of objects."¹⁵³ Indeed, his selection of objects for analysis runs across centuries and world regions, whereas the essential connection to the principles of nature is claimed to be their common feature.

Smirnov's reasoning is more strongly affected by another avant-garde concept - "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*), first introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, a representative of the formalist school of literary criticism. In his 1916 essay "Art as Technique," Shklovsky famously discussed the perception of habitual things, by which he meant not only material objects, but also actions, such as handwriting or house cleaning.¹⁵⁴ He argued that habitual things are not seen but automatically recognized; they appear to us as "packed" and observable only on the surface. An artist's task is to rescue things from "the sphere of the unconsciousness-automatic," and the method for this is *ostranenie*, usually translated as "defamiliarization," but also translatable as "estrangement." Distancing from habitual things and making them strange is, in Shklovsky's vision, the primary technique of art. He claimed:

...in order to return the sense of life, to feel the things, in order to make a stone be a stone [*chtoby sdelat' kamen' kamennym*], there exists something called art. The aim of art is to give the sense of a thing as a vision, not as a recognition; the

¹⁵³ Stepanian, "Boris Smirnov. Flagman i ego eskadra."

¹⁵⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *O teorii prozy* (Moscow: Krug, 1925), 7-20. Cited from: <http://www.opojaz.ru/manifests/kakpriem.html> accessed 3.10.2014

technique of art is “defamiliarization” of things and the method of complicated form, which increases difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception in art is self-sufficient and must be extended; *art is the way to experience the making of a thing, but what is made in art is not important* [emphasis in the original]¹⁵⁵

Shklovsky explains this idea on the examples from literature, and tangible things interest him only as described – and defamiliarized - in a literary text. According to him, the process of making things is a worthy literary subject, but not ready forms, which are habitual, automatically recognized, and therefore “not important” in (literary) art.

Smirnov could be well aware of the concept of defamiliarization as early as in the 1920s, when he studied at the Department of Architecture of at Petrograd Vkhutein, mastered book illustration under prominent graphic artist Nikolai Tyrsa, and then headed decorative-artistic in the Leningrad experimental film workshop. Though Smirnov was 10 years younger than Shklovsky, he, too, belong to the progressive literary-artistic community in Leningrad in the 1920s, where ideas could broadly circulate, or he even could know Shklovsky personally. It is therefore possible to suggest that already as a young man, Smirnov was influenced by the idea of defamiliarization in his understanding of material culture and the objectives of designer’s work.¹⁵⁶ Smirnov could also discover this concept later in his life, in the late 1950s-1960s, when Shklovsky’s early, “formalist” works were

¹⁵⁵ Shklovsky, “Art as Technique.”

¹⁵⁶ As I have argued in Chapter 1, even if there was no official design profession in the 1920s Soviet Russia, many artists, especially the representatives of the avant-garde, were often employed at industrial enterprises, or worked as decorators of festivals and parades. It was widespread that the same person worked in different spheres of cultural production – architecture, painting, graphic art, graphic and product design, decoration of festivities. Boris Smirnov, just like more well-known Vladimir Tatlin, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lisitsky, Nikolai Suetin, etc. – is a perfect representative of this universalist approach to shaping material culture, characteristic for the avant-garde. On Smirnov’s pre-war artistic career see Ildar Galeev, ed., *Boris Aleksandrovich Smirnov, 1903-1986. Arkhitekt, Dizainer, Grafik. Dovoennyi Period* (Moscow: Galeev galereia, 2010). For his detailed biography, see the facebook webpage, devoted to Smirnov: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/ Борис-Александрович-Смирнов-1903-1986/457473480969925?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Борис-Александрович-Смирнов-1903-1986/457473480969925?fref=ts) accessed 5.10.2014

known in artistic circles.¹⁵⁷ In any case, “defamiliarization” clearly reads between the lines of Smirnov’s 1970 book as the key to understanding “the nature of things.” However, Smirnov mostly avoided using the term “defamiliarization,” mentioning it only once in passing. Moreover, he actually never referred to Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique” and mentioned Shklovsky also just once, when selectively quoting one of his late essays. While for a contemporary reader this looks like plagiarism, in the context of cultural production in the 1960s Soviet Russia this could be the way to evade censorship. Even though Shklovsky’s later books were officially published in the 1950s and 1960s, and the entry on *Ostranenie* by a linguist Aleksei Leontiev even appeared in the Short Literary Encyclopedia, published in 1968,¹⁵⁸ his early works were still half-prohibited and could not be freely quoted by any author.¹⁵⁹ Most probably, Smirnov abstained from quoting Shklovsky properly out of caution and in order to make his book publishable. To use again Michel de Certeau’s concept, this was Smirnov’s art of making do, his tactic of promoting semi-prohibited concept as useful for Soviet aesthetics. Even though Smirnov referred to several authors and notions in his text, I suggest that reading it through the lenses of defamiliarization is most productive for elucidating its relation to the theme of “organic.”

In “Art as Technique,” Shklovsky mentions the act of writing by pen as the example of habitual, automated process. Smirnov also uses this image in the opening line of his book:

I am looking at the quill and gradually collecting my thoughts, concentrating. A habitual appearance of a quill calms me down, I forget about it, and nothing distracts me any more. But is it always so? What if the quill itself would attract my attention? For example, it was occasionally replaced by another pen, an unusual,

¹⁵⁷ Ilya Kukulin, email to the author from October 5, 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Aleksei Leontiev, “Ostranenie,” in *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1968), 488-489. I am indebted to Ilya Vladimirovich Kukulin for bringing this text to my attention.

¹⁵⁹ Ilya Kukulin, email message to author, October 5, 2014.

new one, or boring old one, or damaged, bad, scratching, or weak, or the one that produces too bold line, or the one with too heavy or too light holder, for example, not wooden or plastic, but cold metal holder; or, simply ugly pen, very complicated in form and non-plastic. Or maybe, as a surprise I've got a new, very beautiful and original, never seen before fountain pen. It so conveniently goes in my hand, and its color is so wonderful.¹⁶⁰

Thus, we are reminded that the very process of creative work, including that of the designer outlining a new idea, is strongly influenced by a utilitarian object. The dual nature of pen as both the symbol of creativity and a consumer object, and, at the same time, as both the tool and the object of creative process, prompted Smirnov to take it as starting point for implicitly introducing the idea of defamiliarization. A pen signifies here a habitual thing that escapes our attention, unless an attentive user “unpacks” it by looking beneath its surface: “The construction of a quill is very simple. Formally, it consists of sharply cut and split edge of the stem (tube), and thus with the pressure of hand, ink flowing from the tube produces trace.”¹⁶¹ A creative person, Smirnov insists, should turn special attention on these minutiae instead of dismissing them. If Shklovsky's artist defamiliarizes habitual things in literary texts, presenting them in a new light, Smirnov's artist makes them strange by inquiring in their structures and principle of functioning, thus seeing the ways to improve them. This is how the quill evolved into fountain pen and then into ballpoint pen. Thus, in Smirnov's theory, defamiliarization appears as the fuel for design process and the defamiliarizing artist as a designer.

Similarly to Shklovsky, Smirnov includes on the sphere of the habitual not only mundane objects but also actions and the sounds produced by actions with objects, like

¹⁶⁰ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 4.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

clinking of the kitchenware or tinkling of sewing machine.¹⁶² Moreover, Smirnov extends the sphere of the habitual to the nature-made world:

Cicada's jingle in a summer evening on the seaside that provokes a very special feeling in the first day of summer is [usually] barely noticeable, as we quickly get used to it. However, if we paid attention to it, we would learn how interestingly and wittily is created the instrument producing these sounds – the rhythmic contractions of the muscles of the sound apparatus of the singing cicada that provoke the clinking reaction of the membrane located in the belly.¹⁶³

Smirnov goes on with such examples as the beetle's complicated mechanism of flight or the way the leaf unfolds from a bud, "as if it has been preliminary carefully folded and wrapped."¹⁶⁴ The nature, he argues, provides a wide choice of phenomena for an artist to explore and adopt for creative work, but this choice should be smart. Therefore an artist should be broadly educated and familiar with the latest scientific discoveries and with emerging disciplines, such as cybernetics, bionics and biocybernetics. Armed with knowledge, artists will not mechanistically copy the forms of nature or vulgarize them but, instead, will scrutinize them "with mind and the eyes," just like they scrutinize social phenomena, with the aim to create harmonious world of objects. These objects will have a deep, structural link with nature and thus possess not only "consumer utility" but also "emotional, aesthetic utility," and in some cases the latter would be more significant than the former.¹⁶⁵

A decisive component of such "emotional utility" is, for Smirnov, the object's capability to amaze - by its form, decoration, texture, and proportions. In Smirnov's theory, amazement appears as both artistic (or design) technique and the effect produced by the object: "Surprise and amazement are the best stimulants of creativity, not only for a

¹⁶² Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 7.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

professional working in art, but also for everyone who can fully comprehend their creative activity.”¹⁶⁶ An ordinary consumer should be thus also a creative agent, at least on the level of comprehending natural and man-made objects. In the introduction to the illustrated part of the book, Smirnov stated that he

will be satisfied if he manages to fixate the reader’s attention not only on the unseen, but also on the well familiar, thereby provoking emotional experience and the sense of amazement (*amazement is the beginning of art*) and stimulating the desire to aesthetically comprehend an object, in an uncommon, nontrivial, new way” [my emphasis].¹⁶⁷

Though this passage reads like a disguised call for “defamiliarizing” the images of objects, it actually alludes to Shklovsky’s later work, which, nonetheless, can also be considered a development of the idea of defamiliarization. The book *Artistic Prose: Reflections and Analyses* by Shklovsky, published in Moscow in 1959, included the essay “The Birth of a New Novel” (the analysis of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*) and within it a short chapter “On Amazement.”¹⁶⁸ A knowledgeable reader would definitely not miss the implicit reference. But at the end of the book Smirnov quoted the same text openly, returning at the same time to his own earlier argument:

Viktor Shklovsky writes: ‘Amazement is the beginning of the comprehension of life... it is the discovery of the distance between oneself and the phenomenon, the criticism of the phenomenon, its evaluation...’ On the very first pages of my book I noted that the ability to see, know and feel helps a person to perceive and understand art, thus enriching her life. To be good at watching and seeing is to be amazed by what you see.¹⁶⁹

In the original quote, Shklovsky spoke about the importance of amazement as writer’s technique of depicting reality, a technique whose effect is broadening the readers’ outlook and making them see the contradictions of life. For Shklovsky, amazement is the incentive

¹⁶⁶ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 182.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶⁸ Viktor Shklovsky, “Rozhdeniie novogo romana,” in *Khudozhestvennaia proza. Razmyshleniia i razbory* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1959), 272-279.

¹⁶⁹ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 182.

for innovation: “Amazement is the beginning of the comprehension of life. *It is dangerous for conservatives*” [my emphasis]. In the following few sentences, Shklovsky brought the example of Coketown, a fictional city from Dickens’s novel *Hard Times*, where the feeling of amazement was prohibited by the authorities, and then continued: “Amazement is the discovery of the distance between oneself and the phenomenon, the criticism of the phenomenon, its evaluation.”¹⁷⁰ Supposedly, Smirnov omitted the middle of the quote because of its rather strong political overtones, or simply because he did not find it directly relevant to his argument. Yet he definitely had in mind the potential of amazement as the source of personal freedom of thinking and the challenge to dogmas. This idea, resonant with optimism of the “Thaw” era, found its expression across types of art criticism. Careful reading of Smirnov’s book and his articles of the 1950s – 1960s suggests that the idea of amazement as engine for creative innovation was not just a borrowing from Shklovsky but also the result of his solid experience as architect, artist and designer. Encouraging his readers to “see by their minds” (with the reference to Lucretius), Smirnov raised many important issues, which are impossible to cover within the framework of this chapter. Therefore, I focus on three issues, most relevant for the theme of “the organic.”

First, forms and constructions of natural objects, such as poppy boxes, bird nests, pumpkins or wings and jaws of big and small beetles (*zhuki i zhichishki*), are perfect as the models for diverse forms and mechanisms. Adopting these models, in turn, affects the technology of production: “An artist invents new and original solutions of vessels, whose artistic image, noticed in nature [*podsmotrennyi u prirody*], is built on a mutual coordination of form and method of its implementation, that is, technology,” Smirnov

¹⁷⁰ Shklovsky, “Rozhdeniie novogo romana,” 275.

argued.¹⁷¹ Bringing the example of his favorite area, artistic glass, Smirnov supposed that the of free-blown glass was originally inspired by the form of pumpkin, though not directly, but via the so-called *kolebas*, or *tykvianka* – a vessel produced by the growth of pumpkin, bandaged in the middle. The use of such vessels by Australian and African aborigines suggests their ancient origin, but in the 20th century they were also widespread in Ukraine and Turkmenistan. A *kolebas* is a product of minimal human intervention into the process of natural growth, while free blown glass is a man-made product requiring strong effort. Yet Smirnov finds here structural analogy:

The continuity of the form-giving to vessels is ...related to the technology of production. Hence the closeness, similarity of forming blown glass objects: the fruit of pumpkin is filled by growing seeds; the original blank – “bullet” – of a blown glass object is inflated by air; for both, the natural form is a spherical body of maximal volume and minimal surface, that is, a drop. In both cases a human hand intervenes by pinching the form.¹⁷²

While Smirnov’s hypothesis about the direct genealogical link between free-blown glass and the *kolebas* is debatable, his observation of the analogy on the levels of form and technology allows a glass artist and a consumer to broaden their perception of habitual objects - glass vessels. In other words, by defamiliarizing the production process and product, Smirnov revealed its kinship with nature on a structural level. This “convergence of vessels”¹⁷³ was illustrated by the decanter of colored glass, designed in 1941 by Smirnov’s teacher Nikolai Tyrsa in the experimental shop of the Leningrad mirror factory (which after the war developed into Leningrad Factory of Art Glass, one of Smirnov’s workplaces). In this case, indeed, the artist was inspired by the form of *kolebas*, but created, on Smirnov’s view, “a second nature,” which is “already not natural but human-oriented –

¹⁷¹ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 114-115; 140; 148-153.

¹⁷² Ibid., 153.

¹⁷³ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 153.

humanlike, friendly [*dlia cheloveka – chelovecheskaia, svoia*], even if can very much resemble nature.”¹⁷⁴ In essence, Smirnov suggested a new understanding of realism, beyond immediately recognizable forms and motives and based on the technology of form-giving (Fig. 2.12).

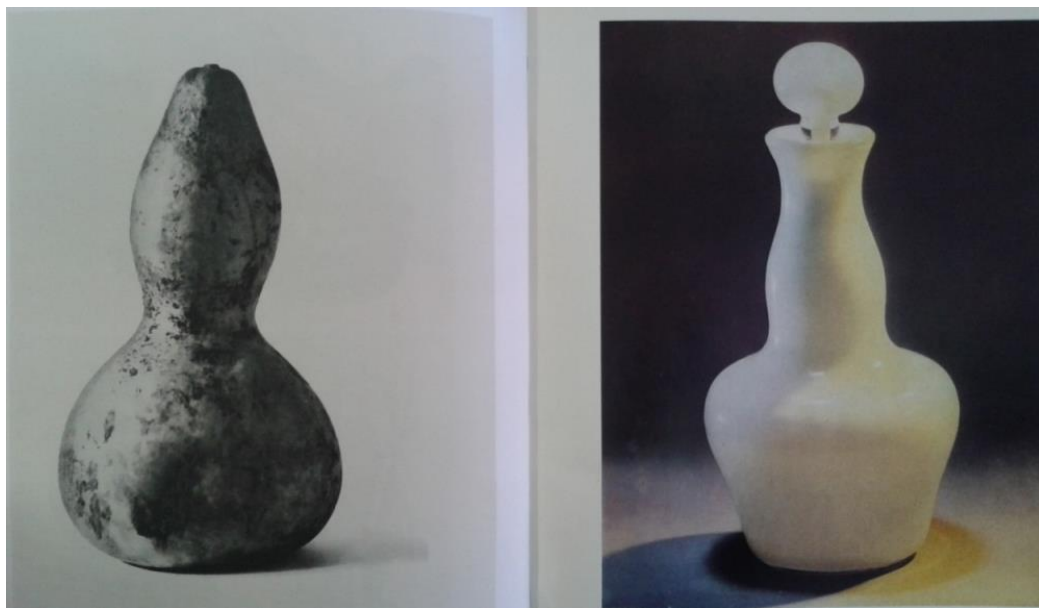


Figure 2.12. Left: Vessel-tykvianka; Right: Nikolai Tyrsa, decanter for water, colored glass, 1941.

Second, Smirnov emphasized the importance of natural textures in creating new forms and artistic images. In this respect, he shared the argument of many reformist art critics, such as Aleksandr Saltykov or Moisei Kagan: natural texture provides excellent décor and constitutes the basis for clear and laconic image. And the same time, Smirnov noticed the diversity of decorative effects, reached by the processing of natural material, such as wood. He illustrated this point by pieces of woodenware, designed by contemporary Soviet artists: “The revealed (not blurred) beauty of the material – the texture of wood – accentuates the plasticity of an object and defines its image”¹⁷⁵ (Fig. 2.13).

¹⁷⁴ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 140.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

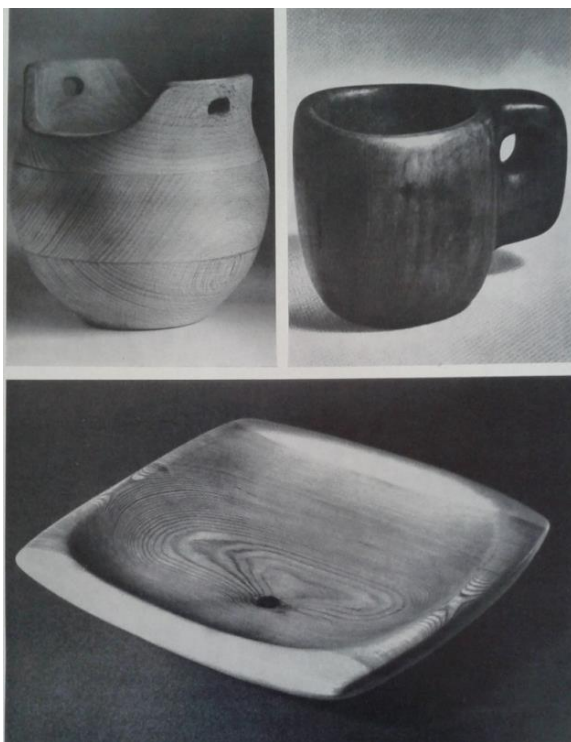


Figure 2.13. Top left: I. N. Sokolova and L. F. Amchislavskii, bucket, glued laminated timber, 1966. Top Right: L. N. and D. N. Sushkanov, mug, wood, 1965. Bottom: L. N. and D. N. Sushkanov, trough, wood, 1965.

But Smirnov moves beyond the usual modernist rhetoric of “revealing natural texture” by suggesting two ways to play with the theme of texture. One is them is creating texture by technical means, as long as it does not contradict the qualities of the material: as a result, the texture will look “organic,” harmonized with the material and form. For example, the artist of Leningrad Factory of Artstic Glass A. M. Ostroumov in his vase “Accord” from lead glass (1966, Fig. 2.14) created a clear geometric pattern of facets. As Smirnov emphasized, so-called “crystal” lead glass properly reveals its glitter only in facets, and the quality of faceting defines the artistic value of the material.¹⁷⁶ Ostroumov’s simple solution of the faceting produced not just a refined composition in tune with the modernist penchant for geometry, but also the impression of texture. As Smirnov put it,

¹⁷⁶ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 172.

using the term from Constructivist lexicon, “the ornament arranged so organically that it is perceived almost as *faktura*.”¹⁷⁷ While in this statement “*faktura*” has a sense of a natural texture, the very artistic effect that Smirnov describes is close to the Constructivist understanding of *faktura*. Leading theorist of Constructivism Aleksei Gan wrote in his 1922 book-manifesto: “... *faktura* is the organic condition of the processed material or new state of its organism.”¹⁷⁸ Gan specified that *faktura* means the processing of the material through and through, not just its surface. In Smirnov’s example, glass, the synthetic material not existing in nature, acquires “natural” texture through careful processing, that is, *faktura*.

Another way of playing with the theme texture is quite the opposite: depicting texture on the object’s surface, thus reducing it to décor. This approach to texture seems at odds with the modernist principle of respect for materials that Smirnov himself so actively promoted in this book and elsewhere. However, the status of celebrated art and design expert allowed Smirnov to challenge one of the sacred cows of the Socialist Modern. Smirnov aptly noted that the tendency to revisit the notion of realism had resulted in uncompromising rejection of depiction in applied art and design. Thus, for example, the 19th century method of depicting the texture of wood upon porcelain ware was perceived by Soviet reformist art critics as forgery (Fig. 2.15). Smirnov objected to this opinion by presenting the texture not only as a structural element of design, but also as pattern valuable for its natural beauty and thus admirable as such. Though this reads as almost an advocacy of “pure art,” Smirnov rather called for open-mindedness in thinking of decoration. If floral motives are traditional in porcelain décor, why a beautiful texture of wood cannot be so?

¹⁷⁷ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 116.

¹⁷⁸ Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver’: 2-ia Gostipografiia, 1922), 62.

Similarly to the artist Zamskikh at Chekalov's lecture, Smirnov argued for diversifying the range of ornamental motives through exploring natural world:

How wonderful is the beauty of natural patterns of everything visible in nature – from micro-world to fingerprint patterns. [Think about] the boundless multitude of most diverse patterns of texture, color combinations, a shade changing the pattern of the same surface, like shell or a bark, with the movement of the sun. And [think about] butterfly wings, hummingbird feathers, the shell of swallow's eggs, snake skin, threads of a leave, etc. And flowers are the essence of nature's beauty. Their depiction on a cup's surface does not imitate or forge a flower bouquet. And even if it imitates, no one will be deceived and no one will try to smell flower aroma in the cup. If this [the depiction] is talented and creative, this is the feast for an eye, the artwork.¹⁷⁹

Smirnov thus used the technique of defamiliarization to rejuvenate the traditional understanding of nature as a source for decorative motives. This approach can also be seen as postmodernist: nature as a source for citation, where the body of object acts as quotation marks. Eduard Krimmer's porcelain set "*Beriozka*" ("Little Birch Tree," 1958, Fig. 2.16), used by Smirnov to illustrate his argument, thus appears as a perfectly postmodernist object. The natural dots and stripes of birch bark, are reinterpreted here as colorful, vivid pattern, by no means the making porcelain ware imitations of birch trees. In a utilitarian set of laconic modernist forms, the artist plays with the traditional theme of "Russian birch," much trivialized in Russian/Soviet visual and literary culture: habitual poetic image transfers into a design element.

¹⁷⁹ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 174.

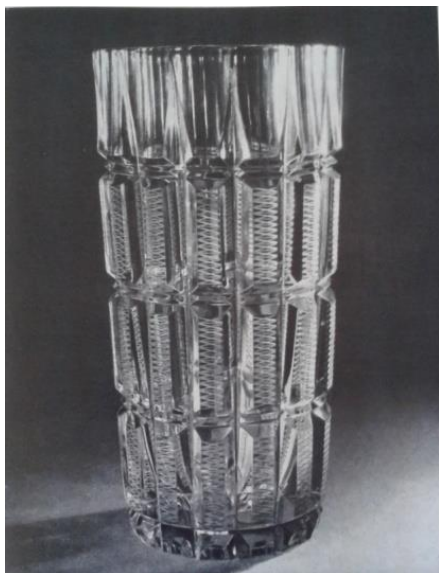


Figure 2.14. A. M. Ostroumov, vase "Accord," lead glass, faceting, 1966.



Figure 2.15. Unknown artist, tea-cup and saucer, porcelain, over-glaze painting, Russia, 19th century.



Figure 3.16. Eduard Krimmer, tea-set "Little Birch," fragment, porcelain, polychrome over-glaze painting, 1958.

By celebrating freedom in the use of nature's motives and playfulness in decoration, Smirnov expanded the notion of "consumer object" (*potrebitel'skaia veshch*). As I will discuss in following chapters, Smirnov was one of the initiators of the shift in applied arts away from utilitarianism and towards decorativeness and conceptual solutions. In a way, his book is an explanation and justification of this shift. Here comes the third important theme of the book: designer's right for breaking rules. In accordance with his advocacy for defamiliarization and amazement as artistic techniques, Smirnov argued that "creative transgression" (*tvorcheskoe narusheniie*), or even "mistake" (*oshibka*) is the beginning for innovation. This was not, however, a call for unlimited artistic freedom. According to Smirnov, thoughtful observation of nature and social environment was a necessary ground for "creative transgression": in order to break rules, one needs to thoroughly know them; a mistake is acceptable when committed consciously.¹⁸⁰ This was the guiding principles for Smirnov's experiments with colored blown glass since mid-1960s, when his careful study of the Russian and Ukrainian traditions of glass-blowing resulted in explicitly non-utilitarian or fantastic decorative objects, like teapots with soldered lids or figures of anthropomorphic bears. Smirnov argued: "There are no bad techniques, there are bad artists."¹⁸¹ He believed that as long as the object is masterfully implemented and emotionally expressive, it is a proper consumer object, Smirnov believed. The diversity and irregularity that Smirnov envisioned in socialist material environment are comparable to those in nature.

In Smirnov's argument for diversification of materials, techniques of processing materials and ornamentation, we find the notion of *zhivost'* ("liveliness") that have

¹⁸⁰ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 163.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

appeared earlier in Chekalov's 1957 lecture. Not necessarily familiar with that particular Moscow discussion, Smirnov verbalized used quite similar rhetoric, but with reliance on the idea of defamiliarization. Like Chekalov, Smirnov connected *zhivost'* with the refutation of naturalism and with the distancing from concrete natural forms. He explained that the effect of *zhivost'* can be achieved, for example, through rendering the typical plasticity of animal or human being in plastic materials like glass or ceramics, or through arranging stylized figurative depictions on concave surfaces, like in Smirnov's series of vessels "Orchestra" (lead glass, 1963). Here, too, defamiliarization appears as crucial technique: "In order for the visual image to become "live" in our perception, we should be in one space with it, to co-exist with the image in this space. This is most easy for a child who does not yet have habitual ideas about surrounding objects."¹⁸² Thus, in Smirnov's theory, defamiliarization appears as the opposite of and panacea against naturalism. But even more, defamiliarization is the link between an artist/designer and a consumer: "The less naturalist is the object, the easier, faster and stronger the consumer can grasp the aesthetic idea of an artist."¹⁸³

The conclusion of Smirnov's book makes it clear that it was addressed primarily to artists and designers as an invitation to reflect on their work and the materials involved in it. Claiming that he not believes in recipes for artistic work, Smirnov explained that his book aimed at provoking critical thinking and courage in overcoming the habitual and looking for new solutions. But the most important aim of the book was to outline the genealogy of usual artistic techniques and thus to remind "for whom we, the artists, work

¹⁸² Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 181.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 183.

and from which fathers, from which land our keen originates.”¹⁸⁴ In Smirnov’s interpretation, the very creative process is essentially organic, as it is always directed to the optimal solution of the questions of technology, form-giving and emotional effectiveness. Accordingly, the result of this process, consumer object, is the “live” object, “co-existing with us” and emotionally affective – as long as both its designer and its consumer possess the skill of defamiliarization and amazement.



Figure 2.17. Boris Smirnov, Glass, bottle for brandy and shot from the set “Orchestra,” lead glass, engraving by pobedit pencil, 1963.

¹⁸⁴ Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, 185.

Conclusion

The aesthetic turn from Stalinist celebratory art to Socialist Modern was to a great extent centered on redefinition of the notion of socialist realism. The advocates of the specific value of applied art, such as Aleksandr Saltykov in Moscow and Moisei Kagan in Leningrad, argued against figurativeness as the necessary requirement for realist (that is, properly Soviet) art. This thesis was delivered in contradictory ways: sometimes critics claimed that applied art is not psychological and therefore should not be used as the ground for complex subjects and portraits, while at other times precisely the emotional influence of applied art was emphasized in order to demonstrate its non-figurative realism. Both claims could be made by the same critic and within one lecture, as in the case with Kagan's 1956 presentation. But whether it was usefulness or emotionality that critics emphasized as the main feature of applied art, the aim was the same: to demonstrate qualitative difference from painting and sculpture and thus to release applied artists from the obligation to depict "socialist reality in its revolutionary development." From the late 1950s, the theme of "organic" became more and more pronounced as the tool to criticize the rigid understanding of realism. Remarkably, this theme accommodated both visions of applied art: as practically-oriented and as emotionally or psychologically expressive. This theme developed throughout the 1960s and affected not only art theory, but also practical work of applied artists, who can also be called product designers, working in different media. In particular, Anna Leporskaia demonstrated the "organicist" potential of Suprematism in carefully proportioning her white porcelain ware and making them pleasant for the eye and human hand. Her sets and vases, which critics often perceived as "organically" beautiful, were the result of precise calculations and refined sense of composition with the exclusion

of the slightest mistake – at least, according to the artist’s own description of her work. In contrast, Boris Smirnov, in his reflection on the nature of things and of creative work, arrived at understanding of mistake, transgression and amazement as key methods of processing reality – natural and social phenomena and objects – into positively affective consumer objects. He demonstrated that the sense of “liveliness” can be achieved in objects in many different ways, including figurative imagery, which Smirnov rehabilitated from the indiscriminating criticism of the 1950s- early 1960s. Smirnov’s daring analysis of many contemporary objects, presented in his 1970 book, suggests that by that time the notion of realism, and, thus, the freedom of applied artists was considerably expanded in comparison with 1953. The theme of “the organic” manifested not just the new discourse of art, but the discourse of a new art, whose central question was “what is a proper art for this new age of reinvigorated socialism?” How this question was discussed and dealt with is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter III: Updating the Material Environment

As the studies of socialist material culture clearly demonstrate, design in socialist countries was an integral element of the socialist variant of modernity. Notably, the landmark exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum that manifested the growing interest in socialist design was titled (quite provocatively) “Cold War Modern.”¹ A pioneer of the history of post-war Soviet design Susan E. Reid wrote of the “modernization of Soviet home” and characterized the move towards mass housing and mass consumption, attended by the changes in visual culture, as “Khrushchev Modern.”² As I discussed in the previous chapter, the concepts “Socialist Modern” and “Organicist Modern” were analyzed by Khristina Fehérváry in her study of material culture of socialist Hungary.³ The examples can be multiplied. To sum up, recent scholarship presents design in the socialist bloc and in the USSR in particular as a symptom of modernity, a tool of modernization, a modern phenomenon, as well as, essentially, a part of international modernism (notwithstanding all the official pronouncements against “bourgeois modernism”).

The picture is complicated by the fact that all these terms with the root “modern” are much debatable and polysemantic. For example, if we take the understanding of modernism as the critique of, or resistance to, modernity,⁴ then the meaning of design in a

¹ The exhibition was co-curated by Jane Pavitt and David Crowley. According to Pavitt, it was quite difficult to convince the administration of the V&A to open the exhibition with such provocative title (Public lecture “Cold War Modern: Design 1945-70” by Prof. Jane Pavitt, Open Society Archives, Budapest, October 4, 2013). See the catalogue of the exhibition: David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds. *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-70* (London: V&A Pub., 2008).

² Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 4, nos.1-2 (January-June 2006): 227-268.

³ Krisztina Fehervary, “From Socialist Modern to Super-Natural Organicism: Cosmological Transformations through Home Decor,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2012): 615–640.

⁴ This understanding appears, more or less explicitly, in the work of many critics and scholars of the twentieth century, most famously, Walter Benjamin. On modernism’s critical aspect as related to material culture, see: Bill Brown, “Things,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Things (Fall 2001), 1-22.

socialist society appears quite ambiguous. Thus, though Soviet design was generated by modern technology and science and influenced, through competition, by Western consumer culture, it also could offer critical stance on Soviet modernity, in particular, in its technocratic aspects.⁵ The work of Boris Smirnov, analyzed in the previous chapter, is the example of Soviet applied art's self-criticism that can be evaluated, depending on the approach, as modernist or postmodernist. But in the context of Soviet design, modernity can be also considered in its immediate sense of "contemporaneity" or "up-to-datedness," both translated to Russian as "*sovremennost'*," literally, "in tune with the time." This was the notion that guided designers in their actual work. The abstract idea of modernization was fuelled by the professionals' desire to be up-to-date. How was this desire translated into concrete strategies of updating consumer goods, interiors, outdoor decorative objects? While designing an aircraft or a vacuum cleaner in the 1960s is clearly a modernizing act, what does it mean for a porcelain or textile designer to be up-to-date? Does a glass artist become "contemporary" when she or he starts working also with such innovative materials as plastics? Susan Reid argued that after 1954 official repudiation of "excess" in architecture, "reformist cultural intelligentsia," i. e. progressively thinking architects, applied artists and critics, "advocated a return to functionalist design principles and set out to formulate a 'contemporary style' on the basis of a reassessment of indigenous Constructivism and international modernism."⁶ What considerations, debates and, probably, personal artistic ambitions stood behind this reassessment? And how can diverse objects with different functions constitute a "contemporary style"?

⁵ Tom Cubbin, "From Technocracy to Techno-Utopia: Futurology and the Soviet Home at VNIITE, 1964-1974" (MA diss.: Royal College of Arts, 2012).

⁶ Susan E. Reid, "Destalinization and Taste, 1953-1963," *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (January 1, 1997): 178.

These questions prompt an inquiry into the very possibility of a useful, tangible object to express the spirit of a present time, especially defined by the rapid development of science and technology, vibrant consumer culture and fashion. Bill Brown, in his attempt to arrive at “Thing Theory,” suggests that the objects of everyday life are constituted not only by consumer desires and affections, but also by the inevitability of obsolescence. He writes about “a basic disjunction, a human condition in which things inevitably seem too late – belated, in fact, because we want things to come before ideas, before theory, before the word, whereas they seem to persist in coming after: as the alternative to ideas, the limit to theory, victims of the word.”⁷ According to Brown, the only way for a thing to escape belatedness is to move from everyday life to the realm of art, where it would resume an affective power. A Surrealist readymade or a Claes Oldenburg’s Pop-Artistic “sculptures” are not “dead commodities,” like their obsolescent everyday-life prototypes, but “living works” that inspire the viewer to reflect upon the meaning of things and their functions. Thus, in Brown’s example, Oldenburg’s 1999 *Typewriter Eraser* of shiny chrome possesses the power “to dramatize the generational divide and to stage (to melodramatize, even) the question of obsolescence.” He then generalizes: “Released from the bond of being equipment, sustained outside the irreversibility of technological history, the object becomes something else.”⁸

Proceeding from Brown’s argument, I suggest that Soviet applied artists-turned-designers, too, aspired for releasing the object from the doom of obsolescence by transcending the “basic disjunction” between ideas and things, as well as between art and everyday life. “Dead commodities” that Brown analyzes belong to the sphere of market

⁷ Bill Brown, “Things,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2001), 1-22, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

relations, where the newness is the instrument for profit. Could, probably, a planned economy be as effective in rescuing things from obsolescence as Surrealism or Pop Art? Clues for the Soviet answer are to be found in the theory of “productivist art” (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*) developed in the 1920s within Constructivism, and concurrently with Surrealism.⁹ The leading theorist of productivist art, Boris Arvatov, stated in his 1925 article “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” (“*Byt i kul'tura veshchi*”): “The construction of proletarian culture, that is, of a culture consciously organized by the working class, requires the elimination of that rupture between Things and people that characterized bourgeois society.”¹⁰ As soon as class barriers fall, so do the divisions between labor and daily life and between production and consumption, Arvatov explained. In a bourgeois society, things are passive and static - merely ready-made objects to be rearranged (Arvatov’s argument, I would suggest, is aptly illustrated by Duchamp’s ready-mades). In the upcoming proletarian society, on the contrary, the thing becomes dynamic, active participant in social life, “an instrument and a co-worker.”¹¹ As the theorist envisioned, “The mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent, compelling people practically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them, and only with them.”¹² Such “affective” objects¹³

⁹ Notably, Brown considers Constructivism and Surrealism as two conscious attempts “to achieve greater intimacy with things and to exert a different determination for them.” Brown, op. cit., 11.

¹⁰ Boris Arvatov, “Byt i kul'tura veshchi,” in *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (Moscow, 1925), 75-72. Quotes are taken from Christina Kiaer’s translation: Boris Arvatov and Christina Kiaer, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” *October* 81 (1997): 119, 122.

¹¹ Arvatov, “Byt i kul'tura veshchi,” 79.

¹² Arvatov and Kiaer, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” 126.

¹³ The concern with the affective components of objects, characteristic for Arvatov’s theory and for the Russian avant-garde in general, was taken by Sergei Oushakine as the starting point for a new scholarly trend, which he calls “the materiology of emotions.” The landmark event for this trend was the interdisciplinary conference “Objects of Affection: Towards the Materiology of Emotions” (Princeton University, May 4-6, 2012): <http://objectsofaffection.wordpress.com/about/> Selected presentations of this conference constituted a section of Russian scholarly journal *New Literary Observer* in 2013. See Sergei Oushakine, “Dinamiziruiushchaia veshch,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie* 120 (2013): 29-34.

seem to be immune from obsolescence and, therefore, always up-to-date. Arvatov's "dynamized" Thing offers the possibility of continuous update, in tune and interconnection with the world of technology. Was this idea implemented, at least partially, in the industrialized Soviet society, as it faced competition with Western consumerism in the 1950s and 1960s? The "reassessment of indigenous Constructivism" in the 1950s reformers, mentioned by Reid, could probably include a reassessment of the productivist understanding of a Thing, which underlined the professional critique of Western obsolescence. This is the conceptual ground for explaining the development of the ideas of up-to-datedness by Soviet artists, designers and critics from the last years of Stalin's power to the establishment of state design system under Brezhnev. From discussing the applied artists' initial striving to overcome their "lag" in artistic production, this chapter proceeds to the analysis of the particular exercise in "up-to-datedness" in the young designers' projects for the interiors of the Moscow Pioneer Palace, and then to the observation of the approaches to the problem of contemporary style practiced in the 1960s within the officially recognized design profession.

3.1 "To Catch Up and Overtake": Transcending the Lag of Decorative Arts (1954-1960)

In September 1954, the Minister of Culture of the USSR Georgii Aleksandrov sent a note to the Secretary of the Party Central Committee, Nikolai Shatalin, describing the unfortunate condition of Soviet visual art. He claimed that insufficient and poorly organized financing for the work of Soviet painters, sculptors as well as decorative artists (mentioned in passing) resulted in visual art's "lagging behind the needs of our people and the task of

ideological-artistic education of the toiling masses.”¹⁴ From the document it is clear that by “lagging behind” the Minister meant backwardness and inadequacy to the current political and cultural situation. The theme of “lagging behind” can be frequently found in Soviet critical pronouncements throughout the 1950s, both in Party and government documents and in published articles on various aspects of Soviet system. “Lagging behind” was a familiar trope of Soviet rituals of criticism and self-criticism, a justification of the Party’s tight control over art production. Yet its function was not merely performative: it could be used as an argument in requests for policy changes, and, thus, as a trigger for updates, like in the example with Aleksandrov’s letter. Reviewing the All-Union Art Exhibition of 1952, the editorial board of the journal *Iskusstvo* (headed by the Academy of Arts President Aleksandr Gerasimov) called for the attention of the State Committee for Art Affairs to the “lag” of visual art in Soviet republics, perfectly in tune with the Soviet civilizing ambition. The same article announced the latest requirements to artists:

The general level of an exhibition and its success depend on the level of the depth and talent of the artists’ depiction of the present [*sovremennost’*] and its needs. Speaking about contemporary genre as such, we mean, first, the works devoted to the historical events of the present time [sic!], second, the works, depicting our everyday life, the sprouts of the new, of Communism within it.¹⁵

Though this reads like a familiar definition of socialist realism, the use of the term “contemporary genre” is worth noticing, as it shows the concern of the Soviet art establishment not only with ideological correctness, but also with up-to-datedness of visual art. That is, even though it drew on visual languages of the past, socialist realism was

¹⁴ “Zapiska ministra kul’tury SSSR G. F. Aleksandrova o sostoianii sovetskogo izobrazitel’nogo iskusstva I merakh po ulichsheniiu truda khudozhnikov,” 27 September 1954, RGANI f. 5 op. 30 d. 85, ll. 34-56. Reprinted in E. S. Afanasieva et al, eds., *Apparat TsK I kul’tura. 1953-1957. Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001), 299-313.

¹⁵ “Sovetskoe izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu,” *Iskusstvo* 1 (January-February 1953): 3.

envisioned as a modern art, and, moreover, in constant need for update in order not to “lag behind” the development of Soviet politics, economy and social life. Notably, in the argument of Gerasimov et al., everyday life is listed together with historical events as a proper subject for contemporary Soviet art. The authors of the review of the All-Union Art Exhibition appreciated the significant presence of paintings devoted to everyday life, but hastened to explain that everyday life is not a banal, private matter:

Artists in their works tell... about the new, which continuously emerges in our daily life [*v nashem bytu*], where the personal and the public are inseparable. From these canvases we learn that simple Soviet people are involved in all the interests of their country, and they have vital interest in the fate of progressive humanity, the struggle for peace in the world and struggle against warmongers.¹⁶

Thus, at the very end of Stalin’s time, up-to-datedness (*sovremennost’*) was officially defined through the everyday, permeated by the official Soviet ideology and expressed in its clichés: in order to be contemporary, an artist had to accurately reflect the latest Soviet position in the international scene; failing to do so would make art lag behind. What I have called in the previous chapter “heroic” socialist realism was presented as modern, given its capacity to raise contemporary daily life to the level of public significance.

After Stalin’s death, the understanding of daily life as a contemporary artistic subject was shifting towards an emphasis on lyricism and particularity. Broadening the thematic scope was now presented as a necessary update of visual art. For example, Leningrad critic Ivan Smolianinov argued in his lecture in 1954 that socialist realism as a method relies on a premise that “the whole diversity and fullness of the surrounding reality,” including “private everyday life” (*chastnyi byt*), deserves to be reproduced in art. He criticized the “idealistic theory of the personality cult,” referring, of course, not to Stalin

¹⁶ “Sovetskoe izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo v 1952 godu.”

(this would be unthinkable until Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech") but to an idealized historical personality as such. As Smolianinov explained, artists had paid too much attention to "historical-revolutionary subjects" and particular historical leaders, at the expense of relevant contemporary topics and many "vivid and important aspects of the life of Soviet people."¹⁷ Yet this new definition of "contemporary" was still based on the content, not the formal qualities of painting/sculpture.¹⁸ With the growing openness of the Soviet Union, first of all, Moscow and Leningrad, to Western culture, marked by such famous events as the Picasso exhibition in Moscow and the exhibition of contemporary Italian graphics in Leningrad 1956, the International Youth Festival of the 1957, the exhibition "Art of Socialist Countries" in Moscow in 1958-59, and the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959, the idea of the "contemporary" in visual art was broadening, though with steady reservations about Western "formalism."¹⁹ In particular, young painters turned their attention to formal elements such as silhouette, line, mass, volume, color and texture of the paint, which most famously resulted in the "severe style" of painting.²⁰

Just like easel artists, applied artists worried about their art lagging behind. Throughout the 1950s, however, the idea of "lag" was not uniform: it was defined in relation to different phenomena and also expressed in different terms: the verb "*otstavat*"

¹⁷ Ivan Smolianonov, "Sotsialisticheskii realizm - tvorcheskii metod sovetskogo iskusstva" (1954), TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 562.

¹⁸ On similar explanation of the contemporary in Soviet art, though still with strong emphasis on heroism in the everyday, see the record of the speech of Dmitrii Shepilov, Secretary of the Central Committee of CPSU: "Za dal'neishii rastsvet sovetskogo khudozhestvennogo tvorchestva," *Iskusstvo* 2 (March-April 1957): 6-13.

¹⁹ RGALI f. 2973 op. 1 d. 104, l. 2; Susan E. Reid, "The Exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries*, Moscow 1958-9 and the Contemporary Style of Painting," in Susan Emily Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 101-132; Pia Koivunen, "The 1957 Moscow Youth Festival : Propagating a New, Peaceful Image of the Soviet Union," in Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (eds), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 46-65.

²⁰ Anatolii Dmitrenko, "The Severe Style: Disposition, Form and Image," in *Time of Change: Art in the Soviet Union, 1960-1985* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2006), 43-44.

(to lag or fall behind), the adjective “*otstalyi*” (backward) or the participle “*ustarevshee*” (out of date). Even though these different definitions often overlapped, for analytic purposes three levels of the understanding of “lag” can be distinguished. Considering them should be helpful for tracing the early formation of the visual aesthetics of what is known as post-war Soviet modernism.

Lagging behind Easel Arts

The claim that applied art lags behind painting, sculpture and easel graphics served as a major incentive for the aesthetic turn. Most important at this level was the recognition of the disparity between decorative art’s role in Soviet people’s lives and its low status within Soviet artistic community – or, borrowing the concept of Pierre Bourdieu, the field of cultural production.²¹

This recognition was manifested as early as in late 1943, soon after the Leningrad Art School of Architectural Decoration of Buildings (LKhU) was established. Its rector, Iosif Vaks, in his letter to the Head of the SNK’s Council for Architectural Affairs, Arkadii Mordvinov, complained that the few surviving “masters of applied art,”²² were undeservedly unknown. He claimed: “In contrast to those working in theater, music and fine art, for whom various honorable titles are set in the USSR, the granting of honorable titles to the masters of decorative and applied art is very rare.”²³ Therefore, on behalf of LKhU, Vaks asked Mordvinov to submit a petition to the SNK of the USSR to setting the

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson, 1st edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²² Among these, Vaks listed sculptors-decorators Leopold Ditrikh and A. Bolshakov, experts on marble works P. Smirnov and D. Sprishin, decorative painter V. Shcherbakov, majolica and leatherwork artist O. Borodina, and art historian, the senior researcher of State Hermitage Ernest Kverfel’d. All of them joined the faculty of the LKhU.

²³ TsGALI SPb, f. 266 op. 1, d. 22, l. 5.

appropriate titles for Soviet applied artists “with the aim of popularizing the names of applied and decorative artists in our country”; the request, however was not properly satisfied until the late 1960s.²⁴ Of Vaks’s concern was not merely the satisfaction of professional ambitions, but, again, raising decorative art’s status and adequately responding to wartime demands. In general, Vaks’ care about the proper location of the new institution, its supply with materials and qualified teaching personnel was about modernizing the profession of decorative artist and through this, the material environment of the USSR – after the immediate task of dealing with war damage would be fulfilled.²⁵ However, in 1954, after LKhU was reformed in the higher institution (LVKhPU named after Vera Mukhina), its administration expressed worry about lagging in terms of the “constrained” condition of learning, that is, the lack of room for workshops, and an insufficient number of instructors with academic degrees and titles.²⁶ The Moscow Higher School for Art and Industry (former Stroganov School) had similar problems in 1955.²⁷ Not only students, but also established decorative and applied artists, members of the Artists’ Unions, experienced difficulty in creative development caused by poor material conditions. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, in 1953 Leningrad artists, for example, showed a high concern about their

²⁴ I have not succeeded to trace the fate of Vaks’s request, but in the available archival and published materials, the title “Honorable artist of the RSFSR” appears with applied artists only in 1967, when artists Anna Leporskaia and Eduard Krimmer were granted this title. Hitherto, only exceptional figures of applied and decorative arts were granted honorable titles, for example, Mikhail Ladur, who in the 1930s and 1940s excelled as theater artist and a designer public festivities, exhibitions and the pavilions of the All-Union Exhibition of Agriculture, received a title “Honorable Art Figure of Karakalpak Soviet Republic.” RGALI, d. 2943, op. 1, d. 2475, l. 57. According to artist Julia Gusarova, applied artists more rarely, than easel artists, bothered to undergo a bureaucratic procedure of applied for a title of “Honored artist.” She helped her father, painter and monumental artist Vassilii Gusarov, to file the application in the 1980s, while her mother, textile artist Larisa Romanova, was eligible to apply but was too busy to consider this option. Email from Julia Gusarova from 31.10.2014.

²⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 266 op. 1, d. 22.

²⁶ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, d. 281, l. 5, 7, 15.

²⁷ RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1 d. 379, l. 54.

inferior status within the city Union of Artists and, consequently, the worse supply of tools, studios and workshops.²⁸

Difficult material conditions were constantly problematized precisely as impermissible in relation to the professionals concerned with updating material environment. Thus, the same reports of MVKhPU and LVKhPU that voiced complaints also stressed the schools' orientation at being advanced in terms of methodologies, the themes for diploma projects and, importantly, cooperation with industry. Notably, for example, the 1954 report on the activity of LVKhPU demonstrates a twofold understanding of up-to-datedness: as depiction of contemporary Soviet reality, like in easel art, and, on the other hand, as connectedness to the architectural environment and an orientation at consumer needs. The report stated:

The diploma works are carried out in porcelain, faience, wood, clay, glass, plastics, metal, marble, stainless steel and other materials. The themes of diploma works reflect the interests of contemporary life [*sovremennosti*]. (...) The diploma works demonstrate a lot of new and interesting. (...) 42 works have been accepted for installment *in situ*. 60% of the works are related to architecture, 22% are the objects of people's consumption [*narodnogo potrebleniia*] and 18% deal with historical topics that are, in essence, academic.²⁹

This phrasing vividly demonstrates the updating of the profession in process: while figurativeness and narrations are still presented as appropriate for applied art, their presence in the total body in diploma works is considerably less compared with the works based on utility and integration with the architectural environment. Indeed, tightening the connection with architecture and industry was the way for applied artists to overcome the lag behind easel arts in terms of recognition, financing and visibility to the broader public. Both

²⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385.

²⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, d. 281, l. 10.

LVKhPU and MVKhPU were founded precisely as schools of restoration and decoration [*khudozhestvennaia otdelka*] of buildings, but in the early 1950s student works were more and more reoriented from restoring architectural heritage to decorating new buildings and designing new interiors and transportation.³⁰ On the institutional level, this reorientation was prompted by these schools' subordination to the USSR Academy of Architecture in 1953³¹ and later by Khrushchev's famous statement against architectural excess at the All-Union Convention of Construction Workers and Architects in December 1954.³² Even though the problem of synthesis of decorative arts and architecture was actively discussed at All-Union conferences on decorative-applied and monumental art, organized by the USSR Academy of Arts, the Organizational Committee of the Union of Soviet Artists, the Moscow Union of Artists and various ministries and departments since 1951,³³ critics stressed the non-figurative "architectural" nature of applied art again and again throughout the 1950s. Thus, critic Aleksandr Saltykov in his two pioneering articles on applied art in 1954 and in 1955 (one addressed trade workers, another artists) carefully constructed argumentation for applied art's specificity and the inapplicability of the methods of easel art in this sphere.³⁴ The most ardent proponent of the architectural character of applied art was Leningrad philosopher Moisei Kagan. His claim about the analogy of image-construction in applied arts and architecture, discussed in Chapter 2, can be also understood

³⁰ Notably, from its beginning throughout the 1950s and further LVKhPU was headed by architects, as were many of its departments. Svetlana Mirzoian and Sergei Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina* (St. Petersburg: Iunikont Design, 2011).

³¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266 op. 1 d. 218, l. 86-87; d. 319; RGALI f. 2460, op. 1, d. 351.

³² RGALI, f. 2460, op. 1 d. 379, l. 47.

³³ Sergei Temerin, "Izuchenie dekorativnogo iskusstva v sovetskom iskusstvoznanii za 40 let," *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* 1 (January-February 1955): 30-36; S. Temerin, "O razviti prikladnogo i dekorativnogo iskusstva," *Iskusstvo* 3 (1956): 9-17.

³⁴ Aleksandr Saltykov, "O khudozhestvennom kachestve promyshlennykh tovarov," *Sovetskaia Torgovlia* 9 (1954): 22-31; Aleksandr Saltykov, "Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva," *Iskusstvo*, no. 2 (1955): 30-34.

in the light of the drive to update applied art.³⁵ Speaking of “specificity,” Saltykov, Kagan and like-minded critics looked for the optimal way for applied art to “catch up with” and “overtake” the development of easel art.

However, the idea that applied art is kindred to architecture rather than easel art did not necessarily imply complete divorce from the latter. Often, easel art was presented as an advisable skill of applied artist, but not the model for imitation. For example, in his extensive article on the current problems of applied art, published in *Iskusstvo* in early 1956, Moscow critic Sergei Temerin argued:

There are still many artists-craftsmen [*khudozhnikov-remeslennikov*] who know their narrow specialty, who can, for example, make a competent pattern for a fabric or a carpet, the design [*proiekt*] of a tablecloth, dress or some domestic object [*bytovoi veshchi*]. But they do not invest creative pathos in their work, do not possess good artistic taste, and do not work on developing their mental outlook. They are not interested in the adjacent branches of art, do not systematically practice painting and drawing.

Such narrow-mindedness of applied artists, according to Temerin, not only compromised the profession, but also, eventually, caused a disaster in everyday material environment:

As a result of the limited horizon and the insufficient artistic-cultural education, applied artists cannot gain proper authority in industry and fall under the total influence of engineer-technical personnel. The guild-like spirit [*dukh uzkoi tsekhovshchiny*], the dissociation of the artists of different branches, inability to raise and defend fundamental creative and legal issues, the absence of the sections of decorative-applied art in many creative unions, and the scornful and condescending attitude to applied artists from the side of painters, sculptors and [easel] graphics – this is what nourishes to a great extent the muddy stream of eclectics, hack-work and tastelessness that provokes fair indignation of Soviet public.³⁶

Thus, in Temerin’s vision, applied artists can overcome the lag not by distancing themselves from easel artists, but, instead, by outdoing them on their own ground. A broadly educated applied artist would be not less, but more than an easel artist, as well as

³⁵ Moisei Kagan, “O spetsifike i sushchnosti prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 1 (January 1956): 16-21.

³⁶ Temerin, “O razviti prikladnogo i dekorativnogo iskusstva,” 31.

more than an engineer. Narrowness appears here as the gravest danger and the source of humiliation and backwardness: notably, the term “narrow” (“*uzkii*”) is used three times in this quotation. This rhetoric of universalism resonates with the aforementioned pronouncements of the Leningrader Efrem Sandler, who claimed in February 1953 that he and his colleagues deal with all sorts of materials and create diverse objects, unlike easel artists, and even book illustrators, who stick to their media.³⁷ Such ideas furthered the concern about the synthesis of arts with the leading role of architecture, which became especially pronounced in the 1950s.

Lagging behind People's Needs

The failure to meet actual people's needs and tastes was time and again discussed by applied critics and artists. At this level, the task of overcoming the “lag” was often formulated in terms of finding proper “contemporary style.” As the administration of the section of decorative-applied art at LSSKh stated in the official report at the end of 1953, “because of the mass character of decorative-applied art, and because domestic goods and decorations are in constant contact with the population, the question of style here is especially burning.”³⁸ The survival of “outdated tendencies of taste” from the late 19th century and *fin de siècle* (historicism and the Russian version of Art Nouveau) was characterized as “bad tradition” and a major obstacle for the development of the new style and for “improving general stylistic culture.” Two ways of cultivating outdated tastes were named: first, uses of the remaining pre-revolutionary objects in daily life, and, second, the current production of the copies of old models, or of new goods inspired by old eclecticism.

³⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 385.

³⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 386, l. 9.

Therefore, the main tasks of the LSSKh and in particular its decorative-applied art section were claimed to be “the struggle for inculcation of the principles of socialist realism, [and] the pursuit of the style responding to the great principles and achievements of the Stalin era.”³⁹ Like in painting and sculpture, socialist realism was presented here as the modern method and the tool for updating applied art. How was this update envisioned, and what would be the new “contemporary style,” replacing the “decadent” eclecticism? The leaders of LSSKh applied artists offered a formula: “For creating contemporary Soviet style, the Administration recommends critical assimilation of Old Russian art as well as classical heritage. At the same time, very important is to study and use, in appropriate elaboration, folk art of the peoples of the USSR and older Soviet models.”⁴⁰ Ironically, this definition is eclectic too, but this new “eclecticism” was presented as close to the literal meaning of the term – “choosing the best.” This formula for Soviet contemporary style was based on the selective attitude to tradition: “bad tradition” of pre-Revolutionary urban visual culture was to be completely wiped out of Soviet art and industry, while “good” traditions of Russian medieval art, Russian classicism and diverse folk art were to be reinterpreted and fused into something qualitatively new. The precise methods of the latter process were, however, not specified, and in their practical work applied artists had to rely on such vague instructions.

Nonetheless, according to the report, some artists actually succeeded in implementing this new “contemporary style” – for example, the employees of the textile factory named after Vera Slutskaia. Its nine most outstanding artists, including the members of LSSKh decorative-applied art section Maria Shraiber and E. Gambarian, created 200

³⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78. op. 4, d. 386, l. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

new textile patterns in 1951-1953. “The quality of artistic design [*khudozhestvennogo oformleniia*] of textiles has been significantly improved; they have become more intentional and colorful. The artists now more frequently turn to folk national heritage,” the section’s leadership reported. Earlier, it was recalled, the artists paid little attention to color combinations, which gave poor results. In order to improve the situation, the Leningrad Party committee had organized the artistic commission that included experienced professionals: textile artist Sara Buntsis and porcelain artist Anna Leporskaia (later the master of “organicist” white porcelain). They suggested a number of innovations, and, eventually, the factory’s production became significantly better in terms of color and even was awarded the first prize at the Spring-Summer and Fall-Winter All-Union inspections of textiles. The comparison of two archival photos of the Slutskaia factory production, one from 1948 and another from 1956, even though they cannot give an idea of the improvement of colors, nicely shows a turn from rather naturalistic floral patterns to stylized and geometric ones (Fir. 3.1 and 3.2). Some of the patterns captured in the second photo recall Constructivist textile patterns by Liubov’ Popova and Varvara Stepanova, while others represent highly stylized floral motives.⁴¹ Probably, the older artists of the Slutskaia factory had been familiar with Constructivist textile designs of the mid-1920s, but the new “geometrism” could be as well the reinterpretation of certain folk patterns. In their effort to overcome “decadent taste,” the artists of Slutskaia factory, in a way, followed the steps of Popova and Stepanova, who offered an alternative to customary floral patterns

⁴¹ On Constructivist textile designs by Popova and Stepanova see: Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery Sovetskogo Dizaina* (Moscow: Galart, 1995), 284-288; Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 89-140

copied from Western models, but at the same time tried to “guess” and meet the tastes of peasant women.⁴²

Thus, the new stylistic trend in textile, launched in 1951 but developed more fully with de-Stalinization, was based on a combination of different kinds of heritage – traditional craft as well as the avant-garde. While some critics still condemned stylization and geometrism in press in the mid-1950s, certain innovative geometric patterns were officially welcomed and encouraged, such as, for example, patterns with optical effect elaborated by P. Mel’nikov, the deputy director of the First Textile Print Factory in Moscow. Notably, Mel’nikov’s patterns were intended to emphasize “advantages” and conceal “disadvantages” of any body shape – for example, a woman’s dress with particular arrangement of horizontal stripes with shade effect would visually enhance the bust (Fig. 3.3).⁴³ Thus, the new “contemporary style” revealed a potential to shape the body of a New Soviet Person of the post-Stalin era – the socialist consumer.

⁴² “Pamiati L. S. Popovoi,” *LEF* 6 (1924): 3-4; Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery*, 284-288.

⁴³ P. A. Mel’nikov, “Risunki s tenevymi effektami v krupnom rapporte,” *Tekstil’naia promyshlennost’* 2 (February 1956): 67-68.



Figure 3.1. Artist of the Slutskaia factory V. Kosovich examines the fabric with new pattern, Leningrad, November 19, 1948.



Figure 3.2. Artists of the Slutskaya factory N. E. Sorokin, E. M. Garbarian and Iu. A. Parnitsyna examine the designs for textile patterns, Leningrad, February 6, 1956.



Figure 3.3. All-Union House of Dress Prototypes, the dress from the staple viscose fabric designed by P. Mel'nikov, 1955.

The success of the updating of textile patterns to a great extent depended on the technological competence of the artists – those employed at factories as well as those who worked on contracts and participated in factories’ artistic councils. In this respect, too, textile reformers followed the example of the 1920s Constructivists, especially the instructors of the textile department of Vkhutemas who prepared not traditional applied artists, but artists-technologists.⁴⁴ In general, the avant-garde understanding of artist as producer and industrial worker, most successfully implemented at Vkhutemas, gained a new relevance in the late 1940s, long before the revival of particular Constructivist ideas and methods became ideologically safe. First of all, this understanding was cultivated within the two advanced art-and-industry schools. Unlike in Vkhutemas, students of LVKhPU and MVLhPU were taught techniques and ornamental motives of traditional applied art, but technical disciplines played a highly significant role in the curricula: these schools aimed to prepare not decorators, but broadly educated specialists on material culture, aesthetics and technology. Iosif Vaks, the head of the sub-department of artistic metalware at the Mukhina School, took a rigid position on this issue: “I prefer to take in a student who is insufficiently versed in drawing but with good [high school] grades in math and physics, than the one who is well-prepared in drawing but low-graded in math and without any gift for technology. One can learn to draw, but the passion for technology [*liubov’ k tekhnike*] is hard to attain.”⁴⁵ That is, the founder of a leading applied art school put the predisposition for exact sciences much higher than artistic skill in the rank of requirements for a student preparing to work in industry. In accordance with this stance,

⁴⁴ Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina*, 206-300.

⁴⁵ Diary of Iosif Vaks, personal archive of Svetlana Mirzoian. Quoted in: Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 180.

Vaks's sub-department employed a former senior technologist of the Leningrad Kirov Plant, Ilya Orlenko, for reading a course on the technology of materials. According to the recollection of his student, designer Svetlana Mirzoian, Orlenko was a man "of encyclopedic knowledge," had an experience of probation work in the U. S. in the 1930s and knew personally the heads of many Leningrad industrial enterprises. He frequently brought students to metal-working and founding shops in order to familiarize them with actual technologies of metal processing.⁴⁶ In the Moscow School for Art and Industry (former Stroganov School), studies of technology also took a significant place in syllabi since the late 1940s.⁴⁷ This also affected the way of studying art history. K. Soloviev, the head of the department of the History of Russian Art at MVKhPU, argued in 1949: "The history of Russian artistic industry requires, of course, paying great attention to the aesthetic aspect, but emasculating [*vykholashchovanie*] the aesthetic side by abstracting it from socio-economic, technological and everyday issues, would inevitably lead not only to the rupture between form and content, but also to the lordly [*barskomu*] snobbism and aestheticism, incompatible with the principles of Soviet education and patriotism."⁴⁸ This rhetoric clearly presents technology as vital, "masculine" element of applied art, linking it to concrete Soviet reality. The orientation on preparing strong technological ground from stylistic update further developed in both schools in the 1950s.

Established artists, too, were expected to enhance their competence in technology – those employed at factories as well as – and probably even more – those who worked on contracts and participated in factories' artistic councils, like the aforementioned Buntsis

⁴⁶ Mirzoian and Khelmianov, *Mukha: Sankt-Peterburgskaia Shkola Dizaina*, 207.

⁴⁷ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 1 d. 50.

⁴⁸ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 1 d. 45, l. 4.

and Leporskaia. “Working in artistic councils of industrial enterprises, the artists learn the technology of production, and this helps them correctly apply their energy to production,” reported the leadership of Leningrad *prikladniki* in late 1953.⁴⁹ Again, textile industry is a good example of this development due its orientation to people’s very basic needs – clothing, covering, and creating domestic comfort, and due to its close connection to fashion. The official periodical of the USSR Ministry of Industrial Goods of Broad Consumption, *Textile Industry* (“*Tekstil’naia promyshlennost’*”), manifested the professionals’ growing preoccupation with the concept of “up-to-datedness” in its connection with technological issues as well as aesthetic concepts. Careful reading of these discussions can reveal the attitudes to the relation between ideas and objects, crucial for the formation of contemporary style.

In March 1953, *Textile Industry* published an article by G. Shuvalov, the head of the engraving sector of the Moscow textile combine “Fifth October,” which seems like a restatement of the common sense: a textile artist should always consider technological and economic conditions, such as the economy of dyes, the durability and size of the engraved copper roller, and the mode of engraving.⁵⁰ However, the meticulous listing of strict regulations implies their frequent violation at Soviet factories, which, together with often outdated equipment, caused a large percentage of spoilage. Therefore, a number of essential requirements had to be clearly voiced, such as: the size of the pattern unit must be determined by the size of the engraved copper roller, and the printing area scope – by the width of the fabric; the elements of each pattern unit must be arranged in the same way,

⁴⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78. op. 4, d. 386, l.14.

⁵⁰ G. A. Shuvalov, “Tekhnika khudozhestvennogo oformleniia tekstil’nykh risunkov,” *Tekstil’naia promyshlennost’* 3 (March 1955): 52-53.

and the pattern should be reversible, without top and bottom, lest the pattern takes different directions in a dress from this fabric; tender and intensive colors cannot be combined in one pattern, because this would require technically complicated combination of different rollers – and so on. He added that in order to raise her qualification, an artist “is obliged to” carefully oversee the industrial process of creating the pattern: engraving, printing and further processing of the fabric. This can be characterized as calling the artists’ attention to the “biography of a pattern” – to borrow the concept of “biography of object,” suggested in 1929 by LEF critic Serguei Tretiakov as the “expedient” building principle of a socialist novel.⁵¹ Just like the movement of Tretiakov’s object-protagonist through the conveyor belt was to reveal important social dynamics, the formation of textile pattern in actual production process was presented by Shuvalov as the expression of the artistic collective’s professional competence. Yet unlike the structurally “transparent” socialist object, envisioned by LEF theorists, Soviet textile of the early post-Stalin years was seen as performative as much as functional. Even though Shuvalov called upon excellent knowledge of the fabrics to be decorated, he encouraged to use this knowledge for visual effects: “One should manage to create the effect of polychrome pattern while using small number of dyes (which reduces the cost of processing)... Skillfully working on the pattern, one can make a simple fabric look rich and expensive, for example, render cotton cloth similar to wool or silk.”⁵² In this case, update of quality is understood as enrichment, based not on superficial decoration, but on a deep structural knowledge of the production process.

⁵¹ Sergei Tretiakov, “Biografiia veshchi,” in *Literatura fakta: pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov LEFa*, ed. by N. Chuzhak [reprint of 1925 edition] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2000), 68-72.

⁵² Shuvalov, “Tekhnika khudozhestvennogo oformleniia tekstil’nykh risunkov,” 53.

The final destination of the “biography of a pattern” would always be, of course, the hands of happy and thankful consumer.

As Shuvalov urged for the fundamental improvement of patterns, the personnel of Shcherbakov silk combine in Moscow actively and “tirelessly” worked on creating new fabrics and improving “structures, artistic and color decoration” of already existing types.⁵³ Remarkably, this process united artists and technical workers, *dessinateurs* (the francophone term “*dessinator*” was used in Russian for naming the specialists on interlacing and processing fabrics). For example, in 1954 the *dessinateur* R. Granovskii developed the crepe “Shcherbakovskii” for men’s shirts, based on viscose silk (Fig. 3.4).⁵⁴ “The fabric is dyed in light or medium colors. Shiny stripes in warp beautifully and spectacularly rise above its mat surface,” explained its author, adding that a special processing regime was found in order to minimize the fabric’s potential shrinkage. The fabric, in different color variants, was introduced into production from the third quarter of 1954 and, according to Granovskii, provoked a high consumer demand.⁵⁵ The modest fabric for classical garments, with subtle decoration based on the contrast of textures (mat and shiny), was considered as a successful case of updating the assortment. Three years later, in the newly created journal *DI SSSR*, artist of the Shcherbakov combine V. Alekseeva noted the productive cooperation of artists and *dessinateurs* (predominantly women!) in creating “fabrics of the new type,” where the pattern is always determined by the texture of the material. She emphasized that in order to properly satisfy consumer needs, specialists

⁵³ M. Sh. Girshgorn and R. G. Granovskii, “Novye shelkovye tkani kombinata Shcherbalova,” *Tekstil’naia promyshlennost’* 4 (April 1955): 9-12

⁵⁴ The journal article was illustrated by actual samples of fabrics, pasted into each issue. Figure 3.4 is my photograph of such sample.

⁵⁵ Girshgorn and Granovskii, “Novye shelkovye tkani kombinata Shcherbalova,” 9.

of different professions – textile artists, *dessinateurs* and dress designers [*model'ery*] – should work in close contact and mutual consultation.⁵⁶



Figure 3.4. Crepe “Sherbakovskii,” Shcherbakov silk combine, 1954 (author’s photograph of an actual fabric sample attached to the article).

Lagging behind Western Design

During the second half of the 1950s, the idea of “lag” was taken up to the international level: it was more and more defined not only in relation to domestic issues, but also to Western design and production of goods. Rejection of “bourgeois” and “formalist” influences was gradually replaced – on the official level – by the eagerness to learn Western experience and select the “best”, that is, most appropriate for contemporary Soviet situation – just like it was practiced with Russian classic and folk heritage. “Recently, we have got a solid amount of Western influence, but we should be careful, because alone with very good things [*veshchiami*] we see things of a bad character. And

⁵⁶ V. Alekseeva, “Tvorcheskii kollektiv,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 3 (March 1958): 7-8.

you know, that many people have a weakness for everything Western without properly understanding what should be accepted and what should not,” Leningrad designer Abram Lapirovo warned his colleagues in February 1956, two weeks before the landmark XX Party Congress.⁵⁷ Evidently, by “people” Lapirovo meant not the ordinary consumers who had little access to Western goods and could not see them at exhibitions until 1956, but applied artists who could read Western design literature in specialized libraries. Yet such selective and skeptical learning led to new frustrations and, consequently striving for more vigorous update of applied art and especially what was called “industrial art” (before the emergence of the term “artistic engineering”). The story of the Soviet Union’s greater openness to Western influences and increasing scope cultural contacts has been discussed in different aspects by a good number of historians;⁵⁸ the new understanding of “lag” and “up-to-datedness” by Soviet art professionals was one of the particular results of this global development.

The discussions of “contemporary style” in applied art/ artistic industry/ industrial art of the second half of the 1950s were inevitably constructed with the reference to the West, either negative or positive. One of the leading reformers of applied art, Leningrader Boris Smirnov, in March 1954 in his conference paper “Contemporary traits in the articles of artistic industry” criticized Western design for its strong emphasis on function at the expense of aesthetics. If in 1949 the aforementioned K. Soloviev had argued that without technology and economic considerations artistic industry becomes “emasculated,”

⁵⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 7, op. 4, d. 389, l. 16

⁵⁸ For example: Polly Jones, *The Dilemmas of Destalinisation: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (Routledge, 2006); Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009); Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Smirnov now implied that the concern with technology, economy and function should not, on the contrary, oust the aesthetic component of art industry, which, on his opinion, is anyway most appealing to the consumer. Probably self-censorship prompted Smirnov the former constructivist to claim: "... we all know well that constructivist and functionalist-physiological aspects totally displaced aesthetics in the designs [*v resheniiakh*] of ultra-modernist furniture of the capitalist West. No doubt, any consumer would be first of all interested in the appearance of a commodity – its aesthetic qualities."⁵⁹ Imitation of Western models is presented here as increasing the lag behind "people's needs," while the proper way of updating production is suggested to be the enhancement of aesthetic qualities. Four years later, in the second published issue of *DI SSSR*, Smirnov claimed that the possibilities of modern technology broaden artists' outlook and stimulate their creativity in producing new forms that respond to the needs of a contemporary Soviet person.⁶⁰ He specified, however, that he by no means advocated asceticism: "contemporary Soviet art should not be ascetic, let alone featureless and ugly [*bezobraznym*; literally "image-less]; it should not imitate fashionable Western art that often contradicts any human ideas of beauty and artistry."⁶¹ But as much as he condemned Western "image-less" asceticism, Smirnov also attacked Western "archaic images of domestic comfort" such as electric fireplaces "in Georgian style" that, in Smirnov's understanding, were precisely the reaction to asceticism. Thus, the split of Western design was split into "ultra-modern" and "archaic" trends were to be opposed by harmonic synthesis of contemporary

⁵⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, l. 71.

⁶⁰ Boris Smirnov, "Khudozhestvennyi oblik veshchi i sposob ee izgotovleniia," *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

and traditional, national and international in Soviet artistic industry (the term Smirnov preferred to use).

But whatever superiority over the West Soviet art professionals proclaimed in the press, in intra-group discussions they had to admit serious lag. At the same time as Smirnov's article was published, a meeting of applied artists and critics from Moscow and Leningrad took place in LOSKh for discussing the start and further objectives of *DI SSSR*. There the executive secretary of the LOSKh Administration Leonid Karateev spoke about lagging in "the aesthetic of machinery," that had been just recently recognized as a subject of applied artists' concern.⁶² In order to overcome the lag, Soviet applied artists should attentively study current Western production of goods, Karateev argued. Criticizing the wrong approach to the Western example, Karateev spoke in terms of patent infringement and lack of originality:

I am sure that if we published in our journal [*DI SSSR*] the images of a range of consumer goods [*tovarov shirokogo potrebleniia*] produced by our factories, we would receive complaints from abroad for the transfer of models into any sphere of industry: motor-car construction, the production of kitchenware and other houseware (...) It's time to have our state national pride in dealing with the achievements of the West.⁶³

Karateev added that on the whole, Soviet "material-artistic culture" was in a very poor condition and urged his colleagues to raise this problem "sharply and strongly" on the pages of *DI SSSR*.⁶⁴ In mid-January 1959 at the discussion of the decorative-applied art section of the Fall Exhibition of Leningrad artists, architect and designer Boris Kreitser (a colleague of Boris Smirnov since the early 1920s), voiced a similar complaint: "In some cases, young artists, who have not yet found their creative personality [*ne naidia svoego*

⁶² TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 398, l. 32.

⁶³ Ibid., l. 32

⁶⁴ Ibid., d. 398, l. 33.

litsa], tend to copy West European models.” He added, however, that thoughtless copying of national crafts’ motives and forms is also unfortunate and labeled this approach “rooster-obsession” [*petushkovost’*], implying the popularity of rooster as traditional decorative motive. “We need to seek for our own path, our means of expression. We are neither in a rooster Russia [*petushkovaia Rossiia*] nor in the abstract West. This is why the task of decorative-applied artists is to find the images related to our contemporary life, to our contemporary interests.”⁶⁵ Mastery of the production process is crucial for successfully fulfilling this task, Kreitser emphasized. Like Karateev, Kreitser understood contemporary style in terms of originality, while also echoing to campaign for enhancing artists’ technological competency – in a way, a revival of the objectives of the 1920s productivists.

Thus, by the end of 1950s, the lag of applied art – or, as it was often formulated, “artistic industry” – was clearly recognized by professionals in Leningrad and Moscow on several levels and in several contexts: the search for professional identity, the artists’ role and responsibility in industry, the development of technology, the changing life standards and needs of the population, and, of course, the economic and cultural competition with the West as an aspect of the Cold War. The “contemporary style” was envisioned as the response to this lag, but never defined precisely. Indeed, its definition was rather negative: neither repetition of archaic forms, nor revival of the “decadent” Art Nouveau, nor the shameful and legally problematic imitation of contemporary Western models. It was often implied that the “contemporary” character of a product would stem naturally from the artist’s technical competence and overall cultural education, as well as the active communication with the workers of industry and trade and consumers through lectures and

⁶⁵ TsGALI SPb, f. 7, op. 4, d. 397, l. 8.

conferences in factories and department stores. An ideal contemporary object of the 1950s was different from the object of Russian Constructivism in its proclaimed connection to traditional crafts and applied art and its pronounced aesthetic appearance rather than rejection of aesthetics as a “bourgeois” quality. The up-to-date socialist object of the late 1950s was envisioned as qualitatively different from a Western commodity while also freed from the legacy of Stalinist material culture; it needed to be, in the words of one Moscow textile artist, “connected to the new interior, to construction, to all our life.”⁶⁶ Modern construction, embraced by the Soviet state and experts from 1954, provided an excellent ground for implementing the ideal of contemporary style – this is the subject of the following section.

3.2. Designing for the Rising Generation: Student Projects for Moscow Pioneer Palace (1959-60)

The appeal of Leonid Karateev to address the problem of the lag of Soviet material culture on the pages of *DI SSSR* was enthusiastically shared by many art reformists. As a result, by 1960s the journal published a number of articles discussing the architecture-led synthesis of spatial arts. The guidelines for decorative artists working for new architectural projects were most clearly articulated in the statement by Iurii Arndt, published in *DISSR* in May 1958 and symptomatically titled “Notes of architect-artist.”⁶⁷ A brief overview of this article should be helpful before proceeding to the analysis of art students’ participation in the Pioneer Palace project.

⁶⁶ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1 d. 2477, l. 29.

⁶⁷ Iurii Arndt, “Zametki arkhitekтора-khudozhnika,” *DI SSSR* 5 (May 1958): 24-26.

Synthesis of Architecture and Arts: New Directions

The article opened by pondering, what the famous “anti-excess” resolution of 1955 had meant for decorative artists. Had the new tendencies in Soviet architecture reduced the scope of the *prikladniki*’s activity? Arndt’s question was yes and no. Yes, he admitted, “the extent of molding works has decreased; there are fewer commissions for fretwork and almost no need of Florentine mosaics and stained-glass windows.” Arndt clarified that the Resolution targeted primarily “constructive” excesses, like towers and columns, and not decorative ones, like molded friezes or fretwork wooden panels. The latter, in fact, constituted the lesser percentage of over-expenditures, yet they became “unacceptable” (in the sense of “obsolete”) with industrialization and standardization of construction. The elaboration of new, relevant methods of interior design had only started. Arndt gave an example: with the lowering of heights of public interiors, fittings tended to be hidden within the ceilings, which in many cases required transferring decorative accents to the walls or even to the floor, but only few artists had yet learnt to properly do it.

Arndt gave a number of general suggestions. First of all, the idea of “grand” (“*paradnyi*”) interior, he argued, has to be rejected. A decorative artist should therefore “pay more attention to the creation of the sense of warmth and certain intimacy, of course, without the hint of philistinism [*meshchanstva*]. Entering a club, a sanatorium, a restaurant, or a theater, a person should feel ease.” Arndt opined that, without complete refusal of solemnity, Soviet architects and decorative artists should work on the rapprochement of public [*obshchestvennoi*] and private [*chastnoi*] life, because “this rapprochement is intrinsic in socialist society.” The “warmness of everyday life” was to be introduced into public interiors, but not at the expense of their specificity. Second, since

reinforced concrete framework allows using fewer bearing walls, a new interior should be not a fragmented, but a unified, “flowing” space, zoned by screens, furniture, or flower beds. Third, illusory decoration is outdated and has to be replaced with monumental painting stressing the flatness of the wall. However, this, too, cannot be a dogma, and some types of relief are welcome in a contemporary interior, like application to the wall of the flat shapes of contrasting material. Even a louver or a “shelf with folk ceramics” can serve “decorative spots” of the interior.⁶⁸

Fourth, Arndt touched upon the question of up-to-datedness and its relation to tradition. He disapproved the rejection of tradition as much as its slavish repetition, calling instead of smart adaptation of tradition to the relevant tasks of the day. The newly proclaimed constructive and decorative techniques, as Arndt argued, had historical precedents: “Active floor, flat painting, and the columns without order [*bezordernaia opora*] were known by [medieval] Pskov architects, and [15th century Russian icon painter] Dionisius, and the masters of Italian proto-Renaissance, and many other great artists, whose experience we, unfortunately, overlook.”⁶⁹ Thus, the theme of “good tradition” was adapted here to the requirements of contemporary building practice. Arndt concluded that “contemporary architecture” implied greater responsibility of applied artists than before: “Interior is the organic complex of layout, utilitarian and decorative elements, that is, fittings, furniture, built-in and moveable furniture. Cloakrooms, external lobbies, shop counters and windows, as well as all sorts of tables, chairs, armchairs, louvers and radiators, lamps and shades – all these are objects of artist’s work.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Arndt, “Zametki arkhitekтора-khudozhnika,” 25.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 26.

While Arndt composed these lines, his project of hotel “Iunost” [‘Youth’] was being implemented in Moscow (Fig. 3.5). Its interiors more or less responded to the principles that Arndt preached in *DI SSSR*, and the hotel became one of the main icons of Soviet post-war architectural modernism. Critic Vladimir Tasalov evaluated “Iunost” as a successful example of arts synthesis and the break from the dictate of passed styles: “The artists’ creative will produced the image that not for a moment reminds of a bygone ‘style.’ Everything is new here – from the organization of space to lamps.”⁷¹ Notably, the critic used of the term “style” with quotation marks, separating its retrospective and current meanings - the upcoming contemporary style, based on the whole complex of technical, social, economic and aesthetic principles, versus the stylization of the forms of passed epochs. Arndt himself viewed even Constructivism as a historic style, like Baroque or Classicism. Accordingly, he disagreed with those critics who looked for analogies between Constructivist and contemporary architecture and called for “socialist architectural ‘style,’” (again, using “style” in quotation marks).⁷² Arndt was not alone in this stance. As Daria Bocharnikova demonstrates in her study, since the landmark Convention of Architects and Builders, there were many voices against merely copying Constructivism and for developing an “alternative approach to the artistic aspect of the program of modern architecture.”⁷³

The search for qualitatively new style based on the synthesis of architecture, decorative and easel art eventuated in several modernist buildings in the 1960s. Of them, most well-known were located in Moscow and finished in the early 1960s: Mikhail

⁷¹ Vladimir Tasalov, “Segodnia I zavtra iunosti,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1962): 24-31; 26.

⁷² Iurii Arndt, “Novaia arkhitektura I ee trebovaniia,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1962): 22-23.

⁷³ Bocharnikova, “Intenving Socialist Modern,” 54.

Posokhin's Kremlin Palace of Congresses (1961), Arndt's Iunost' (1961) and The Pioneer Palace by Viktor Egerev et al (1962). The latter was constructed with the aim of updating of the traditional idea of the Palace, or, by the expression of Susan E. Reid, "destalinizing the 'Palatial.'" It was the seminal project of shaping environment for the proper upbringing of the future inhabitants of Communist society (which, according to the Third Party Program, was to be built by 1981). For decorative artists, on the wake of their recognition as designers, the Palace project provided an excellent ground for the exercise in contemporary style and in architectural synthesis.

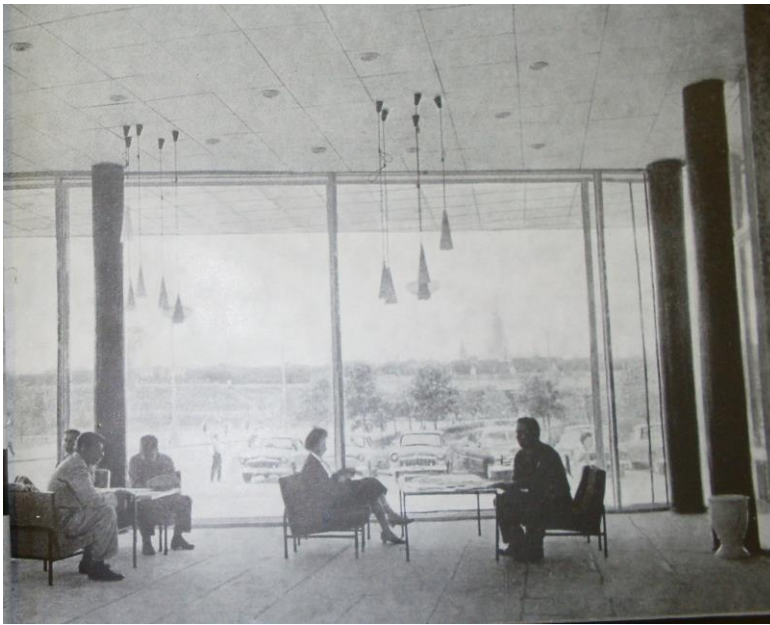


Figure 3.5. Hotel "Iunost" (Moscow), 1961, entrance hall.

The Project of the Pioneer Palace on the Lenin Hills: An Overview

Pioneer Palaces (or Houses) were Soviet extra-curricular institutions, subordinated to the Ministries of Enlightenment of Soviet republics and aimed at all-round creative education of children and adolescents. Their programs, covering diverse set of activities, from singing to aircraft modeling, from amateur theater to various sports, were defined and

guided by the branches of the All-Union Lenin Communist Youth League, or Komsomol. Pioneer Palaces/ Houses were the headquarters of the Pioneer Organization, organized under the auspices of Komsomol in 1922 for preparing children from ten to fifteen year old to be proper Soviet citizens. The first Pioneer House was opened in Moscow in 1922, and in the 1930s they spread throughout the USSR, by 1939 reaching the number 852 only in the RFSFSR.⁷⁴ Early Pioneer Palaces/Houses were located in the pre-revolutionary mansions of aristocracy, and those newly built in the 1930s imitated classical models.

In 1958, the Komsomol Central Committee initiated the plan for a new Pioneer Palace, build from modern materials and radically different from previously existing models. The chosen location, the Lenin Hills at the south-west of Moscow (before 1935 called “Sparrow Hills”), had been traditionally a popular leisure resort for Muscovites. Under Stalin, it gained importance as the location of the grandiose Moscow State University (MGU), one of the “Seven Sisters,” skyscrapers built in the late 1940s – early 1950s as a ring around the never-realized Palace of Soviets. In the second half of the 1950s, Moscow’s south-west became the site of experiments for innovative planning and building, from the second project for the Palace of Soviets (also eventually abandoned) to the residential bloc of five-store prefabricated buildings “New Cheremushki.”⁷⁵ Accordingly, the Lenin Hills needed a new, post-Stalin and “post-excess” landmark, an architectural response to the MGU. In 1958, the Komsomol Central Committee and Moscow Party Committee announced a competition for the palace that would respond to the newest construction techniques as well as to the task of all-round education of the inhabitants of

⁷⁴ M. V. Fokina et al, eds., *Stranitsy istorii iunyykh lenintsev (materialy dlia besed)* (Moscow: Kniga po trebovaniu, 1976): 71-72.

⁷⁵ Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern,” 115-154; 198-205.

the Communist society. It was expected to be not just a building, but a whole complex of buildings and recreation objects, for which a plot of fifty-four hectares in a park was assigned.⁷⁶

The winner was a team of young architects from the construction institute Mosproekt: Viktor Egerev, Vladimir Kubasov, Feliks Novikov, and their leader Igor' Pokrovskii. In resonance with current tendencies in Western architecture and in contrast to the customary practice of the Stalin era, they suggested embedding the building within the plot rather than aligning it to a street.⁷⁷ According to their plan, the Palace complex would include the main two-stored building with four perpendicularly attached wings, connected by the gallery with the concert hall. The main building and the concert hall would comprise an "L" shape embracing the parade ground for pioneer rituals. This building structure also implied a number of semi-closed outdoor spaces for various activities, opening into the park that would include recreational structures like pavilions and artificial lakes. All buildings were to be constructed by industrial methods from standard details of reinforced concrete.⁷⁸

The project was further elaborated by the winning team with the addition of Boris Palui and Mikhail Khazhakian. It was envisioned as an appropriate element of the new centrifugal city plan and an embodiment of Khrushchevist decentralization of power, socialist democracy, and new optimism about scientific and technological progress. Upon the completion of the Palace, Egerev commented:

⁷⁶ Reid, "Khrushchev's Children Paradise," 154-156

⁷⁷ Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Rejean Legault, "Introduction: Critical Themes of Postwar Modernism," in Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Rejean Legault, eds., *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Montréal: Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 22.

⁷⁸ Viktor Eegerev et al., *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, 1964), 5-19.

The manifold function of the Palace could not be resolved in the rigid frames of symmetric composition. (...) Thus, we had to find free way of arranging plans and functions while also providing their essential interconnection. This freedom of composition can be traced in the building's interiors, linked together by sliding glass partitions, open stairways and galleries. This principle allows transforming the interiors, widely and diversely using the inner space of the Palace. (...) We have strived to honestly express the building's function, the work of supporting structures, and the nature of construction materials.⁷⁹

The principles of free plan and functionalism,⁸⁰ characteristic for the architectural modernism of the 1920s – 1930s, were employed for expressing Soviet ideals of the post-Stalin era. Thus, what had become commonplace of Western architecture, on the Soviet soil was reinterpreted to become an innovative force for the negation of Stalinist art-deco and neoclassicism.



Figure 3.6. Pioneer Palace on Sparrow (Lenin) Hills, entrance to the main building, photo by Polina Kirilenko.

⁷⁹ Eegerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 7.

⁸⁰ It should be noted that the attitudes to functionalism differed among the architects of the modern movement, and not all of them even had functionalist intentions. See Stanford Anderson, "The Fiction of Function," *Assemblage*, no. 2 (February 1987): 18.



Figure 3.7. Pioneer Palace on Sparrow (Lenin) Hills, Concert Hall, photo by Polina Kirilenko.



Figure 3.8. Pioneer Palace on Sparrow (Lenin) Hills, Parade Ground, photo by Denis Esakov.

The Palace's interiors, too, had to speak to the new course of Soviet architecture. For this purpose, the construction team involved the graduating students of the Department of Industrial Art at MVKhPU. Why was the task of designing interiors of a highly important building entrusted to the people barely experienced in industrial design (as it was then called, "industrial art")? There are two possible explanations. First, this decision was beneficial for the Komsomol and architectural team due to its pertinence to overall conceptual framework. The Palace, envisioned as rejuvenating architectural statement, was designed by young architects (all, except for Khazhakian, aged below 40) for the youngest audience, a rising generation of Soviet people. Accordingly, its interiors and environs could best be authored by young students, who had started their design education in September 1954, slightly before the famous anti-excess resolution, and mostly had not been exposed to the Stalin-era aesthetic principles such as obligatory figurativeness, focus on the subject matter and lush decoration of unique objects. In short, a fresh force of designers was needed, of which MVKhPU was the most obvious provider.

Second, such cooperation was beneficial for the school, too, as it responded to the campaign of the curriculum's fuller orientation at concrete tasks of industry and construction in response to the all-Union school reform, conducted by the Soviet government since 1958.⁸¹ A part of this campaign was the resolution "On the Forms and

⁸¹ On December 24, 1958 The Supreme Soviet of the USSR accepted a statute "On Strengthening the connection of School with Life and Further Development of the System of People's Education," aimed at global-scale training of technically competing personnel for industry and agriculture. According to it, only 8 years of secondary school education were mandatory, after which the students could either enter vocational schools, or study three more years in high school where 2 days of a week were scheduled for internship at industrial or agricultural enterprises. School graduates received a certificate of technical profession. ("Ob ukрупnenii sviazi shkoly s zhisniu i dal'neishem razvitii sistemy narodnogo obrazovaniia," in A. A. Abakumov et al., eds., *Narodnoe obrazovaniie v SSSR. Obshcheobrazovatel'naia shkola. Sbornik dokumentov. 1917-1973* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1974): 53-61. The lack of positions for school interns in industry impeded the successful realization of this reform, and by mid-1960s it was curtailed. ("Priniat zakon 'Ob ukрупnenii sviazi shkoly s zhisniu i dal'neishem razvitii sistemy narodnogo obrazovaniia'," the website of B. N. Eltsin Presidential Library, <http://www.prlib.ru/History/Pages/Item.aspx?itemid=365> accessed

Terms of Education in Higher Institutions and the Production Internship of Students,” issued by the USSR Soviet of Ministers in August 1959.⁸² In particular, it obliged full-time students of higher art schools to work as employees or paid interns at industrial enterprises for one year. The topics for diploma projects for the academic year 1959-1960, set at MVKhPU in September right after the issue of the Resolution, were all related to practical spheres - mass housing, construction of public buildings, transportation and factory equipment. Therefore, the involvement of MVKhPU final-year students in the ambitious Pioneer Palace Project can be seen as a strategic move within the state and Party-led campaign for updating architectural, social and cultural landscape of the Soviet capital city.

During the academic year, students were expected to design furniture, lamps, lattices, fountains, monumental panels, decorative sculpture, and other types of decorative and utilitarian furnishings - altogether 33 projects.⁸³ The students were provided access to experimental workshops and technical assistance of the Palace’s team. On June 9-13, 1960, students presented the results of their work to the State Examination Committee that included Palace’s architects Egerev, Kubasov and Khazhakian, as well as engineers Nikolai Maikov and Iakov Kerzon. The diploma projects included technical drawings and three-dimensional models. Some of these defenses are available for scrutiny as stenographic records – namely, those of the sections of metalware and woodware at the Department of Industrial Art, in that time headed by architect and designer Aleksandr Korotkevich.⁸⁴

18.12.2014 For a detailed account on Khrushchev’s educational reform, see Laurent Caumel, “The Scientist, the Pedagogue and the Party Official: Interest Groups, Public Opinion and Decision-Making in the 1958 Education Reform,” in Ilic and Smith, *Soviet State and Society Under Nikita Khrushchev*, 66–85.

⁸² “O formakh i srokakh obucheniia v vysshykh uchebnykh zavedeniakh i o proizvodstvennoi praktike studentov,” Resolution by the USSR Council of Ministers from August 4, 1959, <http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=ESU;n=9934> accessed 18.11.2014

⁸³ RGALI, f. 2466 op. 2 d. 137, l. 12.

⁸⁴ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167; RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168.

According to this source, out of 34 diploma works defended in June 1960 by the students of the metalware section, 5 were dedicated to the Palace. In the section of woodware, the percentage was even higher: 11 of 21.

The sections of metalware and woodware deserve special attention not only because of the availability of relevant archival materials, but also due to their historical precedents. The Departments of woodwork and woodware at Vkhutemas, with such prominent instructors as Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Anton Lavinsky, decisively broke with methods of traditional applied art and introduced advanced propaedeutic courses and technical disciplines. In 1926, the two Departments were united into a Department of wood- and metalware – famous *dermetfak*, which became the cradle of Soviet proto-design by preparing “the first detachment of qualified designers,” as Selim Khan-Magomedov phrases it.⁸⁵ Two of these pre-war graduates, Zakhar Bykov and Nikolai Sobolev (in 1923 noted by Varvara Stepanova among Rodchenko’s best students),⁸⁶ in the late 1950s headed the MVKhPU sections of metalware and woodware, respectively; Bykov was, moreover, the School’s rector. Another *dermetfak* graduate, Boris Sokolov, taught at woodware section and supervised several diploma projects for Pioneer Palace. Thus, in the late 1950s, MVKhPU updated its education policy not by inventing approaches and methods from scratch, but by drawing from the experience of the 1920s. The continuity with Constructivism and the productivist movement was established here through experienced professionals. What could their own students, intellectual “grandchildren” of

⁸⁵ Khan-Magomedov, 366. Khan-Magomedov argues that the Department of wood- and metalware most fully responded to the initial program of Vkhutemas that was stated in the Decree by the Council of People’s Commissars from 25. 12. 1920. This program aimed at, essentially, educating specialists for raising quality of the industrial production of useful objects. The text of the Decree was published in: *Izvestiia* 291/1138 (December 25, 1920).

⁸⁶ Varst (Vasvara Stepanova), “O rabotakh konstruktivistskoi molodezhi,” *LEF* 3 (1923): 53.

Rodchenko and other constructivists, offer for the crucial construction project of the Khrushchev era?

There are two major hindrances to the investigation of this question. Firstly, no illustrations, such as drawings or photographs of models, are attached to the archived stenographic records.⁸⁷ This leaves a historian with a highly challenging task to reconstruct the projects by their verbal descriptions. Secondly, none of these projects was directly implemented, despite all the praise from experts. A few of them, however, were realized in a more or less modified form by the Palace's architects and established sculptors. The resulting works were reproduced in publications, and one of them is still partially present in the Palace. This circumstance not only gives a clue about original projects, but also reveals the historicity of design process by showing what was carried to the level of actual construction and what was rejected on the way. The reappearance, however altered, in the actual building, was the main criterion for selecting projects for the current analysis.

In what follows I focus on specific ways by which students solved the task of adjusting to the rigid technical requirements while also adequately expressing ideas of up-to-datedness, creativity and progress, associated with the new Palace. From analyzing verbal presentations and commentaries at student defenses, I proceed to discussing the ways they find (or failed to) influence actual Palace interiors.

Student Defenses: Demonstrating Lightness and Other Qualities

The first day of defenses was opened by student V. Gubarev. He presented the model of decorative lattice, intended for dividing a winter garden from a gallery in the

⁸⁷ The illustrations of these projects may exist in the archive of the Stroganov State Academy of Art and Design (former MVKhPU), but they were not found in RGALI. In this text, I can rely only on descriptions.

large foyer of the Palace's main building. The lattice's model was constituted by bars 25 mm in diameter. Upon them, decorative elements - silhouettes of flora and fauna - were riveted; the student explained that for actual lattice, electric welding should be used.⁸⁸ Some of them could be cut from 2 mm thick iron sheet, while others bent from 40 mm wide steel strips. For the sake of protection from corrosion, all the lattice details would undergo color bluing and oil polishing. The lattices would also include horizontal supports for ceramic flower pots. As Gubarev argued, "the combination of the monochrome metal with ceramic pots of various colors produces the general impression of a noble form [*blagorodnuiu obshchuiu formu*]."⁸⁹ Definitely, he alluded to the "nobleness" ("*blagorodstvo*") in the sense of fineness of composition and mastery of processing the material, not in the old sense of social distinction. Yet he also unwittingly commented to the redefinition to the Palatial: in socialist society, the palaces are open for everyone, and art is universally accessible. And just as the young Pioneers of Moscow would finally have specially built complex rather than an appropriated mansion of pre-revolutionary nobility, inside they would see not the intricate lace of a lattice, but a very simple structure with the accent on color contrast and stylized figurative décor. The trope of nobleness was also used by the project's official reviewer L. Ia. Talalai, architect of the older generation, co-author of the famous art deco house on Novinskii Boulevard in Moscow (1940). He opined: "the chosen diameter of tubes, the dimensions of strip steel and other elements of the composition testify to the fact that student Gubarev properly knows and feels the material. The overall composition of lattices is elegant, well-articulated [*khorosho prorisovana*] and tastefully arranged. The blued texture [*faktura*] of the lattice's elements is noble

⁸⁸ The model was carried out in MVKhPU's workshop, where welding was technically unavailable.

⁸⁹ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 15.

[*blagorodna*].”⁹⁰ Thus, rather than characterizing the project in terms of tradition and innovation, Talalai focused on student’s skill.⁹¹ Gubarev’s supervisor Nikolai Mikhailov expressed his view similarly: “[U]sing the simplest materials, roughly speaking, iron and clay, he translates them into an artistic visual language, making them sound fantastically. Simple cheap materials and well-found techniques produce the impression of preciousness in this significantly inexpensive thing [*veshchi*].”⁹² This rhetoric resonates with the “anti-excess” campaign in architecture: the student was praised for his ability to create “rich” and “fantastic” object without over-expenditure.⁹³

One of the Palace’s architects, Viktor Egerev, evaluated the project in terms of laconicism: “The student correctly fulfilled the given tasks. And these tasks are completely real, connected to actual construction. I would like to emphasize the silhouette character [*siluetnost’*] of this solution ... and the fact that the lattice is not oversaturated with images. (...) This gives contemporary character and lightness [to the lattice].”⁹⁴ The accordance between the decorative detail and the overall concept of the Palace is what, for Egerev, constituted the contemporary character of the student’s project. Particularly, on a syntactic level, Egerev connected contemporary character with lightness, alluding to the lightness of the building itself – with its free plan, glass facades, flat roof and thin supports of the main entrance’s canopy. Indeed, in contrast to the nearby massive MGU building, the Pioneer

⁹⁰ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 17.

⁹¹ As Daria Bocharnikova convincingly demonstrates in her dissertation, the debate, spurred by the Second All-Union Convention of Construction Workers and Architects, was not between modernists and neo-classicists or between reformers and conservatives, but between progressists, eager to incorporate the best achievements of Soviet architecture, be it Constructivism of Neo-classic school of Ivan Zholtovsky, and, on the other side, “a group of waverers and political survivors of different kinds” perceived as conservatives (Bocharnikova, op. cit., 90-114. Evidently, Talalai sided with progressists, caring not so much about stylistic guidelines as about quality and social usefulness of architectural, as well as design, work. This is why he was chosen, or volunteered, as a reviewer for several projects for the Pioneer Palace interiors.

⁹² RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 19.

⁹³ One lattice would not cost more than 5000 rubles, which in 1960 equaled 1250 US dollars.

⁹⁴ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 20.

Palace was conceived as a light building, free from the burden of the symbols of Stalinist past. As architectural critic Grigorii Revzin noticed in his recent interview, the Palace was the first landmark building of the Khrushchev era (“*pervoe khrushchevskoe zdaniie*”), “very light, as if flying.” According to Revzin’s interpretation, it was the result of the young architects’ use of the anti-excess resolution - that was actually oriented at practical issues, not aesthetics - for realizing their creative ambitions.⁹⁵

At the defenses of Gubarev’s colleagues, lightness, too, was often explicitly or implicitly emphasized as virtue. I suggest that “lightness” here acted as signifier of up-to-datedness, or what philosopher Charles Pierce calls “qualisign.”⁹⁶ In her study of material culture of socialist Hungary, anthropologist Krisztina Fehérváry uses the concept of *qualisign* for exploring, in the framework of Peircean semiotics, the influence of materialities upon the process of signification. As she explains, qualisigns are qualities that “can produce affective responses that may or may not come to constitute a recognizable aesthetic regime.” Textures, colors and properties, found in multiple objects, substances and bodies, have a potential to become qualisigns: “The qualia of gray in a rug, for example, is shared by a slab of concrete, a dawn fog, and pebbles on the lakeshore”; this gray is usually mingles with other material properties such as texture or fragility.⁹⁷ According to Fehervary, the presence of qualisigns allows uniting diverse realms into a coherent style. Relying on this argument, one can argue that post-Stalin “contemporary

⁹⁵ “Arkhitektura ot Stalina do Khrushcheva,” Vitali Dymarskii’s interview with Grigorii Revzin, transcribed record of the radio program from June 20, 2010 at Ekho Moskvyy: <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/hrushev/687897-echo/> accessed 17.11.2014

⁹⁶ Charles S. Peirce, *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings*, International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 101; 110; 115.

⁹⁷ Krisztina Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7-8.

style” was built upon sensuous qualities of materials rather than a lexicon of figurative elements. This is why the lightness and “noble” *faktura* of Gubarev’s lattice were seen more important than its figurative elements.

Another example is the project by Boris Borisovskii, where “lightness” contributed to the process of signification in combination with other qualities. The construction plan presupposed the range of monuments dedicated to the “most important landmarks of the development of human society” to be set on the grass in front of the main façade. The recent launch of Sputnik in October 1957 was considered one of such landmarks. The optimism about space exploration needed to be properly celebrated in a monument observable from the Parade ground, where important pioneer rituals were to be conducted. Borisovskii’s suggestion was a sphere constituted by arrows of gilded steel strips, as well as the figure of space rocket, cut from sheet iron. The diameter of the sphere would be 3 meters and the span of arrows 7.5 meters; a one-fifth scale model was presented to the Examination Committee. The sphere and the rocket were supported by a solid skeleton of metal tubes, cased with stainless steel.

According to project’s author, the sphere represented the Cosmos as perceived by Earthmen (“the firmament”), and the arrows – rays of constellations. Sharp glittering rays, pointing to different directions, signified rapid movement, helping the artist to “reflect a moment when emancipated human thought rushed beyond the limits of atmosphere.”⁹⁸ But in the review by MVKhPU professor A. Zavistovskii, the rays were interpreted differently - as astrological imagery that Soviet science was to disavow:

Very convincing artistic technique, used by the author, is the contrast between tangibly dense [*material’no-plotnogo*] element of the monument that symbolizes the dynamic force of human thought, transformed in to the energy, triumphant and entering the

⁹⁸ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 142.

space, and the open-work, almost weightless sphere that symbolizes the medieval views of human beings about the Cosmos, which is intensified by medieval [sic!] astrological signs.⁹⁹

On the whole, therefore, the monument thus appears as the interconnection of astrological and astronomic images, of myth and science, prejudice and reason, together comprising the Soviet myth¹⁰⁰ of progress. In terms of anthropology based on Peircean semiotics, the material properties of the monument – lightness, glitter, sharpness, as well as firmness, – entered the process of signification through resemblance, or iconic extension,¹⁰¹ to concepts like weightlessness, energy, dynamism, but also fantasy and mysticism. Unlike the 110-metres tall Monument to the Conquerors of Space, erected three years after the Gagarin flight, near the VDNKh,¹⁰² Borisovskii's monument was modest in scale and easily comprehensible, as Zavistovskii did not fail emphasize.¹⁰³ The monument would thus be up-to-date in a double sense: celebrating latest achievements in space exploration while

⁹⁹ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 145.

¹⁰⁰ Given the monument's reference to Soviet mythology, it is tempting to explain its signification in terms of Roland Barthes's concept of myth as a second-order semiological system. Proceeding from a Sasseurean relation between the signifier and a signified, Barthes point to the third element – the sign, "which is the associative total of the first two terms." For example, if a bouquet of roses is a signifier and passion is a signified, the "passionified" roses is a sign, which is, in contrast to empty signifier, is full of meaning. In the case of Borisovskii's monument, for example, the particularly shaped gilded steel would be a signified, the Firmament a signifier, and the weightless space with constellations – a sign. This system of signification is the first-order semiological system where the sign is the final term. On the level of myth, however, the sign empties itself and becomes a signifier for a new signified. In our case, this would be Soviet triumph in space. (See Roland Barthes, "Myth as a Semiological system," in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 110-116). But such reading would imply that, by entering (Soviet) myth, the monument is emptied of its first-level significance, that is, its materiality. However, I would side with anthropologists inspired by Peircean semiology in recognizing the active role of materialities in the process of signification. See Fehervary, op. cit; W. Keane, "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things," *Language and Communication* 23, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 409-25; Anne Meneley, "Oleo-Signs and Quali-Signs: The Qualities of Olive Oil," *Ethnos* 73, no. 3 (2008): 303-326.

¹⁰¹ The term "iconic extension" is used by Fehervary to explain the relationship between qualia and concepts as well as the significance people attach to qualia. Fehervary, *Politics in Color and Concrete*.

¹⁰² This Monument's authors were sculptor A. P. Faizykh Krandievskii and architects M. o. Barshch and A. N. Kolchin.

¹⁰³ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 145.

also responding to Soviet pedagogy's orientation at stimulating children's interest in science and technology.

Among the diploma projects dedicated to the Palace interiors, many included metal furniture. Such projects were presented in both sections under consideration, but metalware students combined metal frames with plastic and woodware students mostly with wood.¹⁰⁴ As a progressive furniture type, invented and popularized by the Bauhaus student Marcel Breuer, tubular steel furniture was considered most suitable for the new Palace. This attitude was a part of a broad campaign for updating furniture production, unfolded by the Soviet government from 1958 in connection with mass housing construction and as the response to the population's demand.¹⁰⁵ The use of new technologies and materials, such as plastics and rubber foam, was seen as primary way of overcoming the lag of furniture production. This, in turn, demanded the update of forms. As architect N. Borushko expressed it in summer 1960: "The established types of sideboards, cupboards, beds, etc., cease to be attractive not just because their size does not correspond to contemporary apartments, but also because outdated [*ustarevshiie*] forms do not correspond to new aesthetic views."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Students of both departments in many cases designed similar objects – furniture, and worked with similar materials – tubular steel, plastic, and wood –in different combination. This fact reveals the problematic of institutional division according to the materials processed rather than according to the products designed. The necessity to unite industrial designers in one section, thus distinguishing them from sculptors and decorators working with similar materials, will be soon realized at the governmental level. This problem was realized by the MVKhPU administration in the 1960s, and during this decade the disciplinary division was several times restructured. In particular, in 1965 the section of wood ware was transformed into the department of furniture and transferred into the Department of interior and equipment, while a special section of "artistic engineering" (the term uses for industrial design) was organized on the basis of the section of metalware. RGALI, f. 2460, introduction to op. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Washington, D.C. : Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/ Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 231-237.

¹⁰⁶ N. Orieva, "Krasota truda," *Tekhnika – Molodezhi* 7 (July 1960): 2-4; 4. On the criticism of old furniture types see V. Dele, "O sovremennot mebeli," *DI SSSR* 5 (May 1958): 28-32.

The search for new types of furniture, adequate for small-size apartments, was, of course, not a novelty of post-Stalin years, but a famous initiative of the avant-garde architects and proto-designers of the 1920s. Then, the ideal of asceticism in everyday life was generated both by economic necessity and by collectivist spirit, and the projects of collapsible furniture were of equal interest for architects, designers and workers who inhabited the rooms appropriated from bourgeoisie and the newly built houses-communes. Theorist of productivist art Boris Arvatov celebrated collapsible furniture as an example of a new Thing, “functional and active, connected like a co-worker with human practice.”¹⁰⁷ In accordance with this the productivist idea of socialist object, students of *dermetfak* at Vkhutemas designed various types of collapsible furniture, mostly of wood, but in some cases with the use of steel tubes. Upon graduating in the late 1920s, some of these “pioneers of Soviet design”¹⁰⁸ entered industrial enterprises and actually influenced, though on quite a limited scale, Soviet production.¹⁰⁹

After the predominance of traditional furniture forms in the 1930s - early 1950s, collapsible furniture again found state and Party support as a tool of modernizing material culture, but unlike in the 1920s, now the industry had capacity to produce such furniture on a mass scale. Thus, Arvatov’s “co-workers” could now enter every home. Modernist public buildings like Pioneer Palace were supposed to display most advanced furniture models to be mass-reproduced. But since the line of educating furniture designers, initiated at Vkhutemas, was interrupted for three decades, in 1960 Soviet design of metal furniture was

¹⁰⁷ Arvatov and Kiaer, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” 126.

¹⁰⁸ This is the term is by Selim Khan-Magomedov, used as the title of his seminal 1995 book, with a clear allusion to Nikolaus Pevsner’s famous work *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Faber&Faber, 1936).

¹⁰⁹ A. Abramova, “Naslediie Vkhutemasa,” *DI SSSR* 4 (April 1964), 8-12. Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery Sovetskogo Dizaina*, 383-399.

still, by expression of Khazhakian, “most lagging front” [*samym otstaiushchim frontom*].¹¹⁰

While assigning furniture designs to students, the Palace’s architects also conducted research on the latest models of Finnish and Swedish furniture and as a result ordered 40% of all furniture, planned for the Palace, from Finland. This decision, however, was regretted after the architects saw student projects, which surpassed their expectations and were evaluated as good enough to equip the whole Palace, no worse than Finnish furniture. At least in this particular sphere of design, the lag behind the West was promised soon to be overcome.

In all these furniture projects, lightness was emphasized in various ways. Furniture for the beach of an artificial lake in the Palace’s park was presented by its author Igor Akimov as “convenient, light and beautiful, and also easily collapsible, so it would serve longer and be conveniently stored in winter time.”¹¹¹ The furnishings for waiting rooms, designed by Elena Bondarenko, would include convenient wooden chairs “of very light type” (*ochen’ legkogo tipa*).¹¹² Valentin Konovalov’s equipment for concert hall was praised for the use of “new progressive materials: thin-walled metal tubes in place of massive legs for chairs and foam rubber for seats instead of springs.”¹¹³ For the kitchen of the Palace’s ‘housekeeping school’ student E. Fomina designed functional and hygienic furniture arranged along walls. Her reviewers found the design simple and effective: plastic coatings of working surfaces would be easily (*legko*) cleaned; the central table with narrow metal legs would appear light and produce the sense of spaciousness.¹¹⁴ Similarly, for the

¹¹⁰ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 131.

¹¹¹ Ibid., ll. 127-133.

¹¹² RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168, ll. 46-53.

¹¹³ Ibid., l. 125.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., l. 36-44

Palace's park, Nodari Gogoberidze designed benches, chairs, tables and chaise-lounges - "firm, light and easily transportable," conveniently foldable and collapsible, but also light and bright in terms of color and reasonable in terms of production costs.¹¹⁵

In the context of general enthusiasm of the Examination Committee about these projects, critical responses present special interest as shedding light at the difficulties accompanying the actual work on new socialist objects. For example, woodware student M. Vlasov-Klimov was challenged with the assignment to design the interior for the Palace's dining hall, which implied arranging the places for 176 people to comfortably eat and easily clearing the tables after meal, while also leaving a free passageway for a maid with food-cart.¹¹⁶ The task was further complicated by the unusual ellipsoid configuration of the room, sail-shaped [*vsparushennyi*] ceiling supported by a solid pillar in the center, and large glass wall, opening the view on stadium and artificial lake. Vlasov-Klimov's response to the challenge was the design of small square tables, easily adjustable to the curve of the wall and to the position of the pillar. The tables were accompanied by light chairs of advanced construction: seat and back to be bent from a single piece of nine-layer plywood, and the legs produced of two steel tubes intersecting at one point and fixed not to the back, as usual, but to the seat. The tables would have two tops, the lower serving as shelf for children's possessions. For decorative effect as well as additional protection, front sides of chairs and upper tops of tables would be coated by PVC and covered by nitrocellulose lacquer. The student also presented models of a sharp-cornered table for used dishes and a complex buffet, probably inspired by the late 1920s projects of kitchen units

¹¹⁵ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168, 231-233.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., l. 89-91.

and transformable furniture: it would include a table with two glass showcases, cold-air unit and several shelves with adjustable height.

Nikolai Sobolev, Vkhutemas graduate and the current head of the woodware section, found the table design uneconomical: “Why such efforts for supporting these tables? I calculated that you used [altogether] forty meters of excessive tubes, while we always use metal sparingly.”¹¹⁷ Vlasov-Klimov defended his choice: the legs are fixed not to the sides of a table top, but to its middle, so that they don’t disturb the legs of the sitters. Such construction, though ergonomic, is not enough stable and requires additional fixing element – hence the use of extra tubes. Several committee members disapproved the shape of the table for dirty dishes. Thus, Zakhar Bykov, another Vkhutemas graduate and head of metalware section, characterized this shape as “accidental and unwarranted,” and, contrary to what the student claimed, unreasonable in terms of hygiene. He also, together with engineer Nikolai Maikov criticized pointed angles of the table top as “somewhat disturbing” and suggested that rounded angles would be safer for children approaching the table with used dishes. Vlasov-Klimov explained that the sharp square form of the table top was determined by the parameters of the interior. The quality of “lightness,” implied by tubular steel furniture, also appeared questionable: one committee member doubted that children would be able to move the chairs, for example, for cleaning the dining hall. Again, the student reassured that his chairs are “very light,” adding that rubber endings (“hoofs”) of the legs make this chairs also stable. These arguments revealed the contradictions between different principles of modernist design, embraced by Soviet architects and applied artists by 1960: economy, functionalism, ergonomics and ease of maintenances.

¹¹⁷ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168, l. 92.

While trying to follow some of these principles, the student unwittingly violated others. Thus, square tables would produce elegant composition but be potentially dangerous for their users: formal considerations overshadowed ergonomic requirements. In the case of tables' legs, on the contrary, ergonomic considerations led to the over expenditure of material. These shortcomings are easily explainable by the author's status of a student and hence lack of experience. Yet they can be viewed in the context of contradictory legacy of Vkhutemas design that much influenced Soviet design education in the late 1950s but was mostly untraceable in everyday environment, so that students had to follow abstract models and move toward effective solutions through trial and error.

Vlasov-Klimov's fellow student at the woodware department, V. Goriunova, was also assigned a challenging project – furnishing a very spacious playroom for 7 to 9 years old schoolchildren (*oktiabriata*), located in the main building within the winter garden.¹¹⁸ Her work was determined by the specific character of walls: side walls as sliding glass doors, one wall made from wooden blocks and the fourth wall, totally from glass; with opening side doors, the hall would be united with the main enfilade of the Palace, in accordance with the principle of “flowing space,” described by architect Arndt in *DI SSSR*. In accordance with transparency and transformability of the walls, and, broader, in accordance to the current ideas of communist upbringing and new types of educational space,¹¹⁹ Goriunova was instructed to create a dynamic and interactive interior. In the existing Soviet educational institutions, she did not find proper models for emulation: “There was nothing to look at.” Rejecting familiar interiors, the student attempted to create

¹¹⁸ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168, l. 198-206.

¹¹⁹ E. Koridalina, “Oni zdes' khoziaeva,” *Semia i Shkola* 4 (1962): 9-10; Reid, ““Khrushchev's Children Paradise.”

completely new complex of furniture, toys and wall decorations, where everything would be entertaining and cognitively useful. Goriunova explained: “I aimed to create the conditions for children to feel freedom; to create ingenious children’s world; therefore I proceeded from the principle of simple forms, accessible and amusing for children.” She designed collapsible furniture that could be easily folded when the hall is opened and included into the general enfilade. From wooden sections and foam-rubber cushions, children would compose different pieces of furniture, like table or coach. The toys, too, were designed as collapsible from different parts. Architect Sergei Nikulin approvingly noted that both furniture and toys will stimulate children’s interest to DIY practices and raise the activity of collective games, which would be “correct in terms of the methodology of upbringing.” The sliding partition walls were to be decorated by appliqué landscape compositions that would thematically correlate with the actual landscape visible through the glass wall. Lest the only opaque wall be “somewhat boring” (“*skuchnovatoi*”), the student offered to decorate it by subtle drawing in mild colors. In all decorations she claimed to have relied “on children’s drawing and children’s taste.” To make playing even more comfortable, she suggested covering the floor with the grass-imitating mat. In spite of the criticism that some toys’ details cannot be fixed well enough, Goriunova’s project generally met the expectations of the Palace’s architects.

Even though Goriunova claimed that her project was unprecedented in the Soviet Union, its description resembles that of the interior design of a kindergarten’s playroom, a diploma work defended in June 1953 by V. Orlovskaja.¹²⁰ There, too, convenience, coziness and simplicity of forms were main objectives. Light wall paintings and even a

¹²⁰ RGALI, f. 2460 op. 1 d. 285.

decorated transparent partition also appeared in that project. Yet Orlovskaja did not suggest collapsible furniture or interactive toys: though light and spacious, her playroom would keep children follow the rules set by adults rather than inviting them to arrange and transform the environment according to their own needs. Goriunova could hardly be unfamiliar with the work of her predecessor, but, evidently, she found it obsolete in its rigidity.

Goriunova's approach to the playroom was up-to-date in terms of its resonance with the concern for freedom, prominent among post-war architects and designers in Europe and the U. S. As Sarah Goldhagen underlines, an important component of this concern was the ideal of *homo ludens*, man at play, inspired by Johan Huizinga's 1938 book of the same name. Play, understood as the source of spontaneous self-expression and resistance to the socio-political pressures, required proper architectural spaces. Accordingly, play often served as reference for architects, such as Alison and Peter Smithson and Cedric Price in Britain, Jaap Bakema and Aldo Van Eyck in the Netherlands and the members of Situationist International in France, especially by the late 1950s.¹²¹ Although in that time Soviet architects and applied artist were concerned with the problems of interaction and collective activities, spontaneous play was not pronounced to be a crucial part of human life. In this respect, childhood was a prominent exception. The objects Goriunova designed promised to be not co-workers, but toys, or playmates. Goriunova's playroom, as well as the whole Pioneer Palace project, was envisioned as a segregated space of freedom within a regimented socialist society. The emphasis on "lightness" in many student defenses can

¹²¹ Goldhagen and Legault, "Introduction: Critical Themes of Postwar Modernism," 19. Several essays from this volume deal specifically with the theme of *homo ludens* as related to architecture.

therefore be also considered as a symptom of the striving to downplay the institutional pressure and let children reveal their genuine interests and capacities.

Implementation: Plagiarism or Reinterpretation for Better Design?

All the projects for the Palace from the sections of metalware and woodware – altogether 16 – were expected to be implemented within the next half a year. Khazhakian called for finding “organization forms” for realizing the projects in situ. “It should be said that we witness the birth of such a great mastery,” he enthused.¹²² Architect Georgii Zakharov, the pro-rector of MVKhPU, stated clearly that the elaboration of these “organizational forms” should be the responsibility of the Palace team and Komsomol as much as of the School.¹²³ But the cooperation between Palace’s architects and the MVKhPU administration remained at the level of good intentions. In April 1962, three months before the opening of the Pioneer Palace, the Administration Board of the Moscow Organization of the USSR Union of Architects met with the MVKhPU representatives for discussing students’ diploma works and the prospects for their implementation into industry. At this meeting, rector Bykov complained that architects rarely turn to MVKhPU for cooperation, and even if they do, the resulting student works are often eventually neglected. He cited the Pioneer Palace as a vivid example: “Unfortunately, none of the student projects has been realized, even though they all have been approved and the students strongly wished to implement them in situ.”¹²⁴ No commentary on this particular case followed from the architects.

¹²² RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 131

¹²³ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1168, l. 160.

¹²⁴ RGALI, f. 2466, op. 2, d. 137.

The Palace was ceremoniously opened in 1962 in the International Day of Protection of Children – June 1. The published materials on the new Palace, as well as archival sources, reveal that, in fact, some of MVKhPU projects were implemented without involving and acknowledging of the students, in more or less modified form. These sources, however, do not give a clue for the reason of what essentially was plagiarism (though not a legal problem, since student works were not protected by Soviet copyright law).¹²⁵ Most likely, while students' ideas were indeed appreciated as relevant and innovative, the inclusion of students into the Palace team process turned out to be a difficult organizational task that could slow down the construction process. The official profession of industrial designer was not yet established, and as a result, the authors could not benefit from their own work. Was this probably also an attempt to update student work to a more professional level, to better adjust its qualities to the actual building? A brief survey of the modified projects by Gubarev, Borisovskii, Vlasov-Klimov and Goriunova will shed light on this question.

The project of decorative lattice was, evidently, the only one implemented almost without changes – by Egerev and sculptor P. Shimeson (Fig. 3.9). The technique of bluing, suggested by Gubarev, was neglected; yet the laconic silhouettes of birds, fishes, crabs and insects, fixed on thin iron bars, as well as decorative flower-pots quite accurately corresponded to the original design. Indeed, the lattice appears very light, in tune with the

¹²⁵ In 1960, there was no special law about industrial standards in the USSR. The 1924 Resolution of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars "On Industrial Standards" (drawings and models) was invalidated in 1936. No replacing document was issued. Technical drawings were now protected by the copyright law while models (prototypes) fell under the category "technical improvements" and were protected by the 1931 Regulation on inventions and technical improvements, according to which "author license," rather than patents, became the main form of protecting rights of inventors. Evidently, student projects, drawings as well as models, were not considered as belonging to either of these categories, because they were ultimately not admitted into industrial production and thus not given author licenses. A. P. Sergeev, *Pravo intellektual'noi sobstvennosti v Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (Moscow: Prospekt, 2003), 34-48.

metal furniture and flower-beds located in the foyer. Its composition is at once free and rhythmically structured: highly stylized images of fauna are asymmetrically arranged upon the regular grid. This contrast produces strong visual, but also potentially tactile, effect. To use the conceptual framework of the Constructivists, the lattice combined elements of construction (expedient processing of material) and composition (arrangement of elements, or “spots,” as architect Vladimir Krinskii defined it in 1921).¹²⁶ While the figures of fauna are by no means necessary, they are produced by minimal means, and thus do not oversaturate the lattice, just as Egerev remarked at Gubarev’s defense. At the professional meeting in June 1962, after the Palace’s opening, young art critic V. Lebedev noted: “The figures thematically correspond to the hall’s purpose [winter garden with pool and fountain], they are clearly comprehensible, expressive, rhythmically sharp, and expressive as see-through [*khorosho rabotaiut na prosvet*].”¹²⁷ However, Lebedev, as well as Egerev himself, found the location of the lattice unfortunate: it was partially obscured by the strings of staircases and by trees, so that proper perception of the lattice was hindered.¹²⁸ One can only guess whether the implementation would be better or worse if student Gubarev conducted it; in any case, the compositional mistake greatly weakened the lattice’s integrity, lightness and “contemporary character.” (Notably, the lattice is still in place,

¹²⁶ The definitions of composition and construction were famously discussed at the series of meetings at the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk) in Moscow in January 1920-21. The meetings were held by the newly founded “Group of Objective Analysis” that included artists Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov’ Popova, Nadezhda Udal’tsova, Vasilii Kandinskii, Aleksei Babichev, and others; architects Vladimir Krinskii, Nikolai Ladovskii and others. The participants’ views on composition and construction significantly differed, yet at the end it was mostly agreed that construction was connected to necessity (the principle “nothing excessive”) and composition – with tasteful and arrangement of optional elements. Most ardent proponents of this view were Rodchenko and Stepanova. Stenographic records of the construction vs. composition debates, currently in a private archive, will be published in the forthcoming volume: Serguei Alex. Oushakine (ed), *Formal’nyi metod: Antologiya rossiiskogo modernizma* (Yekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2015). I am indebted to Serguei Oushakine for providing a copy of this pre-published document.

¹²⁷ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2 d. 82, l. 17

¹²⁸ Ibid.; Egerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 63.

almost unchanged, and it looks strikingly obsolete with the background of vending machines with beverages of Western brands – see Fig. 3.10).

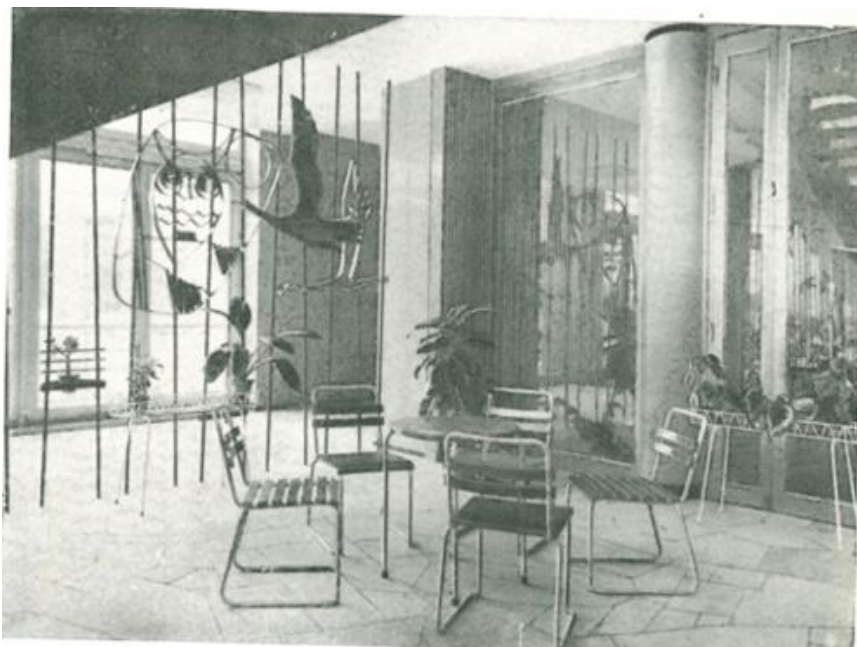


Figure 3.9. V. Egerev and P. Shimeson, decorative lattice of the winter garden (after the project by V. Gubarev).



Figure 3.10. Contemporary view on the lattice (photo by the author, July 2014).

Borisovskii's project for the monument of space exploration turned out never to inspire the Moscow pioneers to become new Gagarins, or aerospace engineers. Only the figures of constellations were implemented – as the decoration of the curved walls of the planetarium, a special volume within the left end of the main building (Fig. 3.11). Applied to the black, PVC-coated wall, the metal arrows are not any more perceived as openwork and hardly produce the impression of weightlessness. Rather, they look like smartly arranged decoration and, to use the Constructivist dyad again, act as composition, not as construction. Nonetheless, their authors, sculptors D. Shakhovskoi and M. Lukashevker, succeeded in revealing the visual qualities of materials, contrasting the grooved surface of PVC laths and thin strips and silhouettes of silvery aluminum, as both critic Lebedev and architect Egerev did not fail to mention. Lebedev positively noticed this work's dynamic plasticity – the interchange of protuberances and hollows intensified by strong contours – yet he found the composition oversaturated with figures, whose “graphic sharpness” was, in his opinion, somewhat lost.¹²⁹ Though Shakhovskoi's and Lukashevker's work does not produce a complicated signification that Borisovskii envisioned, it has an advantage of better comprehensibility: rather than being a free-standing symbolic structure, it encircles the room-theater where children actually learn the basics of astronomy.

Close to the planetarium, in the first side wing of the Palace, under the auditorium the architects located the pioneer café – the same oval room with the column in the center that had been previously planned as dining hall. Vlasov-Klimov's suggestion of numerous square tables on thin metal legs was quite accurately implemented (though the available photograph does not reveal the way of fixing table's legs, a subject of debate at the student's

¹²⁹ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2 d. 82, l. 17; Egerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 62.

defense). Like in the original project, table tops were coated with white plastics and chairs with red ones.¹³⁰ The formation of chair seat and back from a single piece of plywood, offered by Vlasov-Klimov, was neglected in favor of more customary type of a chair with metal frame (Fig. 3.12). However, the plywood chairs with unified back and seat did appear in the buffet of the Pioneer Theater in the fourth side wing, but they are more likely to have been modeled after contemporary Scandinavian furniture rather than after Vlasov-Klimov's design, given that a part of the Palace's furniture was produced at Finnish factories.¹³¹ After all, the student himself could have well imitated these same Finnish models. The rest of furniture (Egerev does not specify the percentage) was designed by the Central Moscow Project and Construction Bureau of Moscow *sovnarkhoz* (TsMPKB), most probably, including the café's chairs, which clearly lack the elegant simplicity of Finnish furniture. These chairs obviously were solid enough to stand the energy of young and hungry users, just as Vlasov-Klimov's chairs were supposed to do, but en masse they produce rather a chaotic vision, a forest of metal legs, somewhat in discordance with both the transparency of the café's wall and the solidity of its reinforced concrete support. Their slightly clumsy form will soon become ubiquitous throughout the USSR until its collapse; it still visible in public interiors, like schools and canteens, well into the 1990s – obsolete, material signifiers of the past era, just like the lattice of winter garden.

¹³⁰ Egerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 35.

¹³¹ Egerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 94.

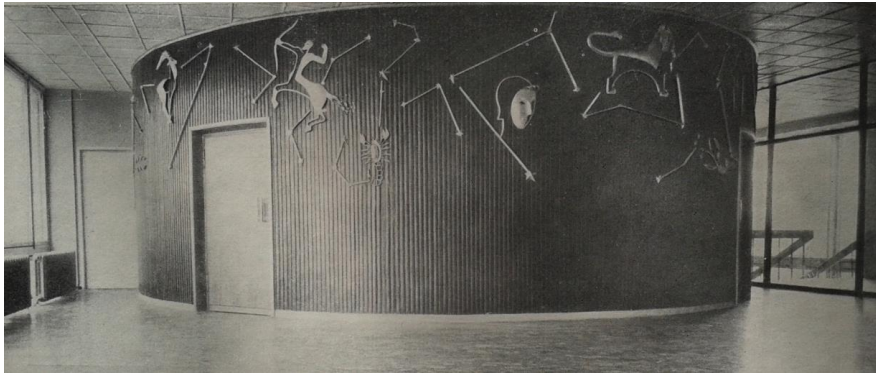


Figure 3.11. D. Shakhovskoi and M. Lukashevker, decoration in the foyer of Planetarium, fragment.

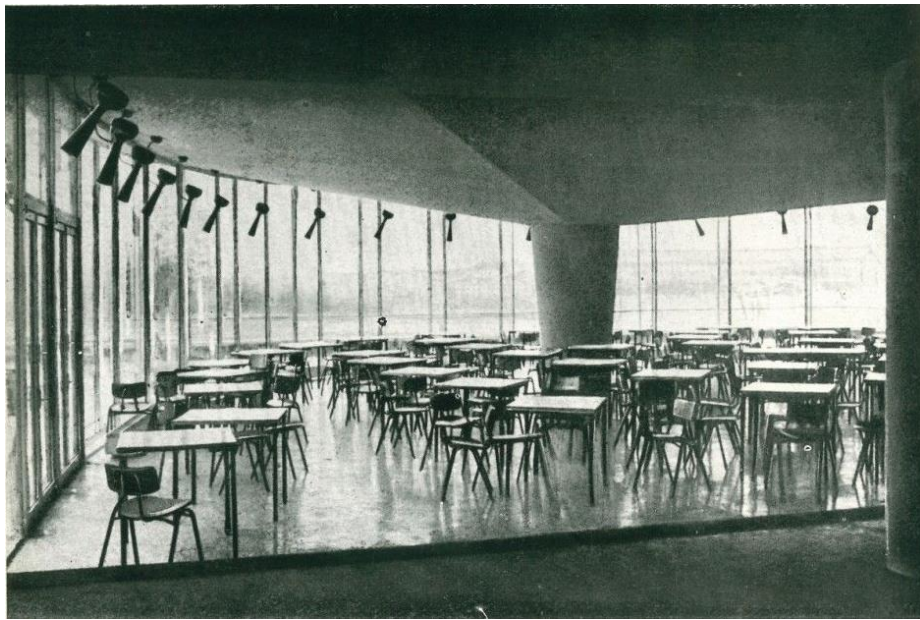


Figure 3.12. Pioneer café interior.

Finally, V. Goriunova's project for the *oktiabriata* playroom was also partially modified (Fig. 3.13). Reporting on the Palace's opening, the official newspaper of the Komsomol paid special attention to this interior: "And to the right [from the winter garden], behind the wall is a green lawn. This is the *oktiabriata* room. The floor is covered here by the thin carpet of soft plastics, and all the toys are on the floor. They are selected in such a way that one cannot play with them alone – only with peers."¹³² In his book, Egerev

¹³² E. Bruskova and S. Soloveichik, "Kliuch ot strany romantikov," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, June 2, 1962, 1-2. Notably, one of the article's authors, Simon Soloveichik, initiated the liberal trend in upbringing, based

specified that the carpet was made from nylon, and the toys were “cars and cranes, construction equipment, rockets and ships, dolls and bricks – everything that can give pleasure to a child.”¹³³ The accent on pleasure, rather than prohibition and punishment, echoes Goriunova’s emphasis on entertainment and freedom of movement in her project. Indeed, two of her suggestions – green grass-like carpet and dynamic toys – were met by the architects in the actual interior. However, instead of sectional furniture of the original project, TsMPKB designed low tables of multagonal shapes. Though irregular and amusing, these tables are static props for children’s games rather than transformable objects-playmates. The decoration of glass partitions, another suggestion of Gorinova, was also neglected in favor of transparency and, implicitly, easier control over playing children. As a result, the actual playroom environment turned out more restrictive of children’s freedom than the student’s diploma project.

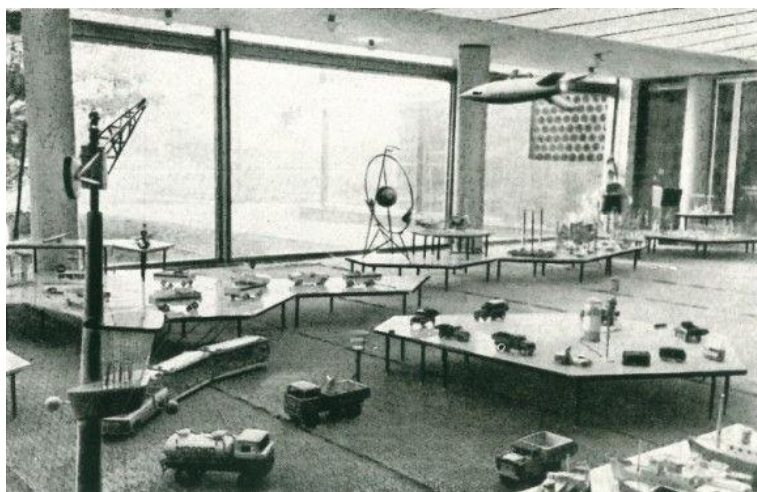


Figure 3.12. Playroom for oktiabriata.

on tolerance to children’s initiative. See Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (Yale University Press, 2007), 388.

¹³³ Egerev, *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 32.

While the story of students' painstaking work on designing interiors for the Pioneer Palace has been mostly forgotten, the building itself, on the contrary, became one of the main icons of Khrushchev-era modernism.¹³⁴ Enthusiastic reviewers praised it as a "country of romantics." Professional critics believed it to be a breakthrough, or, as Lebedev phrased it, "the leap forward in the process of architectural development."¹³⁵ Thus, in the eyes of contemporaries, the Pioneer Palace came to signify the overcoming of lag, of backwardness and of the Stalinist past. Its interiors, too, were perceived in that light. Behind this festive image is the story of the clashing visions of up-to-datedness, feasibility and functionality, and the negotiations between the bearers of Vkhutemas traditions, their students, and the young architects who pursued their careers as modernizers of Soviet architecture. The latter also deprived "Rodchenko's grandchildren" from the rightful status of Soviet design modernizers (the reasons for this that remain to be found in the course of further research). But the fact that student decisions were partially retained in the final construction testifies to their good quality and novelty – in particular, in terms of smart use of materials and the production of dynamic forms and spaces. If the architects acted as tactful guides rather than appropriators, the Palace construction would be perhaps a more decisive leap towards new synthesis of arts.

3.3. Technical Aesthetics as an Updating Tool (the 1960s)

While the Pioneer Palace was being designed and constructed, the lag of Soviet production of consumer goods – behind people's needs, behind the level of Western

¹³⁴ On the today's attitude of architectural expert and broader educated public in Russia to this building see: "Arkhitectura ot Stalina do Khrushcheva"; "Turii Bolotov – o tom, pochemu Dvoret Pionerov – samoe luchshee mesto v Moskve," November 16, 2014, <http://www.the-village.ru/village/city/modern-architecture/169531-dvoret-pionerov-na-vorobievyh> accessed 18.11.2014

¹³⁵ RGALI, f. 2943, op. 2, d. 82, l. 6.

production and behind the advance of science and technology both in the West and in the socialist bloc – impelled decisive steps from by the Soviet leadership. Following the objective of the XXI Party Congress to advance in “fully satisfying the constantly growing material and cultural demands of Soviet people,”¹³⁶ in October 1959 the Party TsK and the government issued a decree criticizing the scarcity and technological backwardness of Soviet domestic goods (“*tovarov kul’turno-bytovogo naznacheniiia i khoziaistvennogo obikhoda*”), promising to urgently solve this problem and ordering the republican and regional governments, Soviet ministries, departments and *sovnarkhozy* to take appropriate measures.¹³⁷ The Third Party Program, adopted at the XXII Party Congress, proclaimed the task to “guarantee in the Soviet Union the highest life standard in comparison with any capitalist country,” not least by the means of increasing production of commodities and large-scale mass housing and construction of public buildings. It also promised fruitful development of all arts and aesthetic enlightenment of the working masses, so that art would “even stronger animate labor, beautify everyday life and ennoble people.”¹³⁸ Taken together, these claims implied the urgent need of an appropriate profession and field of expertise. In this context, the governmental Decree of April 28, 1962 that established VNIITE and launched the elaboration of state design system, appears as an inevitable step, even though it was very much impacted by the outstanding personality of Iurii Soloviev. This institution, responsible for the design activities in the whole Soviet Union, can be

¹³⁶ “Kontrol’nye tsifry razvitiia narodnogo khoziaistva na 1959-1965 gody,” in *Vneocherednoi XXI sezd kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuzia : 27 ianvaria-5 fevralia 1956 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet. Vol. 2.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1959): 456-549; 485.

¹³⁷ “O merakh po uvelicheniiu proizvodstva, rasshireniiu assortimenta i uluchsheniiu kachestva tovarov kul’turno-bytovogo naznacheniiia i khoziaistvennogo obikhoda,” *Vpered* 125 (October 20, 1959): 1-2

¹³⁸ *Programma Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuzia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1974). This text is available at http://leftinmsu.narod.ru/polit_files/books/III_program_KPSS_files/III_program_KPSS.htm accessed 26.12.2014.

viewed as a laboratory of new, post-Constructivist socialist objects, objects that are more than mere consumer goods or equipment. In other words, VNIITE emerged as a promising platform for strengthening the tendencies started in the 1950s at factories and at two major Soviet design schools. The “TE” of this institution’s acronym, “technical aesthetics,” was promoted as multidisciplinary science studying the “laws of artistic activity in the sphere of technology” and thus promising to finally determine the role and objectives of an artist within socialist production. Equipped with sophisticated methodology, VNIITE designers in the 1960s strived to produce fundamentally useful objects, not susceptible to arbitrary changes of fashion yet also adequate to current progress of science and technology. VNIITE was established as a modern institution par excellence, staffed by an interdisciplinary team of 2,000 specialists - not only designers, but also engineers, scientists, economists, architects, art historians, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists. And while up-to-datedness was the primary value and aim of this institution, it was understood not merely in terms of “contemporary style,” but as a complex and harmonious interconnection of diverse criteria. Unlike the applied artists who reasoned in terms of objects [*veshchi*] in the 1950s and still in the 1960s (think of Smirnov’s *Artist on the Nature of Things*), VNIITE designers preferred the terms “production,” “types” and “environments.”

By the end of the 1960s, VNIITE’s orientation towards design of environments rather than single objects became clearly pronounced and intensified further, resulting in the late 1970s in an obsession with “design programs” that included not only projects of complex socio-cultural environments, but also the organization of the processes of implementing these projects.¹³⁹ In the late 1960s, understanding of up-to-datedness at

¹³⁹ Vladimir Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki. Kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 262-279.

VNIITE was mainly shaped by Soviet reception of Western futurology. In 1968, a group of designers at the head VNIITE, led by architect Aleksandr Riabushin, launched the research on the domestic environment of the future that was strongly influenced by the ideas of Western avant-garde architectural groups – London’s Archigram and Viennese Haus-Rucker-Co.¹⁴⁰ Their work was also much informed by theoretical writings of philosopher Karl Kantor, especially his concept of “deartifactualization” (*razveshchestvleniie*)¹⁴¹ – the refusal of a single object that always posts a danger of commodity fetishism, in favor of dynamic complexes.¹⁴² By that time, designers also embraced cybernetics as the tool for rational organization of environments.

Soviet experiments with futurology, cybernetics and systems theory have been recently discussed in detail by design historians Tom Cubbin and Diana West.¹⁴³ I would like to move beyond the evident modernizing and futurological orientation of VNIITE by looking at particular ways of designers’ participation in solving current problems of industry. To use conceptual distinction offered by Leningrad VNIITE designer Vsevolod Medvedev,¹⁴⁴ I concentrate on contemporary (*sovremennoe*) rather than prospective (*perspektivnoe*) course of VNIITE work, inquiring in what designers could offer for the present rather than for glorious “deartifactualized” future, envisioned by Kantor et al. First,

¹⁴⁰ Tom Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine: Futurological Experiments in the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1968–76,” *Home Cultures* 11, No.1 (March 2014): 5–32.

¹⁴¹ I consider Tom Cubbin’s translation of “*razveshchestvlenie*” as “deartifactualization” to be the most accurate.

¹⁴² Karl Kantor, *Krasota i pol’za* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1967), 272. As Kantor explained in this book, the concept of defamiliarization was inspired by the idea of “material setting” (material’naia ustanovka,) elaborated in 1922 by the theorist of productivist art Boris Kushner and presented at InkhuK (Institute of Artistic Culture, 1920–1924). On Kushner’s presentation see Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina*, 251–252.

¹⁴³ Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine,” Diana Kurkovsky West, “CyberSovietica: Planning, Design and the Cybernetics of Soviet Space, 1954–1986 (Ph. D. Diss., Princeton University, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ Vsevolod Medvedev, “Dizain budushchego i budushchee dizaina,” in *Nauchnye aspekty dizaina: sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg State University of Technology and Design, 2014): 194–211.

I discuss the attempt to update professional language by developing original and comprehensive design terminology. Then I analyze VNIITE's visions of up-to-date design through the prism of technical aesthetics' intervention in two spheres widely associated with aspirations of Soviet modernity: civil aviation and mass housing.

Coming to Terms with Design

As it was mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the Anglophone term “design” was used by art professionals of the 1960s exclusively in relation to the West, but never as a term for the new Soviet profession. I would suggest that the neglect of the term “design” for the newly established profession was more than a tactic in negotiating with Soviet authorities who would never sanction an institution promoting a ‘bourgeois’ concept (though this was definitely an important factor, recalled today by former VNIITE employees).¹⁴⁵ It could be also an attempt to establish the continuity with the productivists' discussion on defining the industry-oriented art, thus emphasizing specific character of Soviet design – also in a response to the perceived lag behind the West.

This continuity was explicitly stated by prominent art historian Larisa Zhadova in her talk at the Convention on Artistic Engineering that was organized by VNIITE in Tbilisi in May 1964 and gathered designers from all over the Soviet Union (except for Central Asia where design organizations were not yet established) as well as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany and Bulgaria.¹⁴⁶ This was, in fact, the first

¹⁴⁵ See interviews with former VNIITE designers conducted by the curators of Moscow design museum in 2012 on the museum's youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/MoscowDesignMuseum> Irina Kostenko, director of VNIITE's design center that operated from 1975, shared a memory of “design” as strictly forbidden world at the conference (De)Constructing Utopia: Design in Eastern Europe from Thaw to Perestroika (May 2-3 2014, Sheffield University).

¹⁴⁶ Larisa Zhadova, “O terminologii i ponimaniakh v sfere promyshlennogo iskusstva,” *Tekhnicheskaya Estetika* 7 (July 1964): 14-17.

international event in the sphere of socialist design. Calling for the universal design terminology throughout the socialist bloc, she searched for its roots in early Soviet Russia. She recalled the imperfect terms of the late 1910s - 1920s, “technical art” (“*tekhnichskoe iskusstvo*”) and “industrial art” (“*industrial’noe iskusstvo*”), the former meaning artistic impact on technical tools and the latter adjusting applied art to industrial technology. A better term, emergent in the early 1920s, “production art” (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*), accentuated the “principal novelty of the nascent phenomenon” and the “radical shift of aesthetics towards material practice and production.” However, Zhadova argued, in the current situation this term sounded “naïve, limited and unclear,” as “production” can refer equally to handicraft, manufactory and modern industry. It was considered no more relevant in 1964 than the Anglophone “industrial design,” criticized as too broad and vague. The developed socialist planned economy necessitated reliable, theoretically advanced terminology for the new profession, which was clearly recognized in Eastern Europe – at this point Zhadova emphasized the Czech origin of the term “technical aesthetics.”

For Zhadova and her colleagues, European socialist countries were not only the mediators of the knowledge about Western design, but also the providers of original knowledge of their own. In particular, Czechoslovakia, an industrially developed country with rich tradition of glass-making, had attracted Soviet designers since the early 1950s. This interest intensified by the end of the decade, when Czechoslovakia became a popular destination for artists’ research trips (*tvorcheskie komandirovki*), including the prominent Leningrader Boris Smirnov.¹⁴⁷ In 1959, Moscow hosted the exhibition of Czech glass and in the next year the exhibition “Czechoslovakia 60” that included work instruments

¹⁴⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 7, op. 1, d. 38.

designed by Petr Tucny, the author of the term “technical aesthetics” (*technická estetika*)¹⁴⁸ The exhibition, evidently, revealed the lag in Soviet industry and cultural production, so that in November 1960 the USSR Ministry of Higher and Vocational Education sent a group artists, architects, engineers of different profiles, economists and linguists from Moscow, Kiev, Sverdlovsk and Alma-Ata to Czechoslovakia for a year to learn from Czech industry, design, art and pedagogy.¹⁴⁹ The delegation included the aforementioned Aleksandr Korotkevich, the head of the Department of Industrial Art at MVKhPU, who was impressed by Czech designers’ participation in the mass housing campaign and industrial production of goods, including machine tools. In particular, he noted “the science of industrial aesthetics” promoted by Zdenek Kovar, professor of the Prague Institute for Arts and Crafts. As a result, Korotkevich’s doctoral dissertation “Artist and Industry,” completed upon his return to Moscow, had one of its two parts entitled “Industrial aesthetics in the work of Soviet and Czech artists.” Clearly, “industrial aesthetics” is used here in the sense of a progressive quality rather than scientific discipline.

As Korotkevich worked hard to learn from Kovar’s example, Tucny accepted an invitation for a short-term work in Moscow. In cooperation with the construction bureau of the famous aerospace engineer Andrei Tupolev, he designed a number of machine tools for aviation industry.¹⁵⁰ This is how Tucny’s “technical aesthetics” was planted into the Soviet soil, yet in a distorted form. While Tucny used “technical aesthetics” as the theory of

¹⁴⁸ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 285.

¹⁴⁹ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 220.

¹⁵⁰ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 285.

improving the condition of industrial labor through ergonomic machine tools, Soviet designers interpreted this term in relation a culture of production in general.¹⁵¹

Thus, the Czech import of yet unstable terms, coupled with their diverse interpretations in Soviet design community, created a logical confusion that was further intensified by the chaos of definitions for artists working in industry in cooperation with other specialists. The situation resembled the search for the proper term for industry-oriented artists in the late 1920s, when such terms as “artist-constructor,” “constructivist,” “artist-technologist,” “engineer-artist” or even the cumbersome “engineer-artist-constructivist” were used at different moments and in different settings.¹⁵² In the mid-1960s, when “satisfying the growing needs of working people” was a crucial political matter throughout socialist bloc, the profession responsible for this task had to be equipped with clear terminological apparatus – hence Zhadova’s appeal at the Tbilisi convention. She admitted that absolutely clear terminology is a utopia, given the diversity of grammatical and semantic traditions of the participants. Nonetheless, for the Russian-speaking Soviet designers, Zhadova offered a conventional scheme, systematizing the terms that had been already in circulation for a while:

...the new sphere of artistic creativity is industrial art (*promyshlennoe iskusstvo*); the method of practical fulfilment of the task of industrial art - artistic engineering (*khudozhestvennoe konstruirovanie*);¹⁵³ the theory of industrial art - technical aesthetics (*tekhnicheskaiia estetika*), and the new type of artist, different from applied artists and decorator – artist-constructor (*khudozhnik-konstruktor*).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Zhadova, “O terminogogii i poniatiakh v sfere promyshlennogo iskusstva,” 15-16; author’s interview with Mikhail Alekseevich Kos’kov, recorded in St. Petersburg on 16.04, 2011.

¹⁵² Khan-Magomedov, *Pionery sovetskogo dizaina*, 383.

¹⁵³ Though it was not mentioned by Zhadova in her talk, the term “khudozhestvennoe konstruirovanie” was sometimes used by the Constructivists in the 1920s. See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁵⁴ Larisa Zhadova, “O terminogogii i poniatiakh v sfere promyshlennogo iskusstva,” *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* 7 (July 1964): 14-17.

This terminology was officially accepted, even though the implications of each term continued to be debated, specified and expanded at professional meetings and in special press throughout the 1960s and further, until the Anglophone terms “*dizain*” and “*dizainer*” were officially accepted in the mid-1980s. Thus, coming to terms with the avant-garde legacy, with the Western model and with the experience of socialist colleagues, Soviet designers outlined a contemporary style of speaking about their profession and a terminological toolkit to more effectively solve concrete tasks.

Overcoming Monotony: Experiments in Aircraft Interiors

Aircraft design became the matter of national pride and competition in the U.S., Europe and the USSR in the interwar period. As design historian John Heskett notes, aircraft design in the Soviet Union in the 1930s reflected the grandiosity of Stalinist architecture.¹⁵⁵ Most vivid example is a huge eight-engine passenger liner ANT-20 *Maxim Gorky*, designed in the early 1940s by Andrei Tupolev after the suggestion by journalist Mikhail Koltsov to honor the 40th anniversary of the prominent writer’s career. Its interior design was defined by propaganda purposes: a newspaper office was located in one wing and photographic dark-room in another, while loudspeakers and lights under the wings were supposed to broadcast and flash celebratory slogans and panegyrics to Stalin.¹⁵⁶ The 1950s was the time of worldwide expansion of civic aviation, and in 1954 first Soviet jet airliner, TU-104, was manufactured at Tupolev design bureau¹⁵⁷ (*konstruktorskoe biuro, KB*). First aircrafts of this type had interiors equipped by ornate furniture in Russian Revival

¹⁵⁵ John Heskett, *Industrial Design*, World of Art (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 187.

¹⁵⁶ Its history is darkened by two crashes – on in 1935 during a demonstration flight over Moscow, and in 1942 (when the model had been redesigned as six-engine PS-124), during the flight from Chardzhou to Tashkent. Paul Duffy and A. I. Kandalov, *Tupolev: The Man and His Aircraft* (SAE, 1996), 61-63.

¹⁵⁷ Here design is understood in technical sense, “konstruirovannie” in Russian.

style and embroidered curtains that contrasted with slim outer look that was perceived as contemporary, or, as designer Vladimir Runge recalls, “supermodern” (*supersovremennyi*).¹⁵⁸ At the same time, rapid expansion of civil aviation in the West affected the understanding of aircraft interiors: with their increasing complexity, the organization of cabin space became the concern of manufacturers rather than airlines, the latter being restricted to specifying colors, textures, seat design, and the type and number of galleys. An aircraft was now considered not just the airline operator’s showcase, but, importantly, a comfortable environment for the passenger. After the World War II, the U.S. took the lead in working for “passenger appeal”; in the 1950s this attitude spread in Europe and was promoted by the International Air Transport Association.¹⁵⁹ In the Soviet Union, since the functions of operator and manufacturer were performed by the Council of Minister’s Chief Administration of Civil Air Forces (from 1964 USSR Ministry of Civil Aviation), there was an opportunity and ambition to optimize all aircraft interior design, making it an ultimate expression of Soviet “contemporary style.”

In the early 1950s, the problem of passenger service was overshadowed by the concern with technical progress, but from the mid-1950s Council of Ministers’ State Committee for Aviation Technology demonstrated growing recognition of the importance of interior organization of aircrafts, including visual aspects. For example, in 1956 the Tupolev design bureau raised the question of improving interiors, with the emphasis of overcoming the tube effect – transforming the monotonous elongated form of a cabin. This task was delegated to the employees of a special kind, versed in artistic matters, who were

¹⁵⁸ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 227.

¹⁵⁹ Robert Spark, “Aircraft Interiors,” *Design* 200 (1965): 39-53.

already in the late 1950s called *khudozhniki-konstruktory*.¹⁶⁰ Following the basic requirements to the cabin, elaborated in the USSR Civil Air Forces, they were expected to arrange the interior rationally and beautifully. I. Babin, G. Ozerov and N. Babenkov solved the problem of the tube effect by splitting the cabin in several sections furnished by chairs with collapsible backs. This design to a great extent repeated those by British interior designer Gaby Schreiber, who advanced the idea of breaking a monotonous cigar-shaped cabin into sections and paid special attention to surface finishing.¹⁶¹

For art professionals, aircraft interiors emerged as primary sites of up-to-datedness in design. In 1957, Leningrad critic Virko Blek, claiming that aesthetic component is indispensable in modern (*sovremennyykh*) machines, brought an example of TU-104, which, similarly to Volga passenger car and atomic-powered ice-breaker, “fascinates us with the severity of contours, laconic form and contemporary look.”¹⁶² In the second published issue of *DI SSSR*, Boris Smirnov used aircraft interior as the etalon, or litmus paper, for the up-to-datedness in artistic work. He argued: “It would hard to imagine a passenger of the airliner TU-104 drinking coffee from a unique porcelain cup with the Gardner¹⁶³ trademark, or even a contemporary cup produced at Leningrad Porcelain Factory. Undoubtedly, anyone would notice the irrelevance of its look.” Such a cup, according to Smirnov, would contradict the “new aesthetic perception of reality,” determined by the progress of science

¹⁶⁰ In Soviet terminology, engineering designers, like Tupolev, were called “konstruktory”, while designers concerned with form-giving were defined as “khudozhniki-konstruktory”; they were mainly graduates of architecture departments and, in the 1960s, of the newly opened departments of “artistic engineering” (*khudozhestvenoe konstruirovannye*).

¹⁶¹ Gaby Schreiber, “Design Philosophy – The consultant’s Role,” *Flight*, January 27, 1961, 109-111, <http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1961/1961%20-%200120.html> accessed 2.03.2015.

¹⁶² TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 517, l. 2.

¹⁶³ Gardner factory was a private porcelain enterprise established in 1766 by the English merchant Francis Gardner in the village of Verbilki, Dmitrovsky district, Moscow Province. The porcelain produced at this factory was of outstanding quality, comparable to that of the production of Imperial Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg.

and technology and the new lifestyles and worldviews of the Soviet people. For the passenger of TU-104 “it is more convenient to drink coffee from a light unbreakable cup with a simple handle. All the pieces of such coffee service are fixed in the special holes of a small tray. The form and details of each piece correspond to its purpose and harmonize with each other.”¹⁶⁴

While Smirnov enthused about a brave new world of increasing mobility of people and objects, critic V. Mokichev in his 1961 presented the Western genealogy of TU-104 interior design not as weakness and backwardness, but as successful mastery of progressive design models and a timely response to global developments in aircraft design. He also expressed confidence in Soviet designers’ power to create the sense of domesticity in a cabin, turning it into a “cozy living room” – but not of a petty-bourgeois kind. Compact, rationally arranged furniture, synthetic upholstery of diverse textures and colors and miniature lamps of mild lighting were portrayed as elements of relaxing atmosphere.¹⁶⁵ From 1964, the problems of aircraft cabin design, expanding with the emergence of new airliner types, became regularly discussed in *DI SSSR* as well as in the newly launched VNIITE bulletin *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika*. By that time, the idea of “domesticating” aircraft interior was considered out of date and replaced by the notion of modern dynamic space. As one author, engineer I. Bubnov, argued, “The trip by an airship should be pleasant, interesting and unforgettable communication with contemporary technology.” He suggested using newspapers, radio and, in the future, television for educating passengers about the aircraft technology, so that they can overcome the sense of danger and “distrust

¹⁶⁴ Smirnov, “*Khudozhestvennyi oblik veshchi I sposob ee izgotovleniia*,” 17.

¹⁶⁵ V. Mokichev, “V samolete,” *DI SSSR* 2 (February 1961): 32.

in technology.”¹⁶⁶ Passengers’ apprehension was a common problem of young civil aviation of the 1960s, and Western airlines were eager to solve it, with the help of designers, by providing comfortable seats, optimal temperature and restful colors.¹⁶⁷ Soviet passengers, however, were expected to achieve confidence not through passive relaxation, but through active, collectivized rest and enlightenment.

In the 1960s, VNIITE designers joined those employed in design bureaus of aviation industry in search for optimal aircraft interiors.¹⁶⁸ VNIITE professed a complex approach to the task: not just creating cozy and “homey” aircraft interior, but elaborating the entire environment of civic aviation, including airport interiors, the system of indicator boards, dispatching equipment, work of check-in and luggage registration, airport bus service, and, as regards the aircraft, optimal arrangement of seats, luggage compartments, lighting equipment, etc., and service on board.¹⁶⁹ Within this broad and largely unexplored topic, one particular theme deserves attention as the manifestation of up-to-datedness – upholstery (*otdelochnye materialy*). The expansion of the Soviet chemical industry in the late 1950s and 1960s presented a challenge to applied artists and designers – finding the appropriate forms and decorations for synthetic materials. In the sphere of consumer goods, synthetics signified cheapness, vividness and lightness; in transportation design, they emerged as irreplaceable components with a number of progressive qualities. Thus, synthetic fabrics, used for finishing in aircraft interiors, emerged as a tangible link between domesticity,

¹⁶⁶ I. Bubnov, “Interior passazhirskogo samoleta,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 5 (May 1964): 33-37.

¹⁶⁷ Spark, “Aircraft interiors,” 40.

¹⁶⁸ In his article, Bubnov voiced an idea of creating an organization specifically concerned with developing standard aircraft interiors, similar to Charles Butler Associates in the UK. The Research Institute of the USSR Civic Air Forces could be transformed in this direction (Bubnov, “Interior passazhirskogo samoleta”). I was not able to trace the fate of this initiative; evidently, this function was delegated to VNIITE as ultimate coordinator of all Soviet design.

¹⁶⁹ Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 228; Mikhail Kos’kov, *Predmetnoe tvorchestvo*, Vol. 3, Part VI (St. Petersburg: Ikar, 1996): 13.

traditionally associated with textiles, and state-promoted scientific and technical progress. As Bubnov noticed, color and texture of materials appeared as “powerful weapons” of designers dealing with aircraft interiors.¹⁷⁰

From 1962, VNIITE’s Department No. 5 (“Material, Color and Finish”) advised Soviet Civic Air Forces (GVF) on textiles best suitable for updating upholstery of passenger aircrafts. First and foremost, VNIITE team examined textiles used in interiors of all Soviet passenger airliners currently in operation, in order to determine concrete problems to be fixed.¹⁷¹ According to the research report, most of these textiles, first, were of “low decorative qualities” (such as dull colors or inexpressive texture and ornament) and, second, did not meet technical requirements (such as low combustibility and lightness); remarkably, decorative shortcomings were discussed before technical deficiencies.¹⁷² The next stage of the project was the research on new textiles with reduced combustibility, elaborated in 1960-1963 at the Central Research Institute of Silk specifically for aircrafts. Four types of experimental textiles were offered: rayon for various trimming purposes; nylon 6 (in Soviet terminology, *kapron*) fabrics for seat covets; chlorinated PVC (*atsetolkhlorin*, newly developed at All-Union Research Institute of Fibres) and mixed fabrics of *atsetolkhlorin* and *lavsan*. Most of the textiles were tested within GVF aircrafts under the monitoring of VNIITE team. The results were not always positive: for example, one test flight of a TU-104 with the cabin upholstered by experimental textiles of several types revealed that not all of them were properly abrasion-resistant while “excessive brightness does not provide necessary serenity in the interior.” But even those textiles that

¹⁷⁰ Bubnov, “Interier passazhirskogo samoleta,” 34.

¹⁷¹ RGANTD, f. 281, op. 1-1, d. 4.

¹⁷² Ibid., l. 3.

passed the test and were approved by aviation industry were not yet introduced in mass production.¹⁷³

Therefore, when commissioned by the GVF repair plant no. 400 to consult on updating the upholstery of the TU-104 cabin, the VNIITE team had to choose from an existing assortment of fabrics, produced at different factories across the USSR. The most suitable synthetic fabrics for seat upholstery, in terms of color, pattern, texture, as well as cost, were found to be produced at the factory “Audejas” in Vilnius, Lithuania, and at the Moscow Weaving and Finishing Combine. Suitable items were also selected for floor carpets strips, curtains (fabrics with printed patterns), and trimming of bulkheads and partitions. From the total sum of samples, VNIITE designers arranged 20 color schemes and presented them to the customer. On this basis, designers employed at factory no. 400 developed three variants of interior for TU-104 that were actually implemented, but each only in one cabin. Thus, because of the lack of coordination between R&D and industry, the painstaking work of VNIITE designers reached only a limited number of passengers. Rather than agents of updating environments of most advanced transport vehicles, VNIITE designers had to take the role of compromise-makers and admit that the development of little-combustible, sturdy and decoratively expressive fabrics is in need of significant expansion. No commentary on the expected psychological impact on passengers, like undermining tube-effect, reducing apprehension and boredom, is mentioned in the final report by Department no. 5.¹⁷⁴ It is likely that one of the resulting interiors was reproduced in *DI SSSR* aforementioned Bubnov’s article from May 1964 (Fig. 3.14), with a critical commentary: “The design reveals the striving to fill up every bit of space. ‘Homey’ style

¹⁷³ Ibid., l. 4-30.

¹⁷⁴ RGANTD, f. 281, op. 1-1, d. 4, l. 32-33.

from the era of embellishment (*ukrashatel'skikh vremen*) does not accord with the speed of 900 km/h.”¹⁷⁵ While it is difficult to judge by black-and-white reproduction of a cabin’s tiny fragment, evidently, light seat covers and cushions were perceived by specialists like Bubnov as out of date and place as wooden tables with rounded angles and wide lampshades. As this example suggests, creating new materiality, adequate to the sophisticated technology and dynamism of a jet airliner, was a challenging task laden with negotiations and adjustment to constraints. In the midst of a cutting-edge machine, a specter of petty-bourgeois embellishment was constantly lurking, revealing the need for more sophisticated design methodologies.



Figure 3.14. Interior of the jet aircraft TU-105B, 1963-64.

Overcoming Chaos: The Leningrad Edition of Modern Kitchen

While in comparison to a jet interior, the kitchen may seem a static and traditional environment, recent scholarship has revealed the kitchen’s critical roles in twentieth-century history: as a laboratory of modernization, a showcase of advanced technology and

¹⁷⁵ Bubnov, “Interior passazhirskogo samoleta,” 34.

consumption, a space for embodying gender stereotypes, and a battleground of economic systems and ideologies. The debate between Nikita Khrushchev and U. S. Vice-President Richard Nixon in front of the General Electric's model kitchen at American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 had become an iconic image of the Cold War.¹⁷⁶ In a special volume, devoted to the kitchen of Cold War era, Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann presented kitchen "as a complex, technological artefact that ranks with computers, cars, and nuclear missiles," and more specifically, as "the sum total of artifacts, an integrated ensemble of standardized parts, a node in several technological systems, and a special arrangement."¹⁷⁷ In Soviet society under Khrushchev, the modern kitchen was an integral part of the mass housing campaign and the site for implementing promises of technological progress and material abundance (recall the model kitchen of the Moscow Pioneer Palace, where girls were trained in housewifery). According to the results of a questionnaire survey conducted by the central VNIITE in 1965, cooking was the most time-consuming burden of Soviet housewives, and it was expected to be mechanized first of all.¹⁷⁸ While the CPSU Third Program promised rapid development of public dining facilities in the context of

¹⁷⁶ Nicholas Bullock, "First the Kitchen: Then the Façade," *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3/4 (January 1, 1988): 177–92. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (Basic Books, 1983); Ghislane Hermanuz, "Outgrowing the Corner of the Kitchen Table," in Joan Rothschild and Alethea Cheng, *Design and Feminism: Re-Visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things* (Rutgers University Press, 1999); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), 453–457; Susan E. Reid, "Our Kitchen Our Kitchen Is Just as Good": Soviet Responses to the American National Exhibition in Moscow," in David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London: V&A Pub, 2008), 154–162; Susan E. Reid, "The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 289–316. Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010); 148–201.

¹⁷⁷ Ruth Oldenziel and Karen Zachmann, "Introduction," in Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds., *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (MIT Press, 2011), 2–3.

¹⁷⁸ Russian State Archive of Scientific-Technical Documentation (RGANTD), f. 281, op. 1-1, ed. khr. 85, "Social-Economic Research of Consumer Demands to the Tools Mechanizing Domestic Labor," December 1965.

welfare policy,¹⁷⁹ and utopian visions of total collectivization of cooking and dining, echoing those of the 1920s, appeared in press,¹⁸⁰ housewife's labor in the kitchen – now more and more often an individual, rather than communal, kitchen – was a ubiquitous reality. It needed to be maximally rationalized and automatized, and, accordingly, in popular journals and household literature the kitchen was presented as a modern workshop, akin to the site of industrial production. In VNIITE, the kitchen of a prefabricated apartment was approached as a proper testing ground for the principles of technical aesthetics.

Since its establishment in September 1962, the Leningrad branch of VNIITE (before 1967 – the Special Artistic-Engineering Bureau of Leningrad council of people's economy)¹⁸¹ actively participated in the centrally initiated campaign against “chaos of forms.” This problem was recognized and variously approached by Western designers at that time, as it was clearly manifested at the 1963 ICSID congress in Paris.¹⁸² While in their discussions Soviet designers portrayed chaos of forms as one of the ills of market economy, they also unwittingly admitted that the planned economy also suffers from this disease, and probably even more because of its rigidity and emphasis on quantity. As designers tirelessly emphasized, not only newly built apartments often showed poor layout,

¹⁷⁹ *Programma Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuza*

¹⁸⁰ Aleksandr Riabushin, “Zhilishchen ovogo tipa,” *DI SSSR* 2 (1963), 5-10.

¹⁸¹ Before 1966, VNIITE regional and republican branches were organized as special artistic-engineering bureaus (SKhKB) of the councils of people's economy (*sovnarkhozy*, relatively self-sufficient economic units, introduced in 1957 within Khrushchev's decentralizing reform). With the liquidation of *sovnarkhozy* in September 1965, all SKhKB were transferred to the jurisdiction of the all-Union and republican ministries, depending on the predominant orientation of their design work: thus, Leningrad SKhKB became answerable to the USSR Ministry of Machine Building for Light and Food Industries. In 1966, all major SKhKB were transferred to the State Committee for Science and Technology, and in 1967 they were rebranded as VNIITE Branches (*Filialy VNIITE*). However, there remained SKhKB of particular industry branches (for example, light mechanical engineering). TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, introduction to op. 2-1, l. 3-4; Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki*, 231. For the sake of convenience, I will further use the abbreviation LF VNIITE.

¹⁸² Simon Bojko, “Na tretiem kongresse IKSIDA,” *Dekorativnoe Iskustvo SSSR* 11 (November 1963): 23-48; Evgenii Rozenblium, “Problemy dizaina,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1966): 2-5; „Un esprit de l'Industrial design? Icsid Paris 1963,” *Design et Histories, Le blog de Jocelyne Leboeuf*, January 6, 2013, <http://designethistoires.lecolededesign.com/2013/01/un-esprit-de-lindustrial-design-icsid-paris-1963/>

they also could hardly be properly furnished and domesticated.¹⁸³ Accordingly, producers of domestic goods were blamed, but not so much for insufficient production as for the excess and chaos of models resulting from the lack of coordination between enterprises. In widespread practice, goods of the same category (e. g. refrigerators) were produced by several factories answerable to different ministries; these models were similar to each other and often, as designers painfully noted, obsolete. Accordingly, a large percentage of them fell out of demand and filled warehouses. At the same time, available domestic goods of different categories were often stylistically in discord. The outcome was a paradoxical situation: an inflated assortment blocked the possibility to obtain a properly coherent and up-to-date set of home equipment. In the very first issue of *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika*, VNIITE economist Ia. Orlov presented this problem as the evidence of “the lack of integral technical and aesthetic policy.”¹⁸⁴ From 1965, with Brezhnev-Kosygin reforms on the re-centralization of Soviet planning,¹⁸⁵ the task of policy integration and production control became even more acute. In his 1966 article, Riabushin called for rigorous scientific methodologies of regulating (*uporiadochenie*) the production of consumer goods, without which any discussion of stylistic unity would be impossible. Predicting the objection that standardization contradicts consumer interest in limitless diversity, Riabushin drew the distinction between the terms “nomenclature” and “assortment,” the first understood as the typology of goods and the latter as the sum total of produced goods. Ideal types of the nomenclature would therefore constitute a harmonious order that would be then embodied

¹⁸³ G. Liubimova, “Veshchi v dome,” *DI SSSR* 8 (August 1965): 2-5.

¹⁸⁴ Ia. Orlov, “Tsena plokhogo kachestva,” *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika* 1 (January 1964): 27-29.

¹⁸⁵ On Brezhnev-Kosygin economic reforms, see Mark Harrison, “Economic growth and Slowdown,” in Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).

into sensible and tangible models of the assortment. While nomenclature, he believed, would rationalize production and modernize mass housing, assortment would encompass the variety of consumer tastes.¹⁸⁶ This was the stance of VNIITE: combating the chaos of form, engendered by planned economy, by more efficient planning. The next logical step would be the total regulation of the material environment, which, indeed, constituted the major objective of VNIITE's activity in the second half of the 1960s. Major proponents of this totalistic vision of design were Riabushin and Kantor, as well as the philosophers of the Moscow Methodological Circle, headed by Georgii Shchedrovitskii, who joined VNIITE in 1965. The Circle's critical approach to systems theory in its Western variants and methodological understanding of all kinds of activity resonated with technical aesthetics' aspiration for the status of a universal science of design.¹⁸⁷

On the level of concrete tasks, the regulation of the production of domestic goods took the form of so-called artistic-engineering elaborations (*khudozhestvenno-konstruktorskie razrabotki, KhKR*) – multistage projects of particular objects or complexes of objects. In LF VNIITE, the lead on KhKR was taken by an enthusiastic researcher Vsevolod Medvedev, who by 1966 presented a detailed algorithm of KhKR, with four major stages: research of relevant theoretical materials, foreign models, existing assortment and consumer demand; sketch design (*eskiznoe proektirovaniie*), accompanied by consultation with the customer and relevant experts; technical design (*tekhnicheskoe*

¹⁸⁶ Aleksandr Riabushin, "Zadachi i sposoby opredeleniia bytovogo oborudovaniia," *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika* 6 (June 1966): 3-5.

¹⁸⁷ Anatolii Piskoppel', "G. P. Shchedrovitskii – podvizhnik i myslitel'," in N. I. Kuznetsova, ed., *Poznaiushchee myshlenie i sotsial'noe deistvie. Nasledie G. P. Shchedrovitskogo v kontekste otechestvennoi i mirovoi sotsial'noi mysli* (Moscow: 2004), 24-34. VNIITE's interaction with Shchedrovitsky's school is a subject of special research, currently conducted by Tom Cubbin. See his personal website <https://tcubbin.wordpress.com/>

proektirovanie), e. g. defining the details of objects and preparing sketches and mock-ups to be discussed at VNIITE's artistic-technical council and submitted to the customer; and, finally, the introduction of the design into industry.¹⁸⁸ While this algorithm includes the multi-level analysis technological, functional, economic, ergonomic and aesthetic factors, the user with her or his preferences is conspicuously absent. As a prominent LF VNIITE designer, Mikhail Kos'kov, commented later on this approach, in KhKR "a human being was considered in the tradition of functionalism: first, predominantly from an engineering, rationalistic point of view, ignoring their personal, spiritual needs, and, second, on average, as a person fitting into norms."¹⁸⁹ This was not a specifically Leningrad feature: as Diana West demonstrated in her recent study, in many design projects of the 1960s and further, human agents appeared as but extensions of rational systems or were altogether neglected.¹⁹⁰

In terms of concrete application of KhKR, one of the major works of LF VNIITE was the design of standard sets of kitchenware for the model apartment worked out in 1965-66 by the central VNIITE in collaboration Central Research and Project Institute for Housing and Public Buildings and other construction institutions.¹⁹¹ The Leningrad design team, headed by Medvedev, painstakingly passed through the three stages of KhKR: examined the latest Western literature on household management and kitchenware models (mostly British, French and West German), the data of opinion polls undertaken by trade organizations, and the assortment, previously developed by the Central Research Institute of Housing (*TsNIIEP zhilishcha*), and the (uncoordinated) kitchenware production by

¹⁸⁸ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 78, l. 13-16.

¹⁸⁹ Kos'kov, *Predmetnoe tvorchestvo*, 11-12.

¹⁹⁰ West, *CyberSovietica*, 152.

¹⁹¹ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 77.

Soviet factories; on the basis of this research and the consultation with an economist and art critic (the already familiar Moisei Kagan), created a nomenclature of dimension-types (*tiporazmerov*) of kitchenware objects;¹⁹² prepared detailed technical drawings and mock-ups with consideration of current and perspective production of relevant materials. This KhKP was focused on the set for the family of 3-4 people, as it was a complementation to the particular project of furniture set, run in parallel at Moscow VNIITE. One set was to be made of polished aluminum, another of enameled steel. According to the KhHR report, the kitchenware would ideally fit the kitchen furniture, so that the space would be used most wisely (Fig. 3.15). Contrary to the conventional classification of kitchenware according to material and technology of production, Medvedev's team connected the classification to specific labor processes in the kitchen, such as washing and cutting foodstuffs, cooking (boiling, frying, steaming, baking, etc), and storing. For the sake of the economy of space (and, of course, raw material for the stage of production), designers introduced inlay vessels (*vkladyshi*) for different purposes – such as porridge cooking, milk boiling or steam cooking – to be used with a single pot at different times and stored together. All modeled ware was of rational, laconic forms, with functional details appearing as decorative elements (Fig. 3.16 - 3.19). In the aluminum set, all the lids' surfaces were to be both heat-protected and decorated by color anodizing. This solution followed Western example and would be innovation in the USSR. Suggesting various colors for anodizing – from yellow to turquoise – the designers argued: “Addition of color to the cold surfaces of polished ware, emphasized by the black spots of [plastic]

¹⁹² The results of the second stage of KhKR were presented in press: V. Medvedev, “Assortiment kukhonnoi posudy,” *Tekhnicheskaya estetika* 6 (June 1966): 13-17.

significantly enriches its decorative sounding.”¹⁹³ This solution would meet the consumer demand for “bright and trim kitchen ware,” indicated in opinion polls. Another technical innovation with decorative effect, chromium-plated polished rim, would be used in the enameled set: “White or colored enamel, accentuated by shiny edging, makes an item more expressive.”¹⁹⁴

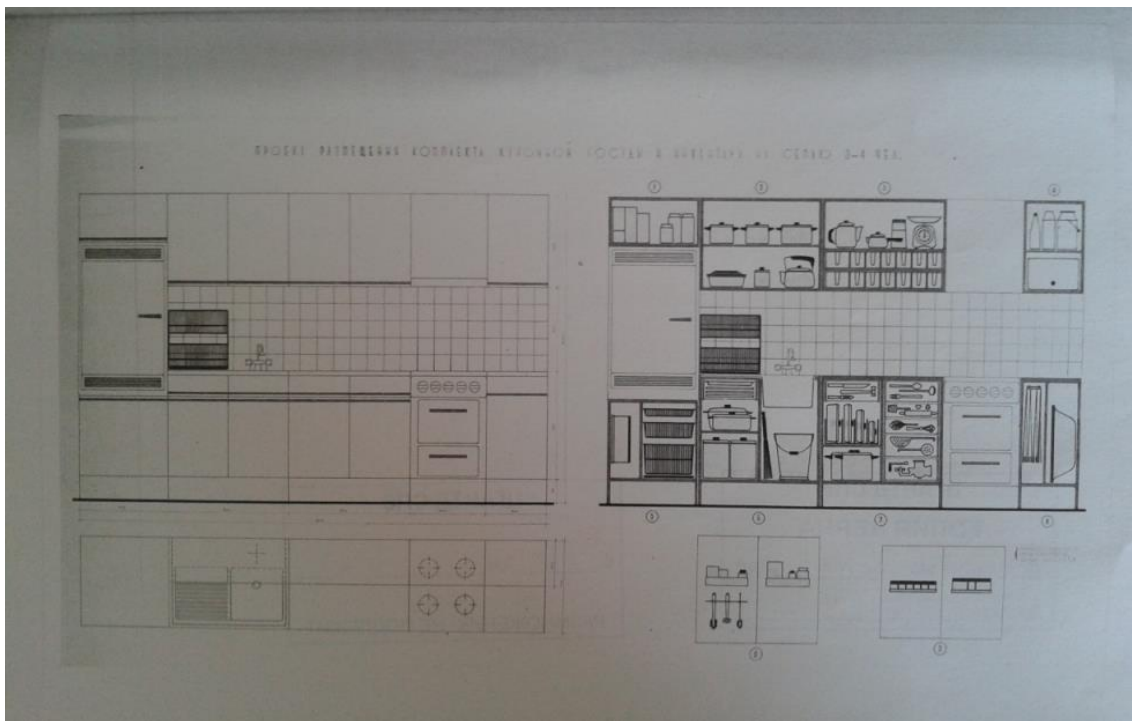


Figure 3.15. Project of arranging kitchenware and implements for the family of 3-4 people, LF VNIITE, 1966.

¹⁹³ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 77, l. 36. Unfortunately, the archival file of this KhKR includes only black-and-white illustrations.

¹⁹⁴ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 77, l. 39.

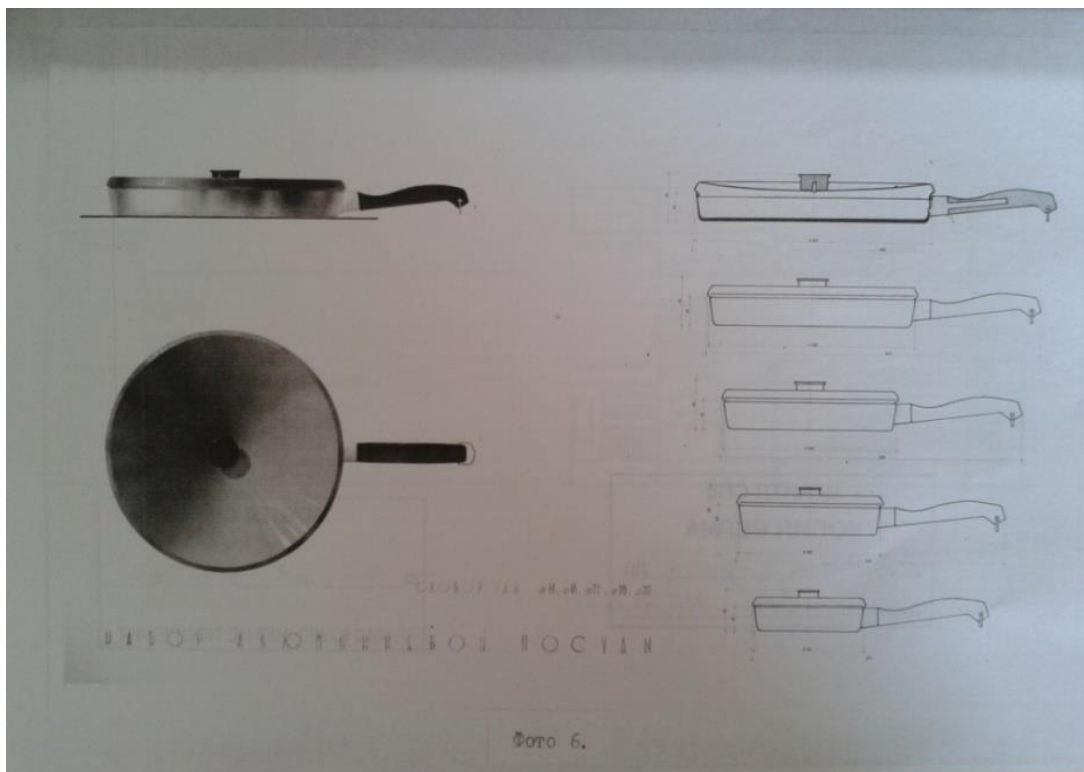


Figure 3.16. Technical drawing of aluminum frying pan, LF VNIITE, 1966.



Figure 3.17. Mock-up of aluminum frying pan, LF VNIITE, 1966.

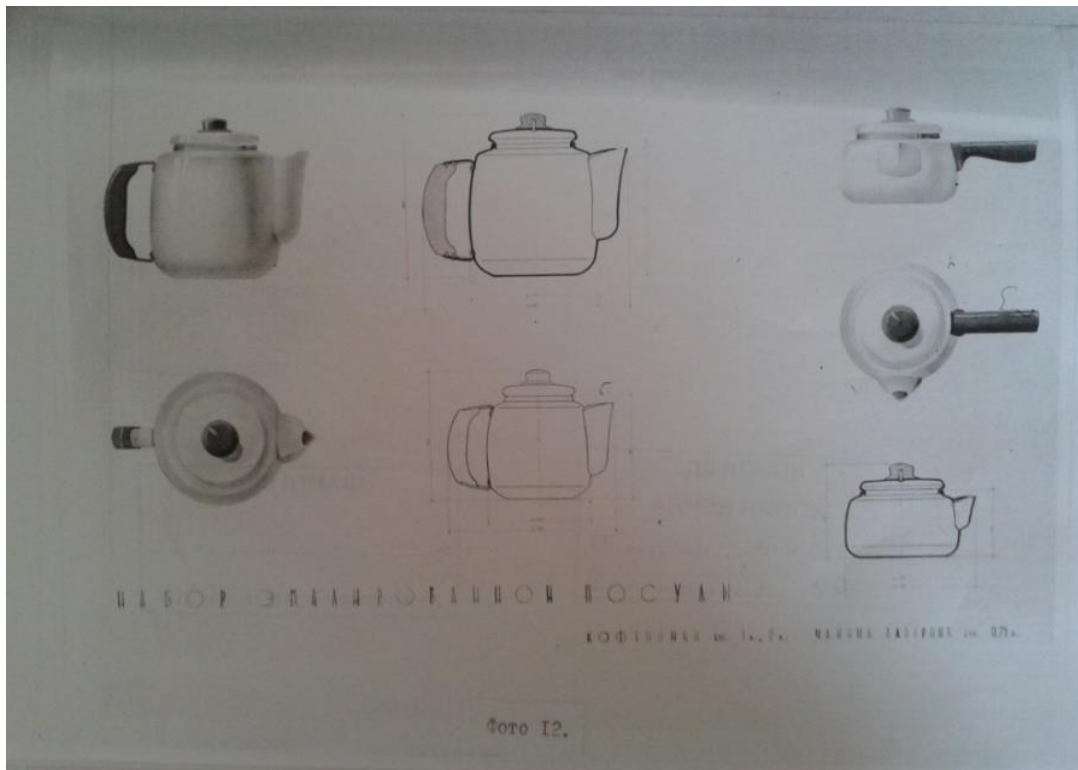


Figure 3.18. Technical drawing of enameled steel teapot, LF VNIITE, 1966



Figure 3.18. Mock-up of enameled steel teapot, LF VNIITE, 1966.

Not only the kitchen tools, but also the prepared food was supposed to be beautiful. Such items as vegetable- or egg-cutters would render the meals aesthetically appealing, diversifying the domestic menu and, ultimately, stimulating healthy digestion. Of course, hygiene and economy, too, acted as important factors for designing. Simple typified plastic cans with tight lids for storing different kinds of foodstuffs would keep them from untimely rotting or drying. The cans for marinades would have square shapes with rounded corners for the convenience of washing. In the aluminum set, the teapot for brewing tea would be technically impossible to put over the teapot for boiling water, as it was customary in pre-revolutionary Russia and still, evidently, practiced by many in the 1960s. The project's authors characterized this way of tea-making as unhygienic, so the very forms of the designed items were meant to preclude it. Thus, the offered assortment manifested up-to-datedness in several aspects – advanced materials technologies, new color combinations and hygienic standards perceived as appropriate for rational kitchen. This vision of up-to-datedness was presumed to be universally applicable, regardless of individual social behavior, culinary habits, ethnic/cultural identities, aesthetic views, etc. The designers' suggestion to sell the kitchenware not only in sets, but also as separate items “for giving consumers the opportunity to select sets according to their individual needs”¹⁹⁵ was but a small step towards flexibility.

However, the fourth stage of this KhKR, most closely connected to the current reality (*sovremennost'*) was not successfully fulfilled. Medvedev's team envisioned that the set will be most in demand by new settlers of prefabricated apartments and that, unlike current kitchenware items, the new ones not will be piled unsold in warehouses. For the

¹⁹⁵ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 77, l. 58.

beginning, it was planned to produce a pilot lot of 3-5 thousand sets and thus determine the new assortment's economic efficiency more precisely.¹⁹⁶ The guidelines for introducing the design into production were prepared by 1968 and sent to several Leningrad factories.¹⁹⁷ The designers were ready to make compromises in terms of materials. Yet the factories refused all the suggestions because they lacked of necessary materials and technological possibilities. The trip to Vilnius and Kaunas with the attempt to make agreements with local factories brought only partial success: the Kaunas factory of consumer goods "Pirmunas" agreed to select some pieces for assimilation. Because of the failure to establish proper contracts with industry, the research on this topic was discontinued.

Evidently, this was not the only case of an aborted KhKR, while many others had to be strongly modified to fit the real possibilities of Soviet industries. Yet in the shifting focus from economic efficiency to technical aesthetics as theory and science, one can evaluate this project as a successful escape from chaos of forms and obsolescence. Unlike actually produced kitchenware that was in danger of ending up in a warehouse, VNITE's shiny pots and pans with ergonomic handles, transparent containers for grains and colorful jars for tea and coffee remained outside of the spheres of production, consumption and use, but also of control and dictate. They are frozen as pure concepts of ever-relevant socialist objects and coherence, and as the documents of designers' painstaking attempt to bring order into chaos. KhKR thus can be approached not as utopian undertakings, impossible to be implemented by the rigid planned economy, but as a particular mode of thinking up-to-datedness, of making sense of the multiplicity of Soviet objects and of creating hierarchies of things and uses – "objectively defining necessary and sufficient minimum of items, capable of

¹⁹⁶ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 77, l. 61.

¹⁹⁷ TsGANTD SPb, f. 146, op. 2-1, d. 79.

providing a contemporary level of comfort.”¹⁹⁸ They were, therefore, expressive elements of what Serguei Oushakine calls “Soviet productivism” – a cultural practice of late socialism that echoed the ideas of the 1920s theorists and focused on rationalizing the relations between sensuous characteristics, forms and social functions of things.¹⁹⁹ The same productivist logic underpinned the projects for rationalizing design of jet cabins, from functional schemes of seats to the patterns of window curtains, which in practice could shrink to selection of least unsatisfactory items of imperfect production. As the analysis of two VNIITE projects demonstrates, the category of up-to-datedness within Soviet institutionalized design was replete with imbalances, clashes and compromises that stemmed from a designer’s assumed powerful – but actually fragile – role as coordinator of production, distribution and use of things.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to bring the broad notion of Soviet modernization to the level of useful objects and look at it through the eyes of art professionals. The result is a tentative outline, by no means the only possible one. The survey of statements, debates, strictly practical and visionary projects has demonstrated the elusive nature of the category of up-to-datedness in the social economic and political context of the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev eras. Up-to-datedness never appeared as a clear-cut notion, and exceeded the confines of “contemporary style.” Instead, it accompanied, or, rather, was submerged within discussions of such heated problems as an artist’s place in industry, Soviet economic and cultural competition with the West, research on and satisfaction of people’s needs,

¹⁹⁸ Riabushin, “Zadachi i sposoby,” 3.

¹⁹⁹ Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “‘Against the Cult of Things’: On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2014): 198–236.

comprehensive synthesis of arts and architecture and, eventually, large-scale – but also meticulous – regulation of production, distribution and uses of things. This trajectory can be summarized as art professionals’ perpetual attempt to control the flow of time in order to be on the forefront of cultural, technical and economic developments. While actual objects – be these furnishings of a pioneer palace, upholstery for a jet cabin, or kitchenware for a compact kitchen - kept coming after ideas, theories and words (to paraphrase Bill Brown), technical aesthetics was turning more and more towards the future, where the irregular historicity of things would be overcome.

Chapter IV: Excess and Taste



Figure 4.1 A still from the film "There is Such a Lad," 1964.

A 1964 film by Vasilii Shukshin, "There is Such a Lad" (*"Zhivet takoi paren'"*) has a memorable episode.¹ The main protagonist, young truck driver Pashka (Pavel Kolokolnikov, gives a lift to an educated woman from the city on a Siberian road. Pashka complains that the countryside life is a bore, and the woman answers that it is the villagers' own fault, because they fail to make their lives "really beautiful." And the beauty, she argues, is in the detail: "I have just been in the home of one young [female] collective farmer. She's got all kinds of stuff! Pillows, bedside tables, stupid elephant figurines... What do you think is it for? For 'happiness.' You're a young man – don't you understand?" On Pashka's awkward attempt to defend domestic coziness, she responds didactically:

Look, it is philistinism! Elementary philistinism. Incredible! Is it so difficult to replace all this with two or three reproductions of contemporary artworks, to put an ottoman

¹ Vasilii Shukshin, *Zhivet takoi paren'* (Kinosdudiia imeni M. Gor'kogo, 1962). Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGLgp6AP1gQ> accessed 31.05.2014. The role of Pashka was played by Leonid Kuravlev.

instead of a merchant-style bed, to buy a floor lamp. By the way, lighting means a lot. To place a contemporary beautiful vase on the table. Is it really so hard? And such furnishing will be no more expensive [than the habitual one]!

This passionate speech is very similar to numerous articles on good taste which had been published in the Soviet press by the early 1960s. Obviously, the educated passenger is well familiar with them. She appropriated the expert discourse on good taste, and now acts as an agent of modernization in the countryside. Her call indeed affects the driver, an open-hearted country lad. The next film shot captures the picture of Pashka's fantasy: a room arranged in a minimalist fashion, with modest furniture, window curtains with geometric patterns and few reproductions on the walls, one of them even featuring abstract painting. This is a recognizable picture which one could see in *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* or even the popular *Ogoniek*. A young woman with the bubble haircut, in a latest-fashion dress welcomes him in "French," as imagined by the driver. However, he himself appears in a caricature smoking-and-top-hat suit, pretentiously imitating French sounds (Fig. 4.1 and 4.2).



Figure 4.2. Still from the film "There is Such a Lad," 1964.

The episode ironically reveals both the ubiquity of taste advice and its insensitivity to the particular contexts, which leads to superficiality and absurdity. But did Soviet art professionals really believe, just like the film protagonist, that the beauty of daily life is achieved by simply throwing out the knick-knacks and obtaining a proper floor lamp? What was behind the post-Stalin taste dictatorship?

Taste is a complex concept, laden with social, economic and political connotations. For more than a century taste has been extensively discussed by sociologists (and from the 1980s also by anthropologists) as not only a matter of aesthetics but also a powerful marker of social stratification and a tool for building symbolic hierarchies.² In his celebrated book, Pierre Bourdieu presented taste as a key component of *habitus* – the generative principle for social practices and at the same time the system of their classification. He argued:

Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language, or body texts.³

² This understanding of taste is mostly associated with the fin-de-siècle studies by two prominent sociologists: the American Thorstein Veblen and the German Georg Simmel. See, for example: Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. by Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), Orig. pub. 1904; Thorstein Veblen and C. Wright Mills, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New Brunswick, U.S.A: Transaction Publishers, 1992). The theme of taste, alone with manners, was famously treated in 1939 by German sociologist Norbert Elias in his seminal book on the cultural and political development of European society, later published in English as: Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (Urizen Books, 1978). Taste prominently appeared in post-war American sociology as an element of consumption and mass culture (particularly David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New York: Doubleday, 1953) and Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Rev. & updated ed (New York: Basic Books, 1999). A classic sociological study of taste is the 1979 book by Pierre Bourdieu (see the next footnote) which, though confined to the specificities of the French society, became a theoretical inspiration by a number of studies. In particular, Bourdieu's vision of taste as a manifestation of class distinction was drawn upon and also criticized in the 1980s and 1990s by anthropologists concerned with material culture and consumption: Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Social Archaeology (Oxford, OX, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 147-217; Mary Douglas, *Thought Styles: Critical Essays on Good Taste* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 21-49; 106-125.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1992), 173.

In particular, Bourdieu emphasized that the tastes of dominant classes are largely built on restraint: “It is well known that all dominant aesthetics set a high value on the virtues of sobriety, simplicity, economy of means, which are as much opposed to first-degree poverty and simplicity as to the pomposity or affectation of the ‘half-educated’.”⁴ This dominant aesthetics is appropriated not only by upper middle class, the possessors of economic capital, but also by middle-class intellectuals, e. g. secondary and higher education teachers, endowed with a strong cultural capital but often weak in economic resources. Even though Bourdieu’s theory had been criticized as being reductionist and confined to French conditions, his understanding of the negation of the “vulgar” as the act of social distinction quite accurately characterizes the modernist stance against ornamentation. This critique is not only of the pitfalls of machine-based industry but also a manifested distinction from certain social groups - from the “uneducated public... with too much money and no time, or with no money and no time,” as Nikolaus Pevsner phrased it his famous account on modern architecture.⁵ Taste, therefore, is never socially and politically innocent – it is intimately linked with social hierarchies and can be instrumentalized by intellectuals as a marker of their symbolic superiority over “uneducated public,” or as a tool for radical criticism of mass culture stemming from capitalist economic conditions, as was done by Marxist thinkers, from Theodor Adorno to Guy Debord.⁶

Under state socialism the class distinction, described by Bourdieu, would be unthinkable. Several scholars stressed the holistic understanding of culture, officially

⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 227.

⁵ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design, from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 21.

⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 94- 136; Guy Debord, *the Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

promoted in the Soviet Union from its beginning until perestroika. Instead of “high” and “low” or “mass” and “elite” cultures and diverse lifestyles, Soviet officials and professionals spoke of universally popular and enlightening culture where ballet, classic literature, film comedies and folk art are harmonically combined – “an anti-masscult culture for the masses,” by an apt expression of Kristin Roth-Ey.⁷ This would imply a single universal taste. Yet the notion of homogeneous culture was an ideological construct, which, as Stephen Lovell rightly notes, concealed actual tensions and inequalities that never disappeared from the Soviet society.⁸ I suggest that the use of the notion of taste in public and professional discourses can be perceived as an unwitting recognition and even the barometer of these tensions.

Thus, in the 1920s, taste was portrayed mostly negatively, as the hindrance to the rational reorganization of social life. While in the French capitalist society, as Bourdieu suggests, tastes are justified through refusals of other tastes and thus “tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes,”⁹ in the Soviet society taste was often defined as that of the defeated other – aristocracy and petite-bourgeoisie. Accordingly, with the reappearance of the latter as *Nepmen* in the time of New Economic Policy, taste turned to the attribute of an internal other and a demarcation line for leftist intellectuals, especially the artists associated with Proletkult (artistic organization under the Commissariat of Enlightenment) and the journal *LEF*. In the new proletarian culture, taste had to be replaced with technical and utilitarian necessity: this stance was vividly expressed in the famous composition-

⁷ Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 2.

⁸ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*, Studies in Russia and East Europe (Basingstoke, Hampshire: MacMillan, 2000), 15-21.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 56.

construction debate at the Institute of Artistic Culture in January-March 1921. And if in 1923, Osip Brik enthused that Constructivist Rodchenko was “revolutionizing taste,”¹⁰ in 1925 Boris Arvatov portrayed taste as an inherently bourgeois category, a symptom of the alienation of consumption from production that will be overcome in a proletarian society. In a broader socio-political context, taste appeared as a pejorative term in the state-supported campaign for reorganizing everyday life (*byt*) at in the time of curtailing NEP and unfolding First Five-Year Plan. One of the strongest voices of this campaign, the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* (official print organ of the Communist Youth League), in 1928 repeatedly urged its readers to break “the dictatorship of the workshop of faience figurines” and “summon bric-a-brac to the public trial.”¹¹ Bad taste in home furnishing came to signify alien class ideology.

As a number of recent studies demonstrated, the period of 1930s, especially after the abolition of rationing in 1935, witnessed the formation of a specific Soviet consumer culture that reflected the new social hierarchies in the allegedly classless society.¹² This new social order was disrupted by the dramatic experience of World War II, whose devastating impact was felt long after the official proclamation of victory. War trauma and exhaustion, as well as Soviet soldiers’ encounter with Central European countries during the offensive of 1944-1945, prompted a desire for better living standards and even modest

¹⁰ Osip Brik, “V Proizvodstvo!” *LEF* 1 (1923), 105.

¹¹ *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, November 4, 1928, quoted in Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 35. The quotation is translated by Boym.

¹² Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin’s Russia*, Leisure, Consumption, and Culture (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s*, (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

luxuries as justly deserved by sacrifice.¹³ Therefore, the painful process of post-war recovery and reconstruction was accompanied by the flourishing of illegal economy and black market.¹⁴ In these circumstances, taste emerged as both reverberation and instrument of social change: while people often showed the penchant for material possessions – which became, as Vera Dunham famously argued, the prerogative and reward of the newly formed middle class¹⁵ – art professionals assumed the role of taste regulators.

The social order was shaken once again by the death of Stalin and the following denunciation his personality cult; Khrushchev's reforms, most prominently the full-scale expansion of mass housing campaign and the establishment of cultural exchange with the West, intensified industrialization, scientific and technical progress and the dramatic growth of urban population¹⁶ open the floor for diversification of tastes. At the same time, the campaign against architectural "excess" impelled the strictures of domestic comfort and decoration, both in everyday life and in the artistic production. In the first instance, moving to a one-family prefabricated apartment from a communal one meant not only the advance in living standard, but also rejection of old beloved possessions, such as massive ornate furniture. In the second instance, decorative artists could now use the cause of mass housing as argument of their important status of furnishing advisors and taste arbiters, but they also

¹³Susan J. Linz, ed., *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld and Company, 1985); Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Enlarged and updated ed, Studies of the Harriman Institute (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 3-18; E. IU Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, New Russian History (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 31-56; 101-108.

¹⁴ Jeffrey W. Jones, *Everyday Life and the "Reconstruction" of Soviet Russia during and after the Great Patriotic War, 1943-1948* (Bloomington, Ind: Slavica Publishers, 2008), 180-212.

¹⁵ Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*.

¹⁶ Chauncy D. Harris, "Urbanization and Population Growth in the Soviet Union, 1959-1970," *Geographical Review* 61, no. 1 (January 1, 1971): 102-24; Melanie Ilić and Jeremy Smith, eds., *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009); Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Washington, D.C. : Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

had to solve the methodological puzzle of translating new principles of architecture into their profession.¹⁷

For art professionals in the mid-1950s, the notion of taste became a tool for making sense of the socio-political and economic transformations and for defining their new roles and responsibilities in Soviet society. As the Shukshin's film episode suggests, the comprehensive regulation of mass tastes was little more than a utopia. This chapter considers the trajectory of taste and its implications as used by art professionals in the time of "struggle with excess" and the institutionalization of design. It starts with introducing the concept of "honest object," proceeds to discussing the diversification of the idea of "good taste" after the establishment of VNIITE and, finally, looks at the specific "decorativist turn" within the aesthetic turn that took place in the mid-1960s and signaled the crisis of the normative understanding of "good taste."

4.1. In search of a "honest" object (mid-1950s – early 1960s)

At the Second All-Union Convention of Construction Workers in December 1954, before Khrushchev's seminal speech, architect Georgii Gradov stood up advocating the principles of modern architecture:

Sometimes it is argued in defense of such squandering and ornamentation that architecture cannot serve only utilitarian purposes. This is right. But can false architecture delight the eye of the Soviet people, who are educated to appreciate honesty and reasonability and have a keen sense of modernity? No, it cannot; it can satisfy only retrograde petty-bourgeois tastes.¹⁸

¹⁷ Art historian Iurii Gerchuk, one of the agents of the aesthetic turn, argues in his recent book that the critique of architectural excess by Khrushchev and a number of high-ranking architects brought "radical aesthetic consequences" that affected decorative art. Iurii Gerchuk, *Krovoizliianiie v MOSKh, ili Khrushchev v Manezhe* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozreniie, 2008), 13.

¹⁸ "Vystupleniie' tovarishcha G.A. Gradova, rukovoditel'ia sektora Instituta arkhitektury obshchestvennykh i promyshlennnykh sooruzhenii," *Moskovskii stroitel'*, 651, December 3, 1954, 2. Translated by Daria Bocharnikova and quoted in *Inventing Socialist Modern*, 70. I slightly changed the translation, using "honesty," rather than "truthfulness," for the Russian term "*pravdivost'*."

This passage does not only recall cross-discipline character of the fight against “petty-bourgeois tastes.” It also suggests that honesty (*pravdivost'*) was an important element of the new Soviet understanding of modern architecture. In his later speech, which actually restated most of Gradov's points, Khrushchev listed “the right usage of texture and color of facing materials” and “honest appearance of wall details” as the elements of the desired modernist beauty of Soviet buildings' facades.¹⁹ About half a year earlier, the decree “On the Development of Precast Reinforced Concrete” had been issued as a key measure for effective standardization of construction.²⁰ This material soon became a manifestation of socialist modernity and the “honest” material par excellence. Architectural historian Elidor Mēhilli notes that, although the history of reinforced concrete in the socialist bloc was “characterized by leaps and bounds, waves of entrepreneurial investment and capitulation, periods of almost utter disillusionment and sudden fits of enthusiasm and productivity,” it inspired city planners' and architects' enthusiasm as structurally “honest” material.²¹

Applied artists, too, tended to view honesty as one of the main virtues to pursue in their work. While they did not always use the word “honesty” (*pravdivost'* or *chestnost'*), the theme of honesty as opposed to falsity, usually connected to pomposity, pretention, etc., prominently runs through their professional discourse in the second half of the 1950s – early 1960s. This theme was expressed in different terms and phrasings, such as “clarity”, “harmony” or “accordance of form to material and function.” The term “honesty” is chosen for the current analysis as most comprehensive. I suggest that, by appealing to honesty, art

¹⁹ Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, “O Shirokom vnedrenii industrialnykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel'stva,” *Moskovskii Stroitel'*, December 28, 1954, transl. by Daria Bocharnikova, quoted in Bocharnikova, “Inventing Socialist Modern,” 72.

²⁰ Vitalii Lagutenko, “Vedushchaia Rol' Zhelezobetona v Industrializatsii Stroitel'stva,” *Stroitel'naia Gazeta*, September 1, 1954, 3.

²¹ Elidor Mehilli, “The Socialist Design: Urban Dilemmas in Postwar Europe and the Soviet Union,” *Kritika* 13:3 (Summer 2012): 635-665; 652.

professionals were looking for the symbolic order that would unite art, industry and consumption in the way appropriate for the Soviet society overcoming the traumas of war and late Stalin's repressions. At the decisive moment of defining the future trajectory of applied art, honesty was seen as the core of a socialist object, the basis for its symbolic meaning, utility and social impact. The notion of an "honest" object can be also viewed in the context of intelligentsia's hunger for "objective truth" or and sincerity after Stalin's death and especially after the XX Party congress.²²

The criticism of excessive and pretentious ornamentation appeared in Soviet press even before the official attack on architectural excess. In September 1954, the journal *Sovetskaia Torgovlia* (*Soviet Trade*) published an article by art historian Alexander Saltykov, where he explained to trade workers that a good commodity is "first of all convenient, solid and durable," while its form must not contradict these qualities but reveal them. Commodities that fail to meet this criterion, according to Saltykov, had to be rejected as kitsch (*khaltura*) that "distorts people's ideas of art and spoils the taste of broad masses" and officially withdrawn from trade by the USSR Central Council of Producers' Cooperatives.²³ In the spring of the next year, already in tune with the changing policy of architecture and building, Saltykov promoted the idea of honesty in his article addressed to applied artists and the managers of artistic organizations. He argued that "artistry in

²² This urge was both expressed and further stimulated by the series of essays by Vladimir Pomerantsev, entitled "On Sincerity in Literature," launched by the literary journal *Novy Mir* in December 1953. V. M. Pomerantsev, "Ob iskrennosti v literature," *Novy Mir* 12 (December 1953), 218-219. For the meanings of truth and sincerity in post-Stalin intellectual milieu and broader public culture, see Zubkova, *Russia after the War*; V. M. Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). In a non-scholarly, but essayistic manner, the issue of "search for deep truth" in the 1960s is considered in a book by two writers who reckon themselves among the *shestidesiatniki* ("people of the 1960s"): Piotr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988).

²³ Aleksandr Saltykov. "O khudozhestvennom kachestve promyshlennykh tovarov," *Sovetskaia Torgovlia* 9 (September 1954): 22.

decorative-applied art means first of all that the object clearly manifests its function by its appearance, being itself in form and material, and not imitating anything else.”²⁴ This article was an attempt to justify applied artists’ preference of form over decoration, which should not be mistaken for “bourgeois formalism”: form deserved attention as long as it was “honest.” Disregarding plain forms is an unfortunate mistake, Saltykov claimed, because “[t]he object itself must also be beautiful, its proportions, silhouette, and contours must be perfect, vivid, emotionally saturated; its parts must constitute well-found harmonic whole, simply and clearly expressing its practical destination and fully corresponding to its material.”²⁵

This article by Saltykov presented the first publically available portrayal of the image of socialist object: well-proportioned and clear, not trying to seduce a viewer but honestly declaring the way it has been manufactured and the way it should be used. It can be read as the reinvigoration of the 1920s productivists’ focus on construction, the necessary and sufficient basis of an artwork, rather than composition, an arbitrary and subjective arrangement of superfluous elements.²⁶ Indeed, the theme of honesty is at the centre of the

²⁴ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” *Iskusstvo* 2 (1955): 30-34; 30.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The debates on the nature of composition and construction were held at the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) in January-May 1921. While the participants of this debate showed diverse opinions, a particularly strong voice was taken by those who saw construction as arbitrary combination of elements, depending on an artist’s subjective vision, and construction as essential and clear basis of an artwork, an architectural edifice or a useful object. For example, Aleksandr Rodchenko defined construction as the only possible expression of an artists’ concrete aim, while composition had been a symptom of aimless art of the past; he also compared construction to the organization of politics and social life in Soviet Russia. (“Protokol no.9 of 1/1-1921 g. Rabochaia gruppа ob’ektivnogo analiza Inkhuka. Analiz poniatii konstrukttsiia i kompozitsiia i moment ikh razgranizheniia,” private archive). At another session, Varvara Stepanova stressed “tremendous distinction” between composition and construction: if the former is based on superfluity, the latter is devoid of excessive materials and elements. (Zasedaniie seksii otchel’nykh iskusstv Inkhuka 25 ianvaria 1931 g. prot. no.22. Analiz poniatii konstrukttsiia i kompozitsiia i moment ikh razgranizheniia (prodolzheniie),” private archive; the copies of both documents are provided by courtesy of Serguei Oushakine). The results of this became a decisive factor for the development of Constructivism as the movement for integrating art into industrial production and social policy. Like the 1950s discussion of “honest object,” the composition-construction debate can be interpreted as the search for symbolic order in the situation of social and political turmoil and change. The debate has been analyzed in a number of scholarly works. For the concise analysis of this debate,

Constructivist vision of both the artist's ethics (the producer of useful objects for the broad masses rather than pure art for the selected public) and a socialist object (modest, utilitarian, clearly manifesting the way it was produced, that is, the invested labor). An honest socialist object was opposed to a seductive capitalist commodity which is at once a deceiver and, as Rodchenko sharply expressed it, a "black slave."²⁷ Structural honesty of an object, therefore, precluded commodity fetishism. As Boris Arvatov argued in 1926,

Exposure of the methods of artistic skill, liquidation of fetishistic "mystery," transfer of these methods from the artist-producer to a consumer – this is the only condition for the disappearance of the ages-old border separating art and practice. Artistic products, which exist within *byt* and develop together with it, thus stop to be distinguished into the rank of "unicums" and be preserved as absolutes. An obsolete thing will be replaced by a new one; fetishism of art will fall, because the mystery of artistic creativity will be disclosed, and it [artistic creativity] will thence be understood as a highest degree of skill.²⁸

Therefore, the 1950s art professionals demonstrated a similar strategy to that of the productivists: the belief in the honesty of the material as opposed to changing "Party line" and ideological pronouncements, the striving beyond ornamentation towards the essence of things, towards the embodiment of labor of an artist and a factory worker (who were, contrary to the productivist ideal, usually different people). However, professional discussions and published texts of the 1950s betray a hesitance to completely deny the "mystery" of artistic creativity and, indeed, the importance of aesthetic appeal. To use the constructivist vocabulary again, the aesthetic turn was to a great extent organized around the fluctuation between "composition" and construction." For example, Boris Smirnov, at

see: Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 83-94. For the more detailed discussion, based on newly available archival documents, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (University of California Press, 2005), 21-60.

²⁷ Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Opyty dlia budushchego. Dnevnik. Stat'i. Pis'ma* (Moscow: Grant, 1996), quoted in Ekaterina Degot', "Ot tovara k tovarishchu: k estetike nerynochnogo predmeta, *Logos* 26 (5-6. 2000): 37; http://www.ruthenia.ru/logos/number/2000_5_6/2000_5-6_04.htm accessed 11.06.2014

²⁸ Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo*, 128.

the theoretical conference at LVKhPU in January 1954, argued that too much fixation upon functionalism leads to economic inefficiency, because ordinary Soviet people possess inherent “artistic sense” (“*chuvstvo khudozhestvennogo*”) and expect a commodity to be first of all beautiful and only then convenient and durable.²⁹ In addition, according to Smirnov, the prevalence on constructive and “functional-physiological” aspects was a feature of capitalist commodities, for example, “ultra-fashionable furniture.” One can read this as the reverse of the Constructivist credo: exposed functionalism (“construction”) as the source of commodity fetishism and beauty (“composition”) as the distinctive trait of socialist object. However, art professionals like Smirnov and Saltykov undertook a more sophisticated attempt: to draw the line between socialist honesty and falsity (both capitalist and “petty-bourgeois” in socialist society) across the realms of function/construction and ornament/aesthetic appeal. In search of appropriate criteria they turned to folk art, which since mid-1930s had been officially praised as expression of truly popular creativity. In doing so, applied artists did not simply hijack the official rhetoric, but also followed the line of professional study, preservation and promotion of peasant art that stemmed from the late 19th century patronage of artistic crafts, was gradually revived after the Revolution and the civil war and again after World War II.³⁰

²⁹ Boris Alexandrovich Smirnov. “Cherty sovremennosti v izdeliakh khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti.” Paper presented at the theoretical conference in Leningrad Higher School of Art and Industry named after Vera Mukhina .January-March 6, 1954, TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, ll. 72-89.

³⁰ *Sergei Temerin*, “Izucheniye dekorativnogo iskusstva v sovetskom iskusstvoznanii za 40 let,” *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 30-36; Richard Stites, “Anti-iconoclasm,” in *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 76-78; Julia Vasilievna Gusarova, “Leningradskaia keramika kak Fenomen Otechestvennoi Kul'tury Vtoroi Poloviny XX veka” (PhD Diss.: Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, 2011), 49-51. But, though certain craft cooperatives received support of art historians and were able to raise the artistic quality of their production (most prominent example is Aleksandr Saltykov’s work for pottery cooperatives in Gzhel’), many other were still poorly equipped and managed in the late 1960s, to a great extent because they had to subsume to general management and planning guidelines and wage norms, set by the Central Council for Industrial Cooperatives. RGANI, f. 5 op. 36 d. 48, ll. 103-106.

A reference to folk art allowed reconciling not only functional structure and ornament, (“construction” and “composition”) but also technical skill and “artistic mystery,” which was positively reconceptualized as “fantasy.” As Smirnov argued in the aforementioned talk, fantasy, integral in peasant everyday life and art, serves for the development of a meaningful image, and thus, say, an ornamental rooster is a means to provoke a festive mood and a signifier of certain typical features of peasant life.³¹ Thus, ornament was justified as an essential element of joyful labor and source of the consumer’s positive emotions, and the “folk wisdom,” carefully mastered by professional applied artists, was to guarantee the ornament’s “honesty.” In short, folk ornament was to be a measuring stick for an artist who struggled with the contradiction between pleasing the consumer and honestly revealing the material and function.

By the same token, Saltykov, a connoisseur of folk art and ardent supporter of craft cooperatives in the traditional pottery region Gzhel’, maintained that folk ornament is “deeply honest” and has nothing to do with “falsity and perversity of formalism.”³² But, like Smirnov, he warned applied artists against a literal adoption of the folk models. In the autumn of 1955, reviewing the exhibition of applied art from the Baltic republics, Saltykov specified that contemporary artists should not mechanically copy forms and ornaments of folk art, but always carefully adopt them to the contemporary context. Forms, ornamental compositions and even color schemes of certain objects can get obsolete and irrelevant. What a contemporary artist should take from folk art is the deep structural principle of coherence of all parts and subjection of form to function.³³ In Leningrad, head of the

³¹ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, l. 81.

³² Aleksandr Saltykov, “Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,” 32.

³³ Aleksandr Saltykov, “Prikladnoe iskusstvo trekh respublik (o vystavke proizvedenii khudozhnikov Latvii, Litvy i Estonii,” *Iskusstvo* 6 (November-December 1955):12.

decorative-applied art section of LSSKh Aleksei Balashov discussed the 1954 exhibition of Estonian applied art and marked the examples of knitted ware where the silhouette follows the “inner qualities of ornamental form” and corresponds to the color: such objects relate to folk tradition while having contemporary character.³⁴ “Soviet artists must learn from the [village] folk to create simple and convenient things,” advised art historian Nikita Voronov, the son of the prominent specialist on folk art Vasilii Voronov (1887-1940), in his 1957 article in *DI SSSR*. The heritage of peasant art, he believed, should offer the solution of a “burning” problem of expediency.³⁵ Among the objects illustrating this proposition was a ceramic fruit set by artist M. Levina, produced at the faience factory in the Kalinin (now *Tver*) region by the combination of manual and machine techniques (Fig. 4.3).³⁶ The set’s plate and saucer are decorated by technique of free-flowing glaze, which produces different patterns on each particular object. Thus the ornament is the explicit trace of the very industrial process of glazing – it tells the story of labor invested in the product.



Figure 4.3. M. Levina, fruit set “Flame,” Faience, Kalinin Faience factory, 1957.

³⁴ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4 d. 378, l. 62.

³⁵ Nikita Voronov, “Narodnye traditsii i sovremennoe iskusstvo,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 8-16; 9.

³⁶ Ibid.

Artists from the Baltic countries were viewed in Moscow and Leningrad as champions of folk-inspired honesty in their works. In his review of the decorative art section at All-Union Art Exhibition in 1957, Saltykov appreciated the model furniture set by a Lithuanian applied artist Jonas Prapuolenis (Fig. 4.4) for its wise use of the tradition of peasant furniture-making. Made from light-coloured wood, probably beech or white spruce, the set is, indeed, expressive in its laconic forms, conditioned by the technology of its making and the requirements of steadiness and durability. Ornamentation is limited to few parallel incised strips and round holes on the chairs' tops; otherwise, naked wood creates decorative effect by itself. The simplicity of details and joints makes the set mass-reproducible. This model is, in a way, an example of a standard Soviet notion of art “national in form, socialist in content,” here content meaning expedience and cheapness. Prapuolenis’s work illustrated Saltykov’s claim that in search for specificity of applied art, an artist should proceed from the material and working conditions, not from speculative images.



Figure 4.4. Jonas Prapuolenis (Lithuanian SSR), model furniture set, wood, 1957

The key to successful translation of folk art principles into mass production was often seen in the “deep respect” for the material.”³⁷ Applied artists believed – or hoped – that material cannot lie. “Considering the material as the means of embodying the ideal conception of the work, [an artist] should use its artistic and technological qualities with maximal width,” Smirnov argued. He added that each material possesses inherent decorative qualities and brought the example of his favorite material, glass: “The main expressive qualities of glass [are achieved by] light: the refraction of light in facets; condensation of light within glass; free, almost unchanging, passage of light through glass; and coloring of light through glass by almost any color.”³⁸ Wood, textile, ceramics, glass, as well as plastics, were expected to be treated skillfully, so that the best qualities of each materials could be revealed.³⁹

Plastics present an especially interesting case in this respect. As a new sort of material, devoid of the tradition of artistic treatment, plastics were the challenge to an applied artist. Still in the same 1954 conference talk, Boris Smirnov suggested an approach to plastics that seems at odds with the ideal of honesty. Since this material was still “in its infancy”, and its “expressive aesthetic qualities” had not yet been found, they could be used as a cheaper replacement of gems, so much beloved by Soviet people. If gems are not available for mass production of commodities, let their beauty be reproduced in plastics – this is the part of Smirnov’s argument for democratizing good taste. Was it a call for imitation and thus deception of a consumer? By no means, Smirnov emphasized: his

³⁷ An expression used by Aleksei Balashov, head of the LSSKh section of decorative-applied art, at a meeting devoted to the discussion of Estonian applied art, April 16, 1954. TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 287, l. 63.

³⁸ TsGALI SPb, f. 266 op. 1, d. 291, l. 82.

³⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 287, l. 56.

proposal was about “a sort of approximation [*priblizheniie*] of the beautiful natural materials.”⁴⁰ He explained the difference:

If you thoroughly copy the structure, for example, of such material as malachite, imitating the characteristic articulation of its pattern, produced by the technique of composition from different cut plates of a rock, then you get either a quite expensive museum copy, or in case of bad-quality work, merely ersatz in the worst sense of the word. However, you can masterfully give new expression to a beautiful material, proceeding from specific possibilities of plastics. Create a new, more or less similar, pattern, keeping the characteristic green color, or probably even changing it. Create a new, not less beautiful red or blue “malachite” – actually, the “malachite” only by association.⁴¹

The gem as a theme for creative reference, not as a model for falsification – this is Smirnov’s peculiar scheme for what I would call “honest imitation.” An object of “red malachite” was not to fool a consumer but to make her appreciate the skill and fantasy of the artist-producer.

The actual production of plastic commodities was, however, far from such an ideal picture. In 1957, Leningrad critic Virko Blek found the majority of plastic objects, – such as bread-baskets, plates and vases, – produced by the enterprises of local industry, terribly distasteful and overloaded with ornaments. This is the extreme case of the lack of respect for the material, Blek argued. Unlike Smirnov, she called artists to explore inner qualities of this new medium. “Plastic is one of the most perfect materials, harboring broad opportunities. And here one should first of all operate with line, color, strict and restrained forms. I believe that complex forms and ornamentation are not appropriate for plastics.”⁴² At the conference on “Problems and the Situation of the Propaganda of Visual Arts in Leningrad” in March 1959, young Leningrad art critic Moisei Kagan commented on this subject more sharply: “When [artists] try to hide aesthetic qualities of new materials, being

⁴⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, l. 88.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 517, l. 6.

ashamed of these qualities, when these materials are used for faking traditional and precious ones – gold or silver, velvet or marble, - the result is tastelessness [*bezvkusitsa*] in the sphere of applied art.”⁴³ His colleague B. A. Oleneva complained that the types of objects, which used to be produced from traditional materials, when carried out in plastics look like cheap imitation. For this, she blamed directors of various small cooperatives [*arteli i artel'ki*] as well as the lack of proper technical equipment for processing plastics.⁴⁴ Thus, “the age of plastics,” as Oleneva called her time, made the task of producing “honest” objects quite difficult. In the U. S. and Western Europe, by the 1960s plastic acquired a dual reputation as both super-modern material and an evil substitute for authentic materials and feelings, famously epitomized in popular culture by the film *The Graduate* (1967) and the song “Substitute” by the rock band The Who.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, in the Soviet Union that emulated Western example, plastics could hardly appear as a truthful material, despite artists’ and critics’ striving to reveal its “hidden possibilities.” Yet this striving, too, had Western precedents of which people like Blek and Kagan could be well aware. For example, Austrian-born British designer Gaby Schreiber (mentioned in the previous chapter as author of innovative jet interiors) argued already the early 1950s for creating new forms in plastics and against imitating those set down in other materials like clay and metal.⁴⁶

A particular variation of the theme of “truth to materials” was an ability to make certain materials to reveal more than expected, or, in other words, to “work” at their best.

⁴³ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 46, l. 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 85-86.

⁴⁵ Susannah Handley, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution. A Celebration of Design from Art Silk to Nylon and Thinking Fibres* (John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ “Flying Colors,” *Design* 152 (August 1961): 66-67.

In the same text where she criticized available plastic goods, Blek opined that cheapness of the material was no excuse for the poor quality of an object. Cheap materials can be processed very skillfully, she claimed, bringing the examples of Riga-produced brooches, “where amber is mounted in the silver-looking metal,” or well-colored glass.⁴⁷ As it was discussed in Chapter 3, the diploma project of MVKhPU student V. Gubarev, decorative grid for Moscow Pioneer Palace, was also praised for appearing “precious” while being inexpensive.⁴⁸ Supposedly, specialists in applied art had to carefully distinguish between distasteful imitation and masterful processing: the border was sometimes very thin, if not blurry.

From professional discussions and publications in *DI SSSR*, the theme of honesty spread into popular advice literature. In a peculiar way, for example, this theme was considered in the 1960 book by prominent art historian Nina Dmitrieva, ambitiously entitled *On Beauty (O prekrasnom)* – a comprehensive explanation of the contemporary Soviet aesthetics and its practical applications.⁴⁹ A home of a modern person, Dmitrieva insisted, should be free of all things false and pretentious: no chairs where you cannot sit, no plates and dishes from which you never eat, and no vases where you do not place fresh flowers. Objects’ functions should be not just honestly expressed, but also fulfilled. This position brings to mind the famous argument of art critic Ekaterina Degot about “non-market” aesthetics of Soviet goods. For Degot, “Soviet things – in their ideal, rarely fulfilled variant – resist to the aesthetics of ‘market appearance’ and proceed straight to the essence of function: thick trousers make you warm, pasta feeds you, antiaircraft machine

⁴⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 78 op. 4 d. 517, l. 5.

⁴⁸ RGALI, f. 2460, op. 2, d. 1167, l. 19.

⁴⁹ Nina Dmitrieva, *O prekrasnom* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1960).

guns shoot.”⁵⁰ But if “unfashionable” and “formless” objects that Degot describes filled Soviet apartments and now constitute a part of collective memory about Soviet everydayness, this is not an ideal to post-war which art professionals aspired. Like many of her colleagues, Dmitrieva propagated, first of all, beauty understood as an essential, not superfluous, characteristic. “Everywhere in domestic environment, beauty is inseparable from expediency,” she maintained. Functionality, expressed in an adequate form, correspondent to contemporary visual language, is what constituted “non-market aesthetics” of Soviet objects in the late 1950s – early 1960s, not formlessness or awkwardness. In her advice, Dmitrieva endowed Soviet objects with moral, human characteristics *and also* with visual appeal: you don’t have to “struggle” or conflict with them; they do not “oppress” you, but predict your “wishes and needs.”⁵¹ Evidently, Dmitrieva understood these “wishes and needs” as authentic, not imposed by any external force, and therefore easily met by simple, beautiful and useful goods.

Thus, the “honest” object was imagined at the intersection between functionalism and ornamentation, beauty and utility, artists’ aesthetic principles and consumers’ preferences. Indeed, who would prefer falsity over honesty, especially if, as Smirnov, Dmitrieva, and others believed, urban consumers were predisposed to honest beauty just like peasant craftsmen and were open to the professional advice? The Soviet consumer was imagined as the designer’s ally in the battle for good taste against the agents of falsity and kitsch - undereducated managers of factories and crafts cooperatives, narrow-minded trade

⁵⁰ Ekaterina Degot’, “Ot tovara k tovarishchu: k estetike nerynochnogo predmeta, *Logos* 26 (5-6. 2000): 37; http://www.ruthenia.ru/logos/number/2000_5_6/2000_5-6_04.htm accessed 11.06.2014

⁵¹ Dmitrieva, *O prekrasnom*, 69.

workers and philistine instructors for amateur craft-making circles.⁵² This idealistic view culminated in April-June 1961 all-Union exhibition “Art into Life” [“*Iskusstvo v byt*”] sponsored by the USSR Ministry of Culture, Academy of Arts and the Unions of Artists and Architects and held in the Moscow Central Exhibition Hall (“Manege”). The exhibition aimed to showcase best models of domestic objects for mass production – from furniture to glass – produced at factories across the Soviet Union, as well as model interiors for prefabricated apartments. Art professionals optimistically viewed it as the beginning of the radical transformation of the mass production of domestic goods and the enhancement of their role as advisors to industry and arbiters of mass taste. The scope, diversity and quality of the exhibits were perceived to signify the triumph of art-making oriented at mass production and satisfaction of consumer needs. One reviewer enthusiastically noted that “simple economic objects” (*prostye khoziaistvennye predmety*) were exhibited alongside objects traditionally ascribed to applied art (like porcelain cups or glass vases).⁵³ Thus, aluminum and enameled kitchenware, produced at two Leningrad factories⁵⁴ were symbolically equated with a modestly decorated porcelain tea set from the Leningrad Porcelain Factory as embodiments of honest artistic labor (Fig. 4.5 and 4.6). Glassware from Moscow and Moscow oblast, Leningrad and Byarozowka (Byelorussia) and much

⁵² Amateur craft-making circles (*kruzhki samodeiatel'nosti*) were encouraged in Soviet Russia, at least in big urban centers, since the famous restructuring of artistic organizations in 1932. In this year the sector of amateur art was opened in the newly founded Moscow Regional Union of Soviet Artists (MOSSKh) (RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, l. 32). In 1953, the USSR Ministry of Culture allocated 90000 rubles for maintaining amateur circles in the Russian Soviet Republic (RGAE, f. 7733 op. 42 d. 1152, l. 30). In Leningrad, by 1954 every House of Culture included a studio of knitting, open for visitors TsGALI, f. 78, op. 4, d. 287, l. 39). The popularity of these circles, impelled professional artists to take control over their activity, perceived as potentially damaging to mass taste, since the circles' instructors often had now special artistic education. This problem was often discussed in gender terms, since “housewives” were reported to constitute the majority of the circles' attendees. RGALI, f. 2943, op. 1, d. 2477, l. 52.

⁵³ “Iskusstvo v byt,” *DI SSSR* 6 (June 1961): 5.

⁵⁴ This same kitchenware was considered out-of-date by the employees of Leningrad VNIITE and was to be replaced by rational models, designed in 1965-66, as discussed in Chapter 3.

praised Lithuanian furniture were, probably, most pronouncedly “honest” exhibits, where the play of light with transparent glass walls (just as discussed by Smirnov) and the texture and structure of naked wood, respectively, were expressed for the maximum of aesthetic effect (Fig. 4.7 and 4.8). Above all, the exhibition was arranged in an “honest” way: designers A. Vilup and M. Pless were complimented for proceeding for achieving “maximal simplicity and clarity” and avoidance of “spectacular techniques” and “deliberate embellishment” (*narochitoi nariadnosti*).⁵⁵



Figure 4.5 Kitchenware produced at the Factories of Leningrad sovnarkhoz: “Emal’-posuda no. 2” and “Krasnyi Vyborzhets,” before 1961.

⁵⁵ O. Baiar, “Krasivoe v prostom,” *DI SSSR* 7 (July 1961): 1.



Figure 4.6. A. Semenova (author of painting), V. Semenov (author of form), tea set "Snezhnyi," porcelain, before 1961. Leningrad Porcelain Factory.



Figure 4.7. S. Beskinskaia, glassware set "Domashnii," sulfide glass; E. Ivanova, vase "Romashka", sulfide glass. Both before 1961. Factory "Krasnyi Mai," Tver' oblast.

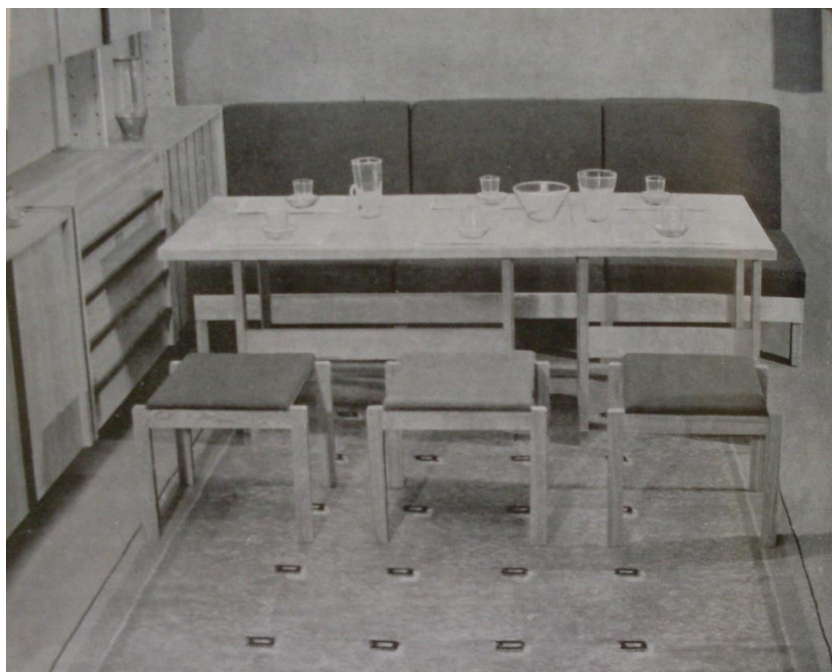


Figure 4.8. A. and V. Naskitis. Furnishing of the dining room of a two-room apartment, design bureau of Lithuanian sovnarkhoz.

For the agents of the aesthetic turn, the exhibition gave a hope of the artist's full integration into industrial production and unity of art and everyday life – the choice of a “productivist” slogan for the title was no accident. The exhibition manifested the emergence of the concept of Soviet design-as-practice (*khudozhestvennoe konstruirovaniie*, “artistic engineering”) and its profound impact upon applied art in terms of the relation to industry. As applied artist I. Chizhova commented seven years later, “it seemed that the paths of *khudozhestvennoe konstruirovaniie* and applied art are converging, and this is the only possible way to further the creation of objects for people, first and foremost, rational in form, convenient and beautiful.”⁵⁶ However, as viewers and art professionals themselves complained, the majority of the exhibits were still unique objects rather than sample of already mass-produced goods.⁵⁷ While a newsreel about the

⁵⁶ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 5, d. 413, l. 10.

⁵⁷ “Iskusstvo v byt.”

exhibition, produced in 1962, presented the visitor's criticisms as minor and stemming from the general curiosity and excitement with the new,⁵⁸ the responses in guest books, as Susan Reid demonstrated in her study,⁵⁹ were far from uniformly enthusiastic. Evidently, taste hierarchies, as imagined by art professionals (socialist honesty vs. petty-bourgeois excess and/or capitalist ultra-fashionable functionalism) could hardly reflect social reality. In what follows I outline art professionals' recognition of this disparity and their conceptual responses to it.

4.2. "Dynamizing" the Notion of Taste (mid-1960s)

The optimism of the early 1960s about the art professionals' power to regulate mass tastes and improve everyday life was gradually replaced by skepticism, shared by critics, applied artists, designers and architects. Research in consumer needs – from polls organized by VNIITE, the Institute for Public Opinion under the auspices of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* newspaper, and central department stores, to experts' intervention into domestic environment – revealed the necessity to seriously revisit the notion of "good taste." At the same time, the attentive study of Western design journals showed the "fluidity" of hitherto unquestioned principles and generated the doubt in the existence of one universally correct way of theorizing and practicing design. *DI SSSR* both supported and documented this uneasy way of conversion. Its initial stage can be captured through a case study, publicized by the journal.

⁵⁸ Sergei Gurov, "Dlia vashego doma" (Central Red Banner Studio of Documentary Films, 1962), RGAKFD, d. 18199.

⁵⁹ Susan E. Reid, "Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 47, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2006): 227–68. 234-235, 255-267.

“Everything is much more complicated”: the Case of Kalinin Youth Dormitories

At the beginning of 1963 art critic Leonid Nevler, by the assignment of *DI SSSR* editorial board, undertook a “field trip” to student and workers dormitories in the town of Kalinin (now Tver’) with the aim to learn about actual people’s tastes and give them specialist advice. The trip report was published in the journal’s March issue.⁶⁰ What Nevler saw was far from the designers’ vision of an ideal Soviet home. All dormitories had in common “first, corridor system; second, predominance of the brown color; third, identical iron beds; fourth, identical milk-white cone-shaped lampshades; fifth, the artistic and anti-artistic consequences of all this.” Yet there was a significant difference by dweller’s gender: young men accepted these gloomy interiors as they were, while young women took effort to domesticate them according to their ideas of coziness. In women’s rooms, Nevler observed: piles of cushions; colored carpet strips over bed covers; red bows tied up to bed frames; postcards with flowers, kissing couples and movie stars, pinned to cushions or put to walls and bedside tables; artificial flowers; handmade cross-stitched embroideries (mostly kittens and flowers); figurines and kitten-shaped money boxes – the whole assortment of bric-a-brac that had been numerous attacked by art professionals for about a decade (Fig. 4.9, 4.10).

However, instead of usual condemnation of the remnants of petty-bourgeois taste, Nevler approached dormitory interiors as meaningful individual and social statements, or, as Bourdieu would have it, “manifested preferences.”⁶¹ He noticed that the embroideries made by these women often showed “an excellent sense of color” and thus could not be dismissed as sheer kitsch. Second, the rooms’ dwellers proved to be not backward

⁶⁰ Leonid Nevler, “*Tut vse gorazdo slozhnee*,” *DI SSSR* 3 (March 1963): 29.

⁶¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 172.

meshchanki, but “quite modern women, with modern haircuts, in modern jumpers and convenient short trousers; jolly, nice, and independent.”⁶² Why did these artistically gifted people, with the taste for modern dress, decorate their living space in a “grandmother’s fashion”? Nevler suggested that while in their dress and behavior the young women followed the requirements of their social environment (working place, university, places for leisure activities), in domestic space they recreated the atmosphere of their parental homes. Though the author does not pronounce it clearly, the tone of his prose implies the theme of social mobility: transition from small villages and towns, where traditional ideas of domestic coziness prevailed, to a bigger city with modern infrastructures of labor and leisure. Therefore, amateur decoration and fancy-work served as the means to settle in and adapt to the new urban and collectivized daily life. Rather than being distasteful, Nevler argued, dormitory dwellers “consistently and painstakingly” followed the taste principles of their “home environment” (*domashnei sredy*). Therefore,

so widespread stylistic incongruity between [dwellers’] attires and interiors is not only aesthetic, but also sociological and psychological. And it is absolutely meaningless (if not offending) to equate out-of-datedness [*nesovremennost’*] with philistinism [*meshchanstvo*] and grandparents’ traditions with tastelessness, as some zealous journalists do. *Everything is much more complicated* [emphasis in the original].⁶³

Moreover, Nevler suggested treating the popular way of dormitory decorations not as eclecticism, but as a specific style, which, had it been the subject of an opinion poll, would prove to be popular in the USSR far beyond women’s dormitories. If this style is loved by people, why should it be rejected, let alone destroyed? It should be taken seriously, Nevler insisted, because it reflects real lives and values.

⁶² Nevler, “Tut vse gorazdo slozhnee,” 30.

⁶³ Ibid., 31.

Nevler's article was the first manifestation of moving away from the dictatorship of taste and towards the recognition of people's individual desires and preferences. However, rather than letting people enjoy what they prefer, Nevler suggested further improving the quality of the commodities sold in urban stores. Also, on his view, old-fashioned domestication was prompted by the "commandant-bureaucratic style" of dormitory interiors, with eclectically combined clumsy furniture and walls painted brown. At professionals had to intervene and create "modern, rational, and modest comfort" that would be appreciated by inhabitants. Nevler admitted that "embroideries and kittens" would, probably, still be brought into modernized interiors, but less and less frequently. At this point, he folded back his argument about decoration as personal agency: young women furnish their dormitory corners as they do not out of conscious choice to follow family traditions, but rather because of the lack of information about modern alternatives. In fact, Nevler reminded, a dormitory (in Russian *obshchezhitie*, literally "a place for communal living") is not a usual domestic environment, but rather a site of collectivism in much need of "massive artistic intervention." The militarist rhetoric strikingly contrasts with Nevler's earlier nuanced explanation of people's choices and reveals the professional anxiety in social mobility and a growing youth culture. While encouraging youth's reception of Western fashion and certain elements of mass culture, designers and critics assumed the role of mediators in this process through publishing advice literature and shaping the spaces of socialization – hence the proliferation of modern youth cafes in the 1960s. Nevler, however, opined that youth cafés attract too much of designers' attention at the expense of the interiors of young people's transient homes, where "the *society's* life-style can and

should be manifested more vividly than in ‘private’ home environment” [emphasis in the original].⁶⁴



Figures 4.9 and 4.10. Interiors of women's rooms in students' and workers' dormitory in Kalinin, 1963.

⁶⁴ Nevler, “Tut vse gorazdo slozhnee,” 32.

Though still confident in professionals' capacity to regulate tastes and, through them, social hierarchies, Nevler clearly expressed his uncertainty in terms of methods to do it in the most ethical and efficient way. Ironically noting how easy it is to criticize bric-a-brac, he concluded with blatantly questioning his colleagues: "But can you offer something instead? Can you? Then why aren't you offering?"⁶⁵

A chorus of offers, repudiations, criticisms and revisions followed soon, culminating in 1965. In this year, the *DI SSSR* introduced an editorial - evidently, modeled after the practice of the British journal *Design* - which became a platform of expressing doubts and offering solutions. In the very first editorial, Mikhail Ladur openly lamented the loss of "great mystery of art" in pursuit of rationality by "the admirers of the aesthetics of numbers and compasses."⁶⁶ Not anymore rejected as fake or fetishistic, "mystery" was now seen as necessary for art to stay humanistic and responsive to people's complex emotions:

... a true artist will never remove the cover of a ductile image in order to show the harmony of ligaments, tendons and neurons of an object. So why the naked function of our world of objects now claims the dominant place in our soul, why do I have to admire only the perfectly ideal harmony of a mathematic formula?⁶⁷

In a few months Ladur added that unified houses, flats and commodities imply unified consumers and thus jeopardize diversity, a fundamental characteristic of humanity. "Our [Soviet] people are different, and we should not make them identical by the means of art."⁶⁸

The terms "emotions," "spirituality," "depth," "width," "diversity" and "complexity" became frequent in *DI SSSR* editorials, usually appearing within interrogative sentences. "The journal managed to get rid of the illusory simplicity of convenient schemes, underwent the difficult break of habitual notions and proceeded to the new pursuit,"

⁶⁵ Nevler, "Tut vse gorazdo slozhnee," 32.

⁶⁶ Mikhail Ladur, "Zametki redaktora" *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1965): 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Mikhail Ladur, "Zametki redaktora," *DI SSSR*, No. 8, 1965, p. 1

recalled design historian Viacheslav Glazychev three years later.⁶⁹ The role of the arbiter of good taste now became more challenging and was probed in a number of ways.

Towards More “Degrees of Freedom”

Within the realm of VNIITE, the notion of taste was approached pragmatically. Retaining its didactic orientation, taste became only one of multiple guiding lines for evaluating a product or a complex of products. It was now culturally meaningful not by itself, as a personal matter, but as an element of a toolkit.

From the mid-1960s, the methodology for expert evaluation of industrial products “from the position of technical aesthetics” became a crucial topic at VNIITE. In the 1965 guidelines for expert evaluation, elaborated at the Leningrad branch of VNIITE, the notion of taste is only implicitly present within “aesthetic analysis of a product,” which was a responsibility of a designer and a “critic of technical aesthetics” (*iskusstvoved po tekhnicheskoi estetike*), who worked in one team with an engineer, technologist, chemist, ergonomist, and physician-hygienist. The main criteria for aesthetic analysis were “architectonics,” “surface texture,” and “socio-aesthetic qualities,” each of them divided into several sub-criteria. If two former criteria were based on precise characteristics (such as scale and proportions, or the length of a light wave), the latter implied the consideration of consumer taste, including such variables as “the degree of correspondence of a product’s consumer qualities to the existing public demand” and “the degree of aesthetic impact (informational expressivity, originality and educational significance).”⁷⁰ The subjective

⁶⁹ Viacheslav Glazychev, “1968 god – ot osnovaniia ‘DI SSSR’ odinadtsatyi,” *DI SSSR I* (January 1968): 21.

⁷⁰ TsGANTD, f. 281, op. 2-1, d. 13, l. 15.

understanding of taste is replaced here with supposedly objective parameters, in tune with the rationalist orientation of Soviet design.

However, the “Methodological Directives for Conducting Expert Evaluation of Products in Terms of Technical Aesthetics,” published by VNIITE in 1967 in small circulation for professional use, recognizes the role of individual taste – both a designer’s and a consumer’s – in designing and evaluating a product. First, through stressing the importance of qualitative assessment of the consumer quality of goods, the VNIITE experts stated that, using the principles of ergonomics, arguments of sociological research, results of laboratory and full-scale tests, resorting to consultative methods of work and relying on the artist’s *intuition and taste*, one can reach quite satisfactory results even without elaborate quantitative measurement for quality evaluation.”⁷¹ Here taste appears as significant instrument of evaluation on a par with precise data, reflecting a dual nature of a new profession of “artist-engineer” (“*khudozhnik-konstruktor*”) (though this dualism was an object of criticism by design theorists such as Karl Kantor).⁷² Second, the brochure singles out sociological, operational and aesthetic aspects of quality evaluation. The latter was explained as connected with the emotional influence of the product, whereas “the sum of emotional experiences of a person in the process of production and consumption is formed of subjective evaluations of the objective qualities of a product and depends on the consumer’s affiliation with certain consumer groups and his ethical views.”⁷³ Thus, even though one of the key objectives of the expert evaluation methodology was the “education

⁷¹ *Metodologicheskie ukazaniia po provedeniiu ekspertizy promyshlennykh izdelii s pozitsii tekhnicheskoi estetiki* (Moscow: VNIITE, 1967), 14

⁷² Karl Kantor, *Krasota i pol'za* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1967).

⁷³ *Metodologicheskie ukazaniia*, 16.

of the population's taste,"⁷⁴ a diversity of consumer preferences was recognized, at least in theory.

Even though the emergent Soviet designers re-discovered, re-interpreted and even propagated certain ideas of the 1920s avant-garde, they did not adopt the predecessors' militant stance towards the notion of taste. Rather than revolutionizing taste up to its annihilation, the 1960s designers integrated it into a broader discussion where such notions as fashion and even prestige were introduced.⁷⁵ The diversity of consumer demand became VNIITE's significant concern around mid-1960s.⁷⁶ *DI SSSR* and *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* now tended to present a more nuanced understanding of taste. For example, Viacheslav Glazychev, a connoisseur of Western industrial design, in the May issue of *DI SSSR* from 1966 called readers' attention to the problem of home decoration.⁷⁷ He recognized the dual nature of a home interior: standardized and yet individual. This duality was for him a socio-psychological problem. As Glazychev admitted, even though Soviet people are more or less equal in terms of income, there exist different social strata defined by education, cultural habits, the prestige of profession, etc. These strata have different tastes and consumer preferences, which cannot be satisfied by standard domestic "comfort." From here follows the growing propensity for hand-made home decoration, both in the Soviet Union and in the capitalist West. Penchant for irrationality and spontaneity is a normal human trait. But, again, specialists should not let things go freely: "designers need to

⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵ G. P. Tolubaev, "Khudozhestvennoe konstruirovaniie bytovykh izdelii," in *Tekhnicheskaja estetika i problemy kompleksnogo proektirovaniia: tezisy dokladov na mezhoblastnom seminare* (Cheliabinsk: Ural'skii filial VNIITE, 1968), 21-22.

⁷⁶ RGANTD, f. 281, op. 1-1, d. 85; d. 122; RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, l. 5; V. Shbili. "Chto daiut konkretno-sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia promyshlennosti i tovgovle," *Tekhnicheskaja Estetika* 2 (February 1964), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁷ Viacheslav Glazychev, "Kak u vsekh ili ne kak u vsekh," *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* 5 (May 1966), 2-6.

elaborate a simple and effective system of small elements-blanks [*elementov-zagotovok*] for assembling. Professional applied art and modernized folk crafts should provide a wide choice of irrational decorative objects.”⁷⁸ All the rest is up to the consumer. In Glazychev’s view, specialists should abstain from rigid recommendations. Instead, their job is to carefully plan “spontaneity.” This proposal can be interpreted as the disavowal of taste dictatorship, but also as its development into a more sophisticated form.

Glazychev’s article soon underwent criticism in one of Ladur’s editorials. From his authoritative position, Ladur claimed that bringing some DIY activities to a standard apartment can only “slightly conceal uniformity.”⁷⁹ Rather than giving a ready recipe for coping with individual consumers’ wishes, Ladur urged the professional community – applied artists, designers and architects – to carefully reflect on this problem. He did not speak explicitly of taste, but warned against the dictatorship of functionalism, even in its disguised form, and raised the problem of “the connection of architecture and environment” to be solved both by architects and by inhabitants. Ladur suggested looking for “some kind of different, not constraining standards.” Ironically adopting the term from exact sciences, he urged designers to create “a great number of ‘degrees of freedom’ for a person, with the trust to her, and with the confidence that she can properly deal with them and use them for expressing her individual rational and aesthetic preferences, probably for the things what exist only for the sake of beauty, but not for making one look like one’s neighbor.”⁸⁰

In 1966, in addition to Ladur’s editorials, *DI SSSR* introduced another platform for debating – the section ‘Problems.’ The first appearance of this section included a polemical

⁷⁸ Glazychev, “Kak u vsekh ili ne kak u vsekh,” 6.

⁷⁹ Mikhail Ladur, “Zametki redaktora,” *DI SSSR* 11 (November 1966): 1.

⁸⁰ Ladur, “Zametki redaktora.”

article by a young architect and theorist Viacheslav Loktev “On dynamic functionalism” that explicitly connected the flexibility of the material environment with the freedom of a consumer.⁸¹ Loktev argued that in the contemporary world functions of material structures (from cities to consumer objects) change much faster than their forms, and the latter hinder the development of these very functions. The result is the disintegration and chaos, when conservative forms are not adequate to the needs. “The dynamism of needs is not satisfied, because the mechanism of the interconnection of the factors that define the direction in which the population’s taste, interests and needs develop is not studied.”⁸² Designers, Loktev complained, work on discreet objects, disregarding systems, and are not interested in consumer feedback. As a result of such “blind designing,” most of issued commodities remain unsold. Random commodities, Loktev believed, do not guarantee flexible use and thus deny a consumer’s creativity and self-expression; moreover, such objects “deform the developing needs.” For a solution of this problem, Loktev suggested elaborating “flexible spacious structures and ensembles of objects” and controlling them with cybernetic models. Somewhat paradoxically, Loktev claimed that precise mathematic calculation of the interaction of elements within a system as well as the latter’s interaction with other systems with allow managing their dynamics, thus preventing chaos of forms and, in addition, stimulating “a consumer’s maximal creative participation in forming his objective-spatial environment.”⁸³ Today’s designers and applied artists “arrogantly impose... standard leveled tastes and a single manner of living to the endless diversity of people’s characters.” The control over the flexible systems, which Loktev called the “method of dynamic

⁸¹ Viacheslav Loktev, “O dinamicheskom funktsionalizme,” *DI SSSR* 98 (January 1966), 6-8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸³ Loktev, “O dinamicheskom funktsionalizme,” 8.

functionalism,” on the contrary, presupposes consumers’ active participation in correcting object systems. At the same time, Loktev adds, “by modeling dynamic systems, we provide the opportunity to manage consumer’s initiative.”⁸⁴ This is the credo of a “taste expert” adjusted to the age of cybernetics: the consumer is given a freedom of taste, but this freedom is to be managed by the designer.

Thus, in Soviet design theory of the mid-1960s, not only an object was dynamized, as it had been celebrated by Arvatov in 1925, but also the idea of consumer taste. Institutionalization of design as specific profession, intensified learning of foreign experience, rising economic and social impact of science and technology, and the emergence of systematic research on public opinion – all these factors stimulated art professionals to reconsider their position as arbiters of mass taste. This, in turn, revealed tension between two professional positions: the trust to rigorous design methodologies, more and more inspired by cybernetics, and the trust to consumers whose wishes cannot always be rationally explained. The first position was more characteristic for VNIITE and voiced in its publications, first of all *Tekhnicheskaiia Estetika*, while the second – to a great extent, the reaction at the first - was professed by art reformists within the Union of Artists, who attached significance to artistic intuition and spontaneous creativity. One prominent outcome of the former position was Central Educational and Experimental Studio of the Union of Artists of the USSR, established in 1964 and actively developed from 1996 which emphasized artistic rather than engineering component of design;⁸⁵ its activity will be

⁸⁴ Loktev, “O dinamicheskom funktsionalizme,” 8.

⁸⁵ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2797, ll. 7-54; d. 2209.

extensively explored in the upcoming study by Tom Cubbin.⁸⁶ The chapter now proceeds to introducing another significant outcome that I call the “decorativist turn.”

4.3. Beyond Utility: The “Decorativist Turn” (second half of the 1960s)

As designers turned to cybernetics for systematizing objects, needs and uses, decorative artists⁸⁷ turned to reconsidering their role in industry. From mid-1950s, decorative artists’ efforts to comply with the parameters of mass production became subject to criticism – recall Ladur’s lamentation over the “great mystery of art.” In his editorial from March 1965, Ladur reiterated this claim by describing the abundance of image-less forms that did not reflect artists’ individual thinking. To be sure, he put major blame on the stubborn members of artistic councils who prevented original, creative works from transition to exhibitions and eventually to industry. But he also pointed to artists’ own responsibilities: “The artist’s true and legitimate right, or, if you wish, duty, is to select the most meaningful from the sea of phenomena, without being false [*ne fal'shivia*] neither to himself nor to his friend viewer.”⁸⁸ The reformulation of professional duty, publicized in an authoritative journal, reads like radicalization of the notion of “honesty”: not just truth to materials but honest expression of one’s artistic visions. But it also, essentially, restated the dilemma, first voiced by Smirnov and Saltykov in early 1958s – unique artistic imagery vs. mass production (or, to use Benjamin’s famous formulation, “the work of art in the age of its mass reproducibility”).

⁸⁶ Tom Cubbin, *Soviet Design on the Edge of Utopia: Senezh Studio 1964-1984* (Ph.D. Diss: University of Sheffield, forthcoming). See <https://tcubbin.wordpress.com/cv-and-contact/>

⁸⁷ From the mid-1960s, the term “decorative art” in Soviet professional discourse became slightly narrower – it still included applied and monumental art but excluded crafts, produced by cooperatives in villages and small towns. My narrative follows this terminological alteration.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Ladur, “Zametki Redaktora,” *DI SSSR* 3 (March 1965): 1.

Ladur's argumentation was a symptom of art professionals' uncertainty in the time of the growing authority of VNIITE- affiliated designers and their impact on the public discourse on material culture. In the mid-1960s decorative artists faced a number of burning questions. Do decorative artists have to subordinate their creative impulses to the requirements of mass production and, in terms of destination, to mass housing? Or could they delegate these concerns to designers and "strive forward" to experimenting with craft-based imagery? Then would they still be useful for the Soviet society? Could they compete with designers for the status of taste arbiters? Or could they answer people's aesthetic and spiritual needs, not calculable by statistical methods? To rephrase the question, raised in 1921 by INKhUK member Vladimir Khrakovskii, how a Soviet decorative artist of post-Khrushchev era could justify his or her existence?⁸⁹ Can, after all, Soviet decorative artist be at once a producer and a creator with distinctive style?

One possible response was to treat the work on unique pieces as the laboratory for the formulae for mass-produced socialist objects. This approach legitimized artist's work on forms and techniques, not easily adaptable for mass production. While the reviews of decorative art expositions of the late 1950s – early 1960s, in particular "Art into Life," are full of complaints about the limited reproducibility of the exhibits, from 1965 *DI SSSR* demonstrates a gradual recognition of the conceptual value of singular or small-edition pieces. "After appearing in a unique artwork, an idea often gets processed, adjusted to the conditions of industrial production and enters the new life in a mass edition. Notably, many among our artists work both in the sphere of unique works and directly for artistic industry," explained critic Nonna Stepanian in her review of the decorative art section of the

⁸⁹ "Preniia po dokladu t. Stepanovoi 'O konstruktivizme' 22 dekabria 1921 goda," 1921, typescript, 13 pp, Khan-Magomedov collection. Quoted in Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 104.

exhibition “Soviet Russia,” held in Moscow in spring 1965. She illustrated her thesis about individual creativity as useful for mass production by reviewing three works of Moscow ceramic artist Vladimir Ol’shevskii. His large decorative vase, made of chamotte,⁹⁰ according to Stepanian, finely expressed gravity (due to the increased volume at the bottom) and made an impression of a natural form, thus perfectly suiting its function as the element of park environment (Fig. 4.11). The hand-made geometric relief added the perception of integrity and “architectural character” (*arkhitekturnost’*). The method of slightly increasing weight towards the bottom was used in a faience tea set with modest detailing of handles and spouts; handmade underglaze painting, combined with relief, echoed the décor of the chamotte vase and “underlined the basic volume of the objects” (Fig. 4.12). Finally, the silhouette probed in these two works found its way to people’s homes in a porcelain tea set mass-produced at Dmitrovskii porcelain factory (Fig. 4.13). Here the loss of the “feeling of the natural life of the material” was compensated by easy reproducibility and “machine clarity,” accentuated with a mechanized geometric décor. Similar skill of adopting artistic ideas to mass production was noticed by Stepanian in the work of many of the exhibition’s participants, especially the artists of the Leningrad Porcelain Factory. The article concluded that whatever form takes the interrelation between unique works and the artistic industry, it always, essentially, reflects “the dialogue between the human being and the machine.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Chamotte, or grog – ceramic raw material with high percentage of silica and alumina.

⁹¹ Nonna Stepanian, “Unikal’nye obraztsy i khudozhestvennaia promushlennost’,” *DI SSSR* 6 (June 1965): 2-6.



Figure 4.11 V. Ol'shevskii, decorative vase, chamotte, before 1965.



Figure 4.12. V. Ol'shevskii, teapot from tea set, faience, before 1965.

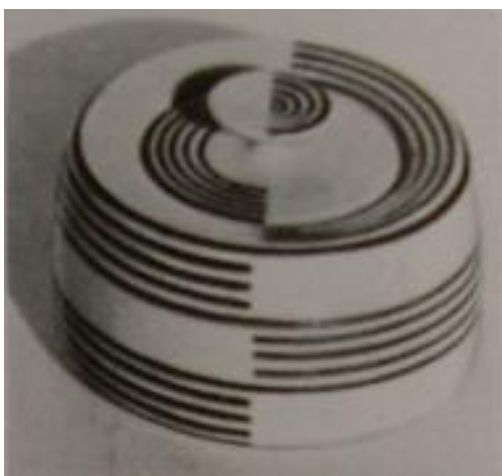


Figure 4.13 V. Ol'shevskii, sugar bowl from tea set, porcelain, before 1965.

The “Soviet Russia” exhibition was, probably, the earliest manifestation of what I call the “decorativist turn” – the growing emphasis on experimental art making and its legitimization as the prolegomena to the improvement of mass production, as well as the artistic organization of public spaces (e. g. city parks). This special turn within the aesthetic turn was by no means momentous and uniform – it is remarkable precisely by its diversity and openness for new (re)definitions of the decorative (hence my choice of the term for this historical phenomenon). It affected artists working in different media - ceramics, textile, wood, metal, glass, or more than one; indeed, its distinguished feature was artists’ striving to move beyond one particular material.⁹² And, contrary to Stepanian’s picture of the genesis of ideas from unique pieces to batch and bulk production, many artists tended to view their experimental works as purely conceptual, beyond the logic of mass production. The decorativist turn was stimulated by decorative artists’ search for distinction from designers of the VNIITE system and by their reinvigorated interest in folk art (this time far beyond the USSR borders, in tune with new a Soviet internationalism) as not just the model of good socialist taste, but as a source for diverse ideas and the tool to proceed beyond the constraints of mass production.⁹³ Creative reinterpretations of folk art, often in playful, theatrical manner, were especially characteristic for decorative artists in the Baltic and Caucasian Soviet republics, whose example was enthusiastically perceived by the

⁹² Liudmila Kramarenko, “O tvorchestve Shushkanovykh,” *DI SSSR* 7 (July 1966): 27-29.

⁹³ This interest to folk art was also internationalized in terms of professional dialogue. In July 1965 *DI SSSR* launched the poll “Folk Art in the Age of Automatics,” which was set to decorative artists, designers, museum curators and other art professionals in socialist bloc, Western Europe (in particular, Britain and Italy, whose design experience was most revered and emulated in Soviet Russia), Cuba and Egypt. The poll inquired about the ways to preserve and promote folk art in industrially advanced countries. While some responses envisioned the inevitable extinction of folk traditions, many others voted for the promotion of crafts in the spheres of business (or, in socialist countries, state-sponsored cooperation), various social initiatives, including courses of craft-making, and encouragement of DIY activities. Based on the responses, *DI SSSR* presented folk art as the powerful source of humanization of machine-dominated industrial societies. “Narodnoe iskusstvo v vek avtomatiki,” *DI SSSR* 7 (July 1965):1-2; *DI SSSR* 8 (August 1965): 2-5; *DI SSSR* 9 (September 1965): 2-3; *DI SSSR* 10 (October 1965): 2-5; *DI SSSR* 11 (November 1965): 45-47.

colleagues in Soviet Russia. Special research is needed to discover to what extent “decorative turn” was informed by nationalist moods, or, in particular, related to the development of “village prose”; however, *DI SSSR* portrayed it as a new, “sincere” manifestation of cultural diversity and dialogue – not just between a human being and a machine, but between people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and, accordingly, different tastes.

Presenting picturesque, sophisticated, playful and sometimes paradoxical works for exhibition, decorative artists questioned the accepted notions – which they themselves introduced a decade ago. In other words, the “decorativist turn” signaled the need to reconsider the criteria of the profession. Symptomatically, “Our Criteria” was the title of a programmatic article by critic K. Makarov, published in November 1967 as a reflection on the latest experimentations and provocations by decorative artists. In a reversal to Dmitrieva’s portrayal of honest socialist objects, Makarov opened his address by welcoming the change:

One of the major tendencies in the development of contemporary decorative-applied art has been the move away from narrowly understood utilitarianism and towards decorativeness and monumentalization of ordinary everyday [*bytovykh*] form, on whose constructive basis unique decorative works are created. The latter are unique in terms of the originality of artistic solution and the beauty of abstract [*otvlechennoi*] form. Bottles, flasks and cups exist today not for wine, vases not for flowers, carpets not for warming the living space, spinning wheel [*prialki*] not for spinning, and chandeliers with candles not for lightening the house.⁹⁴

This is also the reversal of Stepanian’s scheme: not unique pieces work as generating forms for mass production, but, on the contrary, unique decorative works result from the synthesis of everyday forms – from mundane to sudden and surprising. As long as an artists is honest in his or her choices, the artworks are not any more required to honestly express function.

⁹⁴ K. Makarov, “Nashi kriterii,” *DI SSSR* 11 (November 1967): 11.

For example, in spite of its functional obsolescence, a spinning wheel becomes not an ethnographic item, but an “abstract” decorative object, suggested as a tool of taste distinction in the modern world of pre-fabricated flats – much as it was described in Glazychev’s aforementioned article. Purely decorative objects were now rehabilitated, and beauty emancipated from the dictate of utility. As philosopher (and future human rights activist) Boris Shragin remarked in his 1967 survey of the 10 years of *DI SSSR* publication: “Gone are the days when glass artist Boris Smirnov ironically spoke of the decay of Western tastes, like in electric lamps imitating kerosene lamps. Finally, it became clear that ‘everything is much more complicated’” (here Shragin intentionally quoted the title of Nevler’s article on youth dormitories).⁹⁵

Smirnov was mentioned not by accident – he became a prominent agent of the decorativist turn and, more particularly, a participant of the trend for reinterpreting the tradition of Ukrainian blown glass (*gutnoe steklo*).⁹⁶ This trend had a practical basis: from 1966, glass artists acquired the opportunity for experimental work in the All-Union experimental workshops in Lvov,⁹⁷ which allowed them to test fresh ideas.⁹⁸ This became a laboratory for new creative forms - unfortunately only one in the whole Soviet Union (a similar production base was opened in Rostov-on-Don only in the 1970s).⁹⁹ The Leningrad Factory of Art Glass, where Smirnov was employed, had a rigid plan and could not provide its shops for any artistic experiments not related directly to art production. To the great displeasure of artists, the Leningrad Artists’ Union, the second in its power in the USSR,

⁹⁵ Boris Shragin, „Za desiat’ let,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1967): 38-45; 44.

⁹⁶ V. Protsenko, “Ob osennei vystavke v Moskve,” *DI SSSR* 4 (April 1966): 42-43.

⁹⁷ Russian spelling of the toponym (Lviv in Ukrainian) is used here in accordance with the way it was used by Russian art professionals.

⁹⁸ Natalia Titova, “Khudozhniki eksperimentiruiut,” *DI SSSR* 11 (November 1966): 20-22.

⁹⁹ Author’s conversation with Natalia Malevskaia-Malevich, St. Petersburg, March 18, 2014.

could not establish a proper experimental base. “I revere Boris Smirnov,” avowed artist Abram Lapiro in one professional discussion in 1967, “and I claim that the things he makes are being achieved with great difficulty. Why does he have to go to Lvov, even though he is not 20 years old? Why cannot he create his pieces in Leningrad?”¹⁰⁰ However, despite this difficulty, the 63 years old Smirnov demonstrated in 1966 a vivid artistic provocation, quite youthful in spirit, which became the central theme of the decorativist turn.

Smirnov’s “Tea couple” (*Para chaia*) of colorful glass, carried out by Lvov glassblowers, can be termed “decorative sculpture” (Fig. 4.14). It represents a small teapot placed on the top of a larger one – the method of tea-making which in the same year was criticized as “unhygienic” by VNIITE designers (as discussed in the part 3.3). Critic Natalia Titova praised its work for “diversity and mirth of colors,”¹⁰¹ while the author himself explained that it refers to the images of a traditional Russian tea-room, celebrated in the famous late 19th century plays by Aleksandr Ostrovsky and paintings by Boris Kustodiev¹⁰² – that is, the images of pre-revolutionary lower urban classes and merchants, whose tastes had been fiercely criticized by art professionals just few years earlier. Within a decade, Smirnov’s professional position developed from the emphasis on beauty over utility and praise of folk fantasy as the approved form of “mystery” in art making (1954),¹⁰³ to fierce criticism of “cheap effects” of 19th-century petty-bourgeois glass and dishonesty of Western commodities (1958),¹⁰⁴ and, finally, to the openly declared intention to astonish

¹⁰⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78 op. 4. d. 408, l. 51.

¹⁰¹ Titova, “Khudozhniki eksperimentiruiut,” 21.

¹⁰² Leonid Karateev, “Vsesoiuznaia vystavka dekorativnogo iskusstva,” *DI SSSR* 154 (September 1970): 6.

¹⁰³ Smirnov, “Cherty sovremennosti.”

¹⁰⁴ Boris Smirnov, “Khudozhestvennyi oblik veshchi i sposob ee izgotovleniia,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1958): 17.

a viewer (mid-1960s). In the latter stance he referred, however, not to the tricks of commercial production, but to the tradition of peasant art: “Surprise is the folk principle. Take everything from fairytales to ceramic and glass ware: all these aim to surprise. This is what an artist should provide... Where surprise appears, art begins.”¹⁰⁵ (This idea received further development in Smirnov’s 1970 book *Artist on the Nature of Things*, as discussed in Chapter 2).¹⁰⁶ Later Smirnov added that he cannot imagine a viewer who would perceive his decorative work as “real teapots.”¹⁰⁷



Figure 4.14. Boris Smirnov, decorative sculpture “Tea couple,” colored glass, 1966, Photo by the author.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Titova, “Khudozhniki eksperimentiruiut,” 21.

¹⁰⁶ Boris Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970).

¹⁰⁷ Karateev, “Vsesoiuznaia vystavka,” 6.

But when the “Tea couple” was shown at a Moscow exhibition in summer 1966, some viewers and critics understood it as a mockery of real teapots, first of all because of the soldered lids. This seemingly trivial detail produced heated professional debates and, in a way, became a symbol of the “decorativist turn.” Definitely, the “Tea couple” is far away from ergonomic and highly functional teapots from the model set by LF VNIITE (discussed in Chapter 3): it is of no practical help to a Soviet housewife, but, as Smirnov would believe, of importance for her critical thinking and creativity. Some criticized it as a “dishonest” object and as the artist’s evasion of the duty to “serve the people,” but others took it as inspiration for redefining the concept of function. Among the latter was Makarov who spoke of “spiritual” usefulness.¹⁰⁸ His argument unfolded as follows: a teapot does not always have to be a device for tea-drinking; it can be, like Smirnov’s, a decorative object that plays its role in “aesthetic organization of objective-spatial environment” and elevates people’s feelings. Absurd objects like Smirnov’s teapots, quite visible at all-Union and local exhibitions by late 1967, provided an opportunity to transcend a narrow understanding of utility. Broadly conceived, utility is about an artist’s clear sense of *what* and *for what aim* he or she is creating. Moreover, a contemporary decorative artist should reflect on *how else* his work can function in real life today. From this Makarov proceeded to the idea of different contexts of use. That is, a cup functions differently at a business breakfast and at wedding ceremony; a teapot can be simply put on the table, but can be also “solemnly presented.” As the functions of design and decorative art are being differentiated, Makarov reasoned, the latter tends to elaborate objects for contemplation and aesthetic pleasure.

¹⁰⁸ Makarov, “Nashi kriterii.”

Another work that outstandingly challenged the notion of the “honest” and functional object was “Troika” by Leningrad class artist Iurii Biakov – a vase, or glass, devoid of bottom and placed on its side (Fig. 4.15). Made of transparent colorless glass, it was decorated by a stylized image of three harnessed horses – the traditional Russian *troika* – by the method of sand blasting. Shown at the exhibition “Decorative Art of the USSR” in Moscow in December 1968, this piece, just like Smirnov’s, provoked debates. For example, it inspired Leningrad ceramic artist Grigorii Kapelian for the conceptual deconstruction of an object: “...if the glass is not for drinking, but for an exhibition, it can be without a bottom. In fact, if its original purpose is lost, why should it be a container, even if only for emptiness? It can be just a solid glass cylinder. And why necessarily a cylinder, and why necessarily of glass?”¹⁰⁹ Thus, whereas design professionals like Riabushin, Loktev and Kantor, were looking for functionalism beyond objects,¹¹⁰ “new decorativists” offered objects beyond functionalism.



Figure 4.15. Iurii Biakov, object “Troika,” glass, sand blasting, depolishing, 1968, photo by the author.

¹⁰⁹ Grigorii Kapelian, “Nashi kriterii,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1968): 2-5; 4.

¹¹⁰ Loktev, “O dinamicheskom funktsionalizme”; Kantor, *Krasota i pol'za*; Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine.”

To be precise, the “decorativist turn” had also a moderate version, as exemplified by Olshevskii’s work discussed by Stepanian. In this version, instead of blatant impracticality, artists opted for anesthetization, or ritualization, of practical functions. For example, tea sets by the artists of the Leningrad Porcelain Factory, such as Eduard Krimmer, Vladimir Gorodetskii, Nina Slavina and others, produced in the late 1960s, could be both functional goods and feasts for the eye. Praising Gorodetskii’s set “Blossoming cobalt” (Fig. 4.16), critic Liudmila Kramarenko opined: “With this set at home, you can specially invite guests for tea, like you do it for listening to music or seeing a collection of paintings.” She also emphasized the “incomparable joy” of touching a beautifully painted porcelain cup and drinking from it.¹¹¹ In this statement, joy, or pleasure – both visual and sensual – overshadowed “taste” as major element of socialist consumption and domestic order. However, such pleasures would be available only on a limited scale, as the discussed objects were made predominantly by hand and could be produced only in small series – or even only as single exhibition items. But, when used in public interiors, they would aesthetically and spiritually enrich Soviet material environment, - or so art professionals believed.

Probably, the central work of the “new decorativism” in Leningrad glass became Smirnov’s “Festive table,” first exhibited in 1967 – a large composition of colored free-blown glass, consisting of multiple objects, hardly attributable to customary categories (Fig. 4.17 and 4.18). The artist explained this work as an attempt to “create in the human soul a joyful sense of a feast” and also as a set of curiosities, alluding to folklore images, such as a bear, a rooster, and even various folk demons, as well as to traditional vessels for a peasant

¹¹¹ Liudmila Kramarenko, “Prazdnik vokrug tebia,” *DI SSSR* 12 (January 1969): 4-6; 5.

feast.¹¹² While producing, as critic Irina Uvarova noted, the overall impression of a traditional trade fair,¹¹³ “Festive Table” can be also seen an (self-)ironic commentary on modern urbanite’s fascination with tradition and penchant for spontaneous play as retreat from order and rationalism (especially poignant given Smirnov’s position as chief designer of Leningrad State Optic Institute). Somewhat poetically, Makarov characterized this work as “an expression of the contemporary artist’s view on the nature of artistic glass through the prism of folk understanding of beauty.”¹¹⁴ On the reasonable question by the public and critics about the actual use of this artwork, Smirnov replied that he imagined the “Festive table” at an organization like “The House of Friendship,” for receptions of, or ceremonial dinners with, foreign guests. This would be relevant, the artist argued, because “today people not only in the USSR, but also in the whole world, demonstrate the thirst for something amazing, expressive, and colourful.”¹¹⁵ Obviously, not by accident, Smirnov’s explanation of the “Festive table” in the 1969 December issue of *Decorative Art of the USSR* was immediately followed by the survey of the work of Italian designer Ettore Sottsass - the future founder of the Memphis Group, famous for his provocative objects that betokened postmodern design.¹¹⁶

A large 1968 exhibition “Decorative art of the USSR,” where Biakov’s Troika spurred a debate, was the triumph of the decorativist turn. The exhibition received high attendance.¹¹⁷ Visitors’ responses were mixed: some complained about unavailability of the exhibited commodities, some found them unsuitable for daily use; others, on the

¹¹² Boris Smirnov, “Krizis? Chego?,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1969): 27-29.

¹¹³ Irina Uvarova, “Rus’-67,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1967), 1-10; 4.

¹¹⁴ Makarov, “Nashi Kriterii,” 12.

¹¹⁵ Smirnov, „Krizis? Chego?,” 29.

¹¹⁶ Larisa Zhadova, “Ettore Sottsass,” *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1969):

¹¹⁷ Kramarenko, “Prazdnik vokrug tebia,” 5.

contrary, praised colorfulness and diversity, and still others wanted more sophisticated decoration.¹¹⁸ About two-thirds of *DI SSSR* January issue of 1969 were given to the reviews of this exhibitions and reflections on the new directions of decorative art. Kramarenko positively admitted the arrival of “a special genre of decorative-unique art.”¹¹⁹ Defending the anti-utilitarianism of recent art, Makarov welcomed the “division of labor” within Soviet aesthetics and, moreover, ascribed to decorative art leading role in the synthesis between material objects and technical and natural environments. He argued: “Narrowing its possibilities in producing specifically utilitarian objects, since this task has been partially transferred to design, decorative art broadens its special rights in the synthesis, thus pressing monumental art to focus on certain urgent [*udarnykh*] ideological tasks.”¹²⁰ The concern with new synthesis became a publically pronounced justification of decorative artist’s existence as a professional within Soviet field of (cultural) production.

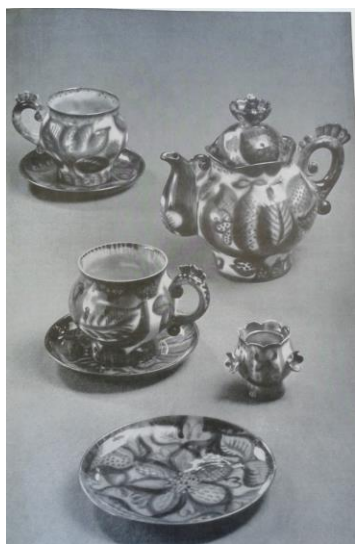


Figure 4.16. Vladimir Gorodetskii, tea set “Blossoming cobalt,” porcelain, underglaze painting, 1968.

¹¹⁸ “Govoriat zriteli,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1969): 7.

¹¹⁹ Kramarenko, “*Prazdnik vokrug tebia*,” 4.

¹²⁰ “Suzhaia svoi vozmozhnosti v proizvodstve sugubo utilitarnykh veshchei, ibo chast’ zadach padaet na dizain, dekorativnoe iskusstvo rasshiriaet svoi prava v sinteze, i, v chastnosti, ono tesnit monumental’noe iskusstvo, ostavliaia na ego doliu reshenie kakikh-to udarnykh ideologicheskikh zadach.” K. Makarov, “Novye formy, novye zhanry,” *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1969): 27-29.

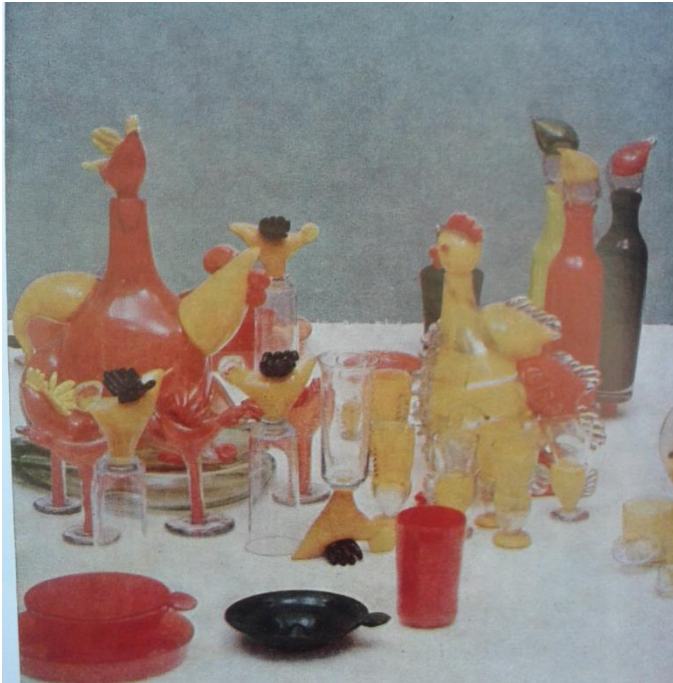


Figure 4.17. Boris Smirnov, composition "Festive Table," fragment, color glass, 1966.



Figure 4.18. Boris Smirnov, composition "Festive Table," fragment, color glass, 1966.

More than simply a reaction of VNIITE rationalism, the “decorativist turn” signaled the art professionals’ disappointment with the populist aspirations of Khrushchev era and, evidently, tiredness with the role of regulators of mass tastes and consumption patterns. Turning from regulation to reflection, decorative artists broadened the borders of good taste, and reconsidered the relationship of people and things in the age of people’s growing dependence on machines. However, these artists also marked a new social distinction based on post-functionalist aesthetics – the distinction not only from colleagues at VNIITE system but also from mass consumers, who had only a limited chance to experience the “spiritual usefulness” of unique conceptual objects at art exhibitions or some public interiors, like Smirnov’s imagined “House of Friendship.” One can presume that “new decorativist” objects were produced more for the authors’ colleagues than for “the people.” Probably the decorativist turn was more about symbolic and economic redistribution in the Soviet field of artistic production than about bringing amazement and joy to people’s lives, or achieving a happy synthesis of material culture and nature. And yet, an agent of the decorativist turn hoped for an impact on the viewer/consumer, albeit a selective and educated one. At the end of 1960, repudiating some critic’s alarming on the crisis of Soviet decorative art, Smirnov maintained that true rationality is inseparable from emotional effectiveness: “... today we should not ‘apply’ emotions to the rational; we should work in such a way that rational becomes organically emotional. This is a human need, a human essence.”¹²¹ Almost a year later, in his interview to the secretary of the USSR Union of Artists’ Administration Leonid Karateev, Smirnov explained:

I offer a viewer a work of art, not a commodity, that is, I want to bring the viewer to the state of non-consumerist attitude to it. I want to make him diverge from the

¹²¹ Smirnov, “Krizis? Chego?,” 29.

perception of the form of a useful object and present it as an object of advanced emotion. I introduce this form into the circle of the values of art work, not the values of everyday life objects.¹²²

From this perspective, the “decorative” turn seems like a new, post-Constructivist attempt to overcome commodity fetishism and eventually arrive at a spiritually useful socialist object and affective environment.

Conclusion

Proceeding from the idea of taste as a tool of building symbolic hierarchies, this chapter showed how uses of this tool by Soviet art professionals were developing throughout the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev periods. Even before Khrushchev and his spokesmen announced their anti-excess policy in architecture and construction, decorative artists opted for modesty and practicality, based on folk traditions, as the ideal to pursue in of their work and the basis for good taste to be broadly propagated. By the early 1960s, this ideal developed as the notion of honest object wherein the invested creative labor was easily traceable. This notion came to be problematic by the mid-1960s, with the growing recognition of the diversity of consumer needs and greater familiarity with Western design trends. Within the working ethics of VNIITE, taste became just one element of rigorous methodologies for designing useful objects. However, gradually some of VNIITE members and other art professionals came to view the object itself as an “excess,” as almost an impermissible luxury in the situation when the whole environment needed to be urgently modernized. As a reaction to this, excess became a subject of almost postmodernist play for some applied artists, who by the late 1960s viewed their art as more “decorative” than “applied,” or even a new type of “fine art,” where objects refused to be commodities by

¹²² Karateev, “Vsesoiuznaia vystavka,” 7.

virtue of their non-utility. By the end of the decade, taste appeared as structuring principle *within* the artistic community, where decorative artists assumed the roles of producers of social affects and leaders of the new synthesis between arts, techniques and nature.

Conclusion

Three months after celebrating the jubilee of the October revolution with an expressive image gallery, the journal *DI SSSR* marked another, though much more modest, anniversary – 10 years from its launch. Among the official greetings from honored artists, heads of regional and republican artists' unions, representatives of artistic industry, and art professionals from East European countries, was the short address from a Westerner – designer Tomas Maldonado, a faculty member at Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm), Royal College of Arts in London, and Princeton University. This was not an accidental choice: since his encounter with Soviet art professionals in Warsaw in 1963, Maldonado was respected in the Soviet Union as an ally in promoting socially responsible design,¹ while the Ulm School was praised as the “revived Bauhaus” (quite adequately to the school’s genealogy and self-positioning).² Congratulating the journal, Maldonado

¹ According to Karl Kantor’s recollection, during the 1963 encounter, a copy of *DI SSSR* was handed to Maldonado in exchange for the copy of his brainchild journal *Ulm*. “Fragment zapisi vospominanii Karla Kantora,” *DI* 3-4 (2003),

http://www.di.mmoma.ru/history/articles/fragment_zapisi_vospominanij_karla_kantora/ accessed 03.08.2012. In July 1964, *DI SSSR* published a translated and modified text of one of Maldonado’s Warsaw lectures, followed by Kantor’s critical commentary. Tomás Maldonado, “Aktual’nye problemy dizaina,” *DI SSSR* 7 (July 1964): 18-19; Karl Kantor, “Vozrozhdenyi Bauhaus,” *DI SSSR* 7 (July 1964): 21-24.

² Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm was founded in 1953 by Inge Scholl and Otl Aicher, who as children were connected to the underground resistance circle “White Rose” whose members were executed by the Nazis, among them Inge Scholl’s sister and brother. According to design historian Greg Castillo, as “a postwar memorial to her martyred siblings, Scholl wanted to found an institute of higher education that would bolster a postwar democracy distinctly socialist in inclination.” Under the pressure of American authorities, Scholl excluded socialism from the agenda in her proposal, introducing instead a liberal-democratic one. However, when the school’s first rector, Bauhaus alumnus Max Bill prepared the curriculum, he, under the advice of Walter Gropius, downplayed the political element and put emphasis on architecture and city planning. Maldonado, who joined the faculty in 1956, emphasized social agenda in his theoretical pronouncements and teaching. Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (U of Minnesota Press, 2010), 42-46; Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 177-178.

expressed confidence that it “will maximally contribute to the birth of **a new quality in the sphere of design, a specifically socialist one**” (highlighted in the original).³

Evidently, this quote was used to please the administration and Party bosses of the USSR Union of Artists – showcasing the support of a friendly Western “socialist”⁴ as an argument for further ideological and financial support of the periodical. However, there is little reason to doubt the editorial staff’s sincere enthusiasm about their work being appreciated by such a prominent professional. The whole issue was prominently optimistic. Ladur’s editorial told the success story of the journal’s expansion towards the coverage of various forms of creative work virtually around the globe. The journal’s further mission was firmly stated: “to do our best in struggling for the creation of a more perfect material world, for its harmony, for its humanistic essence in socialist society. We should lead an energetic attack on ignorance and primitive understanding of creative tasks.”⁵ Such statements suggest that all doubts, voiced in earlier editorials, had been overcome and designer socialism was just around the corner.

A few pages later, philosopher Boris Shragin presented a different account on the journal’s 10-years-long activity, honestly and ironically highlighting tensions, mistakes and compromises. Shragin particularly worried about some of his colleagues’ ongoing aspiration to manipulate people by the means of art and design. Yet he ended on a positive note:

³ “Privetstviia zhurnal’u,” *DI SSSR* 12 (January 1968): 26.

⁴ In fact, Maldonado did not have such clear-cut political affiliation, in spite of his sympathy for socialist design and hopes about its humanistic potential. In his seminal 1970 book “Design, Nature and Revolution” he did not speak about anything like socialist revolution, but, rather, of “Revolution by Design” as a result of both technological and social transformations – to some extent, akin to the concept proposed slightly earlier by R. Buckminster Fuller. See the English Translation: Tomás Maldonado, *Design, Nature, and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology* (Harper & Row, 1972), 27-29.

⁵ Mikhail Ladur, “Desiat’ let stanovleniia,” *DI SSSR* 12 (January 1968): 24.

Thus, aesthetic and humanist pursuits of the journal brought it to the recognition of the immanent value [*samotsennost'*] of a human personality in its freedom, in its originality, in its organic connection with other personalities, with past and future histories. Importantly, this recognition was announced on the journal's pages not pretentiously, not by sloganeering, not by clichéd phraseology, but in accordance with the inner nature of art.⁶

The anniversary issue of *DI SSSR* captures the heterogeneity – or, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, *heteroglossia* – of the aesthetic turn at the high point of its unfolding. It encompassed the smart appropriation of official Soviet discourse for the professional statement (Ladur's proclamation of "struggle" and "energetic attack"), the expression of internationalism in design sphere (Maldonado's anticipation of specifically socialist design, highlighted by the editors), and the attempt of sincere speech, devoid of ideological clichés (Shragin's admission of mistakes and appeal to human personality). Design socialism was to have a human face, an international outlook, but also the skill to hijack the slogans of state socialism for its aims.

Soon after the issue's publication, four Moscow intellectuals, authors of samizdat publications, were accused of "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" and put on trial. Shragin signed two letters in defense of the accused – one to the General Prosecutor of the USSR and the Supreme Court of RSFSR and another to the Presidium of the Budapest Convention of Communist parties; both denounced the lack of transparency at the trial and demanded reconsideration of the case according to the proper legal procedure. For this advocacy of the "immanent value" of human personality beyond the sphere of design, Shragin was fired from the Research Institute of Theory and History of Fine Arts in April 1968 (and soon took less prestigious position at the Research Institute of Artistic Industry).⁷ From then on, Shragin's name disappeared from *DI SSSR* yet became noticeable in

⁶ Boris Shragin, "Za desiat' let," *DI SSSR* 12 (December 1967): 40.

⁷ *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* 1 (April 30, 1968), l. 9, OSA, f. 300-85-49, box 50:13.

samizdat and tamizdat. Disillusioned about the possibility of creating a humanistic environment within the socialist system,⁸ in 1974 he emigrated to the U.S.⁹ In August 1968, an attempt to implement alternative approach to socialism was violently crushed in Prague – the event popularly perceived to end the optimistic era of the 1960s.¹⁰ In two months, the Ulm School of Design, seen in Soviet Russia as the headquarters of humanistic design in the West, was closed due to the funding cut by the federal government.¹¹

While these events signaled certain crises in the aesthetic turn, it was not over: VNIITE experimented with cybernetic models and prognoses, maintained and expanded its international contacts, in particular through its activities in ICSID. In September 1969, at the ICSID Congress in London, Iurii Soloviev was elected Vice President, alone with such outstanding designer as Eliot Noyes and Gino Valle.¹² In November 1969, just after the end of his term as ICSID President, Maldonado visited Moscow and Leningrad and, in particular, was guided by Iosif Vaks and architectural historian Marietta Gize through the departments of Mukhina School.¹³ At the same time, *DI SSSR* further inquired in the meanings of decoration, functionalism, and relations between people and things as well as

⁸ In his 1970 article, published under a pseudonym in the samizdat journal Herald of Russian Christian Movement, Shragin wrote: “Nothing can be said about art: it has practically disappeared from official exhibitions after the hooliganistic row in Manezh organized by Khrushchev.” Lev Ventsov, “To Think,” in Mikhail Meerson-Aksenov and Boris Shragin, eds., *The Political, Social, and Religious Thought of Russian “Samizdat”: An Anthology* (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Company, 1977), 148.

⁹ Shragin emigrated together with his wife Natalia Sadomskaia, anthropologist and human right activist. In the U. S., he worked as a writer, producer and narrator of broadcasts for Radio Liberty for 14 years. He also taught at Amherst College, Queens College, Hunter College, the University of Pittsburgh and Harvard and Columbia Universities. Shragin died in 1990, at the age of 63. Adele Marie Barker and Bruce Grant, *The Russia Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010), 559. In his

¹⁰ Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 282-296; Petr Vail and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir Sovetskogo Cheloveka* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 280-292.

¹¹ Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design*, 177-178.

¹² “Past Executive Boards,” International Council of Societies of Industrial Design,” <http://www.icsid.org/about/people/articles202.htm> accessed 26.03.2015.

¹³ TsGAKFFD SPb, ed. khr. Ar-94432. “Designer, Vice-President of ICSID Tomás Maldonado at the Department of Industrial Art looks at students’ term projects. Lecturer Marietta E. Gize and Prof. Iosif A. Vaks give explanations. November 20, 1969. Photo by V. G. Martynov.

the advantages of Western design; apart from the loss of a thoughtful contributor, Shragin, it seemed little affected by the toughening of political climate. While after the Prague events the Party favored the professionals loyal to the new conservative, to some extent re-Stalinizing course,¹⁴ the USSR Union of Artists was headed by a sculptor Ekaterina Belashova, who from 1957 had defended artists from accusations of “formalism,” advocated the removal of the hierarchy of “fine” and “applied” arts, the new synthesis of arts and architecture, and the strengthening of artists’ position in industry; she held this position until her death in 1971.¹⁵ By 1970, a “decorativist turn” gained many supporters from solid art professionals as just another, legitimate side of the “integral process of the development of our aesthetic culture.”¹⁶ This year, two prominent books were published: Viacheslav Glazychev’s *Essays on Theory and Practice of Western Design* that confirmed the international orientation of Soviet design,¹⁷ and Boris Smirnov’s *Artist on the Nature of Things*, that, as it has been discussed in Chapter 2, argued for inherent unity and freedom of all types of creative activity.¹⁸ Smirnov’s book, just like the late 1960s articles by Glazychev, Kramarenko, Shragin, Ladur and others, turned out to have many common ideas with the now classic book by a cosmopolitan designer Victor Papanek, *Design for the*

¹⁴ Mark Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered,” in Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, eds., *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, Studies in Russian and East European History and Society (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 149-150.

¹⁵ Belashova took this stance by virtue of her position as the secretary of the Administration Board of the USSR Artists’ Union, from where she was promoted to become the Head. She was a graduate of Leningrad Vkhutein, and in 52-65 she taught at MVKhPU. RGANI, f. 5, op. 36, d. 47, ll. 55-56; RGASPI, f. 556, op. 16, d. 84, ll. 91-93; “Iz vystupleniia t. Belashovoi,” *DI SSSR* 9 (September 1960): 2; RGALI, f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171, ll. 35-36; d. 2792, ll. 7-8, 10.

¹⁶ Leonid Karateev, “Vsesoiuznaia vystavka dekorativnogo iskusstva,” *DI SSSR* 154 (September 1970): 1.

¹⁷ Viacheslav Glazychev, *O dizaine. Ocherki po teorii i praktike dizaina na Zapade*, (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970).

¹⁸ Boris Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970).

Real World,¹⁹ and, to some extent, with Maldonado's *Design, Nature and Revolution* both published in 1971 and 1972 respectively.²⁰ The third important book on design, published in Soviet Russia in 1970, was a collection of essays by Malevich's pupil Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, the designer of Soviet expositions at international fairs – from the 1937 *Exposition Internationale* in Paris to Expo-58 in Brussels to Expo-70 in Osaka.²¹ In particular, Rozhdestvenskii argued for the emotional essence of decorative art and the value of an artist's individuality; a black square was chosen as a headpiece for this book – clearly, a reference to Malevich (whose notorious painting was then known to but a bunch of connoisseurs). Thus, an alleged “formalism” could be legitimately reproduced under the guise of “contemporary” and “tasteful” book design.

In 1971 VNIITE introduced the international practice-oriented seminar “Interdesign.”²² In the same year, Natalia Titova, the energetic Deputy Art Director of the Senezh Studio, voiced her colleagues' protest against the usurpation of the international image of Soviet design by VNIITE. In her appeal to the Union of Artists' Committee for Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries, Titova explained that the term “design” in Western vocabularies is very broad and includes not only form-giving to machines and mass-produced commodities, which prevails at VNIITE, but also applied art and all kinds of decorative works. She proposed the inclusion of the USSR Union of Artists into ICSID for representing “the large and diverse activity in the sphere of art design [*khudozhestvennoe proektirovaniie*]” and strengthening the Soviet position in the

¹⁹ Victor J. Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

²⁰ Tomás Maldonado, *Design, Nature, and Revolution*.

²¹ Konstantin Rozhdestvenskii, *Ansambl' i ekspozitsiia* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1970).

²² Vladimir Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki. Kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 233-234.

international design community.²³ As a result, the Union of Artists became the second Soviet member of ICSID and could no longer be perceived in the West as merely a hotbed of propagandist kitsch. By the early 1970s, the aesthetic turn brought the Soviet artistic community to the level of a new seriousness in international dialogue on design as a universal creative and goal-oriented activity.



Figure 5.4 Tomas Maldonado with Marietta Gize and Iosif Vaks in the Mukhina School, November 20, 1969.

This dissertation offered a view of post-war Soviet design in this broad sense, not reducible to genealogies of institutions, biographies of particular professionals, or a stylistic evolution from socialist realism to socialist modernism. Therefore, instead of building a

²³ RGALI, f. 2082, op. 6, d. 1422, l. 6.

linear account, this study mapped the space of manifold ideas, activities and objects. Or, to use the term of Régis Debray,²⁴ it analyzed the mediological basis for different creative activities that intensified, or just emerged, after Stalin, and constituted an essential component of Soviet culture and internationalism under Brezhnev. This analysis was undertaken via three different prisms, popularly associated with Soviet art and culture: socialist realism (the only permitted method, often mistakenly recalled as a style), up-to-datedness (the ideal goal of the Soviet modernization drive), and taste (the key element of the Soviet civilizing process). Such optics highlighted numerous tensions and anxieties, and optimistic hopes of art professionals who took responsibility for bringing art beyond the exhibition halls, metro stations and central city squares down to the level of the daily routines of ordinary Soviet people. The development of each of three major aesthetic categories – (socialist) realism, up-to-datedness and taste – followed a similar path from a cautious evasion of the orthodoxies set by easel art through the appeal to folk tradition, to a decisive embrace of functionalism, stimulated by the unprecedented architectural reform, to, finally, the recognition of diversity of the criteria for “proper” socialist art and design, and, hence, growing skepticism about the possibility for one optimal way to improve the Soviet material environment. In other words, the analysis throughout the “thematic” chapters (2-4) revealed a number of common, or basic, problems that run through different settings and debates: the artist’s status and role in industry; the adoption of folk traditions to mass production and urban lifestyles; the limits of representation; the tensions between intuition and calculation in a creative process and between artistic individuality and mass reproducibility; the challenge of new materials and the inquiry into hidden possibilities of

²⁴ Régis Debray, “Socialism: A Life-Cycle,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 46 (August 2007): 5-28.

traditional ones; the blurry line between structure and ornament, or necessity and excess; and, probably, most essentially, the interrelations between people and things (including machines and commodities, that is, means and ends of production). While by the end of 1960s art professionals hardly solved any of these problems successfully, they created – or, to put it more pointedly, designed - a field of possibilities to probe, criticize, repudiate and defend. Therefore, the notion of realism could be projected onto the wide world of nature but also onto the creative process; up-to-datedness could be expressed through materiality, assortment or comprehensibility; and taste could be reduced to just one point in a sophisticated methodology, only to reemerge as a signifier of social diversity beyond rationalistic calculations. While agreeing with Diana West that Soviet design, just like science and planning, was strongly directed towards total control over the environment and “complete automation,”²⁵ I demonstrate another facet of Soviet design, replete with uncertainties and endless redefinition of concepts. In institutional terms, this facet was formed within the Union of Artists’ and design schools. Further inclusion of other institutions into the inquiry should produce an even more vivid, multifaceted picture of Soviet design, distinct from the popular image of grey and uniform intellectual and material culture of late socialism. Taken in a broader sense, as the entire field of creative activities aimed at transforming the material environment, Soviet design was as eclectic as it was totalistic, and the ubiquitous “Socialist Generic”²⁶ – all these uniform prefabricated apartments, minimalist collapsible furniture, standard kitchenware, streamlined vacuum

²⁵ Diana Kurkovsky West, “CyberSovietica: Planning, Design and the Cybernetics of Soviet Space, 1954-1986 (Ph. D. Diss., Princeton University, 2013), 27; 263.

²⁶ As I mention in Chapter 2, this term was offered by Krisztina Fehervary for the devaluation of modern housing and design in the socialist Hungary in the early 1970s. Krisztina Fehérváry, “From Socialist Modern to Super-Natural Organicism: Cosmological Transformations Through Home Decor,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (November 2, 2012): 624-626.

cleaners, and radio receivers – barely reflected the colorful picture of professional debates, original student projects, and provocations at decorative art exhibitions.

This concluding argument presents an alternative to the two narratives of Soviet design, predominant in the public discourse of contemporary Russia and informed by the politics of memory about the Soviet past. One is the narrative of shame and neglect. It depicts Soviet design as plagiaristic, low-quality, neglectful of the consumer, or altogether non-existent. It is presented by some former employees of VNIITE and the USSR Union of Designers, created by Iurii Soloviev in 1987, who felt constrained by the bureaucratic structures of these institutions and upset that so few of their ideas could be implemented. Their current attitudes are often influenced by the memory of professional ambitions and the perceived conflict “creative people vs. design-bureaucrats,” – a variant of a broader dichotomy personality vs. state/Party machine. In particular, Soloviev (who lived a long life until 2013) is remembered within Russian design community as an odious figure – an adventurous politician and functionary (according to some mythologies, patronized by the KGB), aspiring for personal fame rather than for the real impact on production and people’s daily life. As outstanding graphic designer Sergei Serov, President of the Moscow Global Biennale of Graphic Design “Golden Bee,” expressed this attitude in a 2006 online commentary on the announcement about Soloviev’s freshly published autobiography:²⁷ “I have worked in design for 33 years and spent my best years at VNIITE. But I do not want to go back to the USSR,²⁸ and I do not want to be a part of this false and mythologized

²⁷ Iurii Soloviev, *Moia zhizn' v dizaine* (Moscow: Soiuz dizainerov Rossii), 2006.

²⁸ The phrase “back to the USSR” was used in English in the original – as a reiteration to the announcement’s title, but also, evidently, as a bitterly ironic reference to the catch-phrase, resonant with the post-Soviet nostalgia that developed in the 2000s Russia.

history that is being written by former and current design bosses.”²⁹ Serov’s colleagues who were less successful in building post-Soviet design careers, evidently, remember their VNIITE experience with a mixture of nostalgia, reproach and regrets about missed opportunities. For example, Mikhail Kos’kov, former Leningrad VNIITE designer, and currently design theorist and lecturer at the Stieglitz Academy of Art and Design (LVKhPU successor), criticizes the Soviet design community for insufficient rigor in establishing methodologies and utopianism, in particular, for undue infatuation with “fashionable sciences” like semiotics.³⁰

The negative narrative is supported by graphic designers who started their careers during perestroika and especially during the time of the painful restructuring of Russian economy, when the collapsed industries precluded any development of product design, but the insipient market for advertisement opened new opportunities for talented and businesslike graphic designers. Recently, this narrative was wholeheartedly expressed in an Internet talk-show by a graphic designer Irina Dragunskaa (a 1999 graduate of Moscow State University of Printing Arts) and her father, writer and liberal journalist Denis Dragunskii. In their conversation, Soviet design was presented as amoral, corrupted by the absence of rules (and thus the proliferation of plagiarism), replete with hack-work and neglectful of the consumer – in accordance with the system where “a person was alienated from the world of thing.”³¹

²⁹ A commentary on the entry in the Internet version of the journal *Kak*: Aleksandr Matveev and Vladimir Samoilov, “Back to the USSR,” <http://kak.ru/columns/designet/a1517/>

³⁰ Author’s interview with Mikhail Alekseevich Kos’kov, recorded in St. Petersburg on 16.04.2011.

³¹ “Dizain, kotorogo ne bylo,” video program recorded 17.03.2011, <http://gogol.tv/video/122> published 12.04.2011, accessed 30.03.2015.

The second, positive narrative on Soviet design is centered on the notions of national pride and lost heritage that should be revived and popularized. This narrative has also been created by former VNIITE employees (some of whom are still members of this just formally existing organization),³² who expect their decades-long painstaking work to be justly acknowledged, and by sympathetic younger designers and critics. From the latter group stemmed a recent initiative to publicize the VNIITE legacy through establishing a Moscow Design Museum. It started in 2011 as a mobile exposition in a bus, inspired by early Soviet agit-trains, which travels around Moscow and plans to reach other Russian cities. In addition, the museum organizes temporary exhibitions in different Moscow settings. As this dissertation was in the middle of its progress, the Museum's first exhibition, "Soviet Design 1950s – 1980s" was opened on November 30, 2012, in the prestigious setting – the Manege Exhibition Hall near the Red Square.³³ Based on meticulous archival research at VNIITE and state industrial enterprises and on contacts with VNIITE employees, including the 93-years old Soloviev, the exhibition showcased a variety of objects – both mass-produced goods and prototypes that were never realized - and video-interviews with designers. The museum's director, designer Aleksandra San'kova, aimed to demonstrate to a young generation that post-war Soviet visual culture consisted not merely of propaganda and to present a complex approach to design, professed at VNIITE. As she explained, "according the contemporary idea of design, an object should

³² VNIITE announced to officially close its doors on June 14, 2013, but this event passed virtually without any notice in Russian press and still nominally exists in the same location at the All-Russia Exhibition of Economy (a successor of a famous Soviet VDNKh, whose historical name has just been returned after the area's massive reconstruction) and co-organizes design conferences; in the spring of 2014, I was still able to work in its rarely visited library, thanks to its only librarian Ruf' Liutfievna Nurrulaeva. However, VNIITE, evidently, has no more authority and prestige among Russian designers of various profiles.

³³ "Soviet Design 1950s – 1980s," <http://www.moscowdesignmuseum.ru/en/exhibitions/1/>, accessed 30.03.2015.

possess at least two qualities: functionalism and consumer appeal. Is this idea compatible to the notion of ‘the Soviet?’ Our exhibition aimed to answer this question.”³⁴ The great popularity and high attendance of the exhibition implied the positive answer - or, at least, the contemporary Russians’ (and foreign visitors’) willingness to dwell on it.

Western design historians and curators, too, increasingly contribute to the positive narrative, but from a more critical, distanced position; they appreciate precisely what people like Kos’kov find as errors: interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on the findings of philosophy and sociology, and orientation towards the harmonization of the environment rather than sheer profit.³⁵ In her review of the Moscow Design Museum’s debut exhibition, Swedish design historian Margareta Tillberg shifted the focus from plagiarism and imitation to the affective power of Soviet objects:

Even if Soviet design was often — but far from always — based on originals borrowed from the West, the individual objects exude a personal charm, variation, and quirkiness that makes them well worth preserving, exhibiting, and discussing. Certainly, one might think the Vyatka is merely an unnecessary repetition of the original Vespa, only heavier, of poorer quality, and, because it was not mass-produced, much more expensive. But I still believe the Russian-made scooter deserves more notice than it has been given thus far. It says something about a time and a system that may seem alien, but which had tremendous impact on what our world looks like today.³⁶

³⁴ “Dizain – massovoe proizvodstvo. A v Rossii proizvodstva net,” Alena Lapina’s interview with Aleksandra San’kova, *Bolshoi Gorod*, November 28, 2012, http://bg.ru/entertainment/my_byli_po_odnu_storonu_barrikad_a_vstali_po_druguju-15852/ accessed 30.03.2015.

³⁵ This evaluation is most prominently proposed by Susan E. Reid, Margareta Tillberg and, in a younger generation, Tom Cubbin and the researchers of Baltic countries’ design – Lolita Jablonskienė, Iliana Veinberga, Mari Laamanets and Andres Kurg. A number of scholars and curators similarly approach the design of the European countries of the socialist bloc, most prominently, David Crowley, who has been extensively researched and published on design and popular culture of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary; in 2008, with Jane Pavitt, he co-curated the exhibition “Cold War Modern” at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

³⁶ Margareta Tillberg, “Exhibition in Moscow, Soviet Design 1950s – 1980s,” *Baltic Worlds* 1:2013, pages 28-29, <http://balticworlds.com/soviet-design-1950%E2%80%931980/>, published 13.05.2013, accessed 30.03.2015.

Tillberg's evaluation may suggest that in the Soviet system, the exchange-value of Soviet models, like Italian Vespa scooters or American Hoover vacuum cleaners, was converted into what Soviet economists termed "use-value" (*potrebitel'naia stoimost'*),³⁷ based on honest practicality and sensuous qualities of objects – their "realism, weight, volume, and earth," to use an expression from the 1920s internationalist Soviet avant-garde.³⁸ In this interpretation, the perceived amorality of designers appears as their care for consumers and their wish to translate the advancements of world design into their daily environment – while working on original models, developing sophisticated systems of domestic equipment and envisioning de-artifactualization. The stereotype about clumsiness and unoriginality of Soviet commodities obscures the story that took place behind and beyond them - theoretical debates, lectures, interdisciplinary seminars, and conceptually daring projects. The profound interest in this story informed Tom Cubbin's evaluation of the same 2012 exhibition: "Importantly, this show makes the point that during late socialism there was a community of designers who believed that design in the Soviet Union could be a socially active discipline that would change the lives of citizens for the better."³⁹

This dissertation, too, revealed the conceptual ground behind Soviet things, behind the establishment of VNIITE, and behind the division of form-giving into different

³⁷ "Kachestvo – trebovanie dnia," *Sovetskaia torgovlia*, 1976, no. 2:63. Quoted in Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "'Against the Cult of Things': On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination," *The Russian Review* 73, no. 2 (April 2014): 204. In this article, Oushakine takes the Soviet economists' emphasis on "use-value" of things, in the absence of their market circulation, as a key characteristic of what he calls "productivist worldview, directed at revealing inner qualities of things and their comprehensive systematization.

³⁸ These elements were presented as constitutive of a new type of objects, anticipated in an editorial of the famous trilingual avant-garde journal *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* published by artist (or, more properly, design) Lazar' Lissitzky and writer Ilya Ehrenburg in 1922 in Berlin. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii konchaetsia," *Veshch-Objet-Gegenstand* 1-2 (1922): 1-4.

³⁹ Tom Cubbin, Back to the Future: what the New Moscow Design Museum Can Learn from the Soviet Past," *The Calvert Journal*, accessed 30.03.2014, <http://calvertjournal.com/comment/show/378/back-to-the-future-what-the-new-moscow-design-museum-can-learn-from-the-sov>

professional activities. It argued that the aesthetic turn was concerned with the regulation of concepts and categories as the necessary prerequisite for the regulation of production and consumption, and that this concern gradually led art professionals to develop a fresh, original view on a socialist society as composed of diverse individuals, with their particular consumer preferences, ideals and “spiritual needs.” This view was quite openly discussed in *DI SSSR* and embodied at decorative art exhibitions even – and especially – after August 1968, when Brezhnev’s leadership turned towards conservatism and tighter ideological control over Soviet intellectual life. Art professionals, the designers of the aesthetic turn, were therefore akin to the reformist intellectuals within the Party under Brezhnev, who, as historian Mark Sandle argues, occupied a political-ideological space between “dissent” and “orthodoxy” and later, by virtue of their training in critical thinking, formed the intellectual elite at the core of *perestroika*.⁴⁰ While not dealing directly with political and economic issues, art professionals of the late 1960s created the vibrant intellectual space between “dissent” and “orthodoxy” in art – between nonconformist artists and the guardians of the canon of socialist realism. If they have not created properly socialist objects, as anticipated by the productivists of the 1920s, they established the legitimate forum for proposing and discussing multiple visions of such objects. Whether driven by personal ambitions and status-seeking or by the sincere care about the society’s well-being, reformist art-professionals chose to reject what Maldonado called “nihilism in design”⁴¹ in changing and disturbing political circumstances, thus dynamizing the intellectual life of Soviet Russia’s late socialism.

⁴⁰ Sandle, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing?”

⁴¹ Maldonado, *Design, Nature, and Revolution*, 29.

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