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‘A Glass without a Bottom’: Neodecorativism in the late 1960s Soviet Design

Original article

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In the 1950s, Soviet decorative artists, under the influence of the incipient industrial design profession, chose utility, modesty and mass reproducibility as chief criteria for their work. Some critics envisioned the confluence of decorative art and industrial design. However, from the 1960s the two professional activities gradually diverged, as decorative artists started reconsidering their role in industry, emphasizing decorative aspects of their work and proposing the notion of ‘spiritual utility.’ Believing that mass production had become the responsibility of industrial designers, these artists turned to experimenting with techniques, forms, and colours. The resulting artworks were unique or of limited edition, intended for exhibitions, where they appeared as conceptual objects, inviting the viewers to rethink the notions of design and decoration. This article contributes to the study of Soviet design by identifying a specific phenomenon of the 1960s, for which I offer the term ‘neodecorativism.’ It traces the Soviet decorative art’s turn from ‘honest objects’ to provocative objects that transcended the logic of mass production and questioned the principles of post-war Soviet aesthetics.

Keywords: 1960s, aesthetics, decorative arts, glass, Soviet Union, taste.

The end of Soviet isolationism after Stalin’s death, the unprecedented mass housing program launched by the Soviet state in 1957, the optimism about scientific and technological progress and the campaign for increasing consumer goods quality as a powerful weapon in the Cold War competition – these were the factors behind the reformist campaign in Soviet visual arts and the emergence of industrial design as a profession. In the last years of Stalin’s rule, reform-oriented art professionals criticized the official treatment of decorative arts as minor in relation to painting and sculpture. Protesting against their marginal position within artistic unions, decorative artists aspired for control in art industry – the mass production of objects, traditionally associated with domestic sphere, such as kitchenware and furniture. Together with architects and urban planners, they claimed their role as tastemakers and agents of socialist modernization.¹ This development culminated in the 1962 governmental decree sanctioning the mass-scale improvement of consumer goods and public spaces. The decree created a system of design institutions and design positions in industrial enterprises, to be coordinated by the All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE).² In its theoretical and practical work, VNIITE relied on the example of the socialist bloc’s countries, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Moreover, VNIITE employees had

access, however limited, to West European and U. S. design books and periodicals, as well as to the literature on the Russian avant-garde.³ With such equipment, Soviet designers strived to catch up with the West in the sphere of commodity culture, and their principles and objectives affected traditional decorative arts as well. As Susan E. Reid aptly summarized, 'the Khrushchev era represented a great but uneven leap forward in creating the basis for a modern way of everyday life and a radical stylistic reorientation in domestic spaces and the visual appearance of cities towards a new aesthetic of socialist modernism.'⁴ This new aesthetics, which Reid calls 'Khrushchev Modern,' became a subject of pioneering studies of post-war Soviet design beginning from the 1990s. Though identifying a range of complex issues, these studies mostly provided a narrative of a state-sponsored drive towards functionalism and against 'petty-bourgeois' tastes and decorativism.⁵

From the second half of 2000s, a younger generation of scholars has been complementing and expanding the narrative of 'Khrushchev modern,' often tracing design developments beyond the early 1960s. They explored the tensions within the design reformism, identified earlier by Reid – between artistic individuality and mass production, between folk traditions and advanced industry, between professionals' critical thinking and the necessity to meet Party guidelines.⁶ This article contributes to this new stream of scholarship by identifying a specific design tendency that emerged at the end of the Khrushchev era. At this time decorative artists, challenging VNIITE's dominant role in constructing Soviet everyday aesthetics, arrived at what I, following art critic Iurii Gerchuk, call 'neodecorativism' – a set of artistic strategies to redefine the meaning of decoration. This article highlights one of overlooked outcomes of the 'Khrushchev Modern.' It begins with a brief overview of professional discussions of decorative artists the 1950s, then locates the moment of the change of values, and finally analyses the creative strategies and objects of neodecorativism.

In search of an 'honest' object

The development of Soviet decorative art⁷ of the 1950s was strongly influenced by the new architectural policy that repudiated excessive decoration and called for the comprehensive use of industrial methods and materials. A key notion of this new policy was 'honesty' (*pravdivost'* or *chestnost'*), meaning the clear expression of a building's structure and function in its visual appearance.⁸ Precast reinforced concrete, the material of new Soviet mass housing,⁹ was officially propagated as the 'honest' material par excellence.¹⁰

Decorative artists appealed to honesty in search of 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. Honesty was to stand against pomposity, association with Stalinist architecture and interior decorations. Art historian Alexander Saltykov argued in his 1955 article that 'artistry in 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.'¹¹ Saltykov voiced the emerging ideal of the modern Soviet 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. To a great extent, this was an echo of the 1920s Russian Constructivism: focus on construction, the necessary and sufficient basis of an artwork, rather than composition, an arbitrary and subjective arrangement of superfluous elements.¹² An honest socialist object was opposed both to a 'mysterious' work of pure art and to a seductive capitalist commodity which is at once a deceiver and, in Aleksandr Rodchenko's expression, a 'sombre slave.'¹³ By the same token, Soviet art professionals of the 1950s strived to go beyond ornamentalism, associated with hypocritical slogans of the Stalin era, towards the embodiment of the labour of an artist and a factory worker (who, contrary to the 1920s ideal, were usually different people). A functional "honest object" was the central theme in the theory of decorative art, which only began to develop in the mid-1950s.

However, honesty did not mean the wholesale sacrifice of decoration for the sake of function: this would place Soviet art reformers in the dangerous position of the advocates of

Western design, officially condemned as “ultra-functionalist.” Art theorists relied on the example of folk art, seen as harmoniously combining beauty and utility and also leaving room for fantasy. Notably, some of the leading advocates of decorative art reform, such as Saltykov and Nikita Voronov, were experts on folk art and crafts. Officially praised since mid-1930s as an expression of popular creativity, folk art was also a safe ground for advocating schematic and non-figurative imagery, thus challenging the doctrine of socialist realism that required heroic imagery and/or Soviet emblems for decorative artworks. As prominent Leningrad architect and decorative artist Boris Smirnov argued in 1954, schematic and fantastic folk images were, in fact, truly realistic, because they highlighted most typical features of peasant life. Professional decorative artists, he insisted, should learn from peasant craftsmen to express the essence of contemporary life through vivid decorative images, instead of resorting to banal naturalism. This would be the best strategy for creating attractive commodities, comprehensible for Soviet people and adequate to their “national feelings” as much as to their practical needs.¹⁴

The key to the successful translation of folk art principles into mass production was often seen in the ‘deep respect’ for the material.’¹⁵ 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 believed that each material possesses inherent decorative qualities, providing the example of his favourite 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 colouring of light through glass by almost any colour.’¹⁶ Similarly, wood, textile, ceramics, as well as plastics, were to be treated skilfully, so that the best qualities of each materials could be revealed.¹⁷

An ‘honest’ object, manufactured with respect to its material, constituted an ideal of socialist commodity by the early 1960s. This ideal entered advice literature and was propagated at exhibitions, most famously, at the all-Union exhibition ‘Art into Life,’ organized

by the USSR Ministry of Culture, Academy of Arts and the Unions of Artists and Architects in Moscow in April-June 1961. It aimed to showcase the best Soviet models of commodities and interiors for prefabricated apartments. The scope, diversity and quality of the exhibits were perceived to signify the triumph of art making oriented at mass production and the satisfaction of consumer needs. One reviewer enthusiastically noted that modern commodities were exhibited alongside objects traditionally ascribed to applied art (like porcelain cups or glass vases).¹⁸ [1] The exhibition displayed the emergence of the concept of Soviet design-as-practice (*khudozhestvennoe konstruirovaniie*, 'artistic engineering') and its profound impact upon decorative art in terms of the relation to industry.¹⁹ However, as viewers and art professionals themselves complained, the majority of the exhibits were still unique objects rather than samples of mass-produced goods.²⁰ While a newsreel about the exhibition, produced in 1962, presented visitors' criticisms as minor and stemming from their excitement with the new,²¹ the responses in guest books, as Susan Reid demonstrated in her study,²² were far from uniformly enthusiastic. Evidently, taste hierarchies imagined by art professionals (socialist honesty vs. petty-bourgeois excess and/or capitalist ultra-fashionable functionalism) could hardly reflect social reality. [INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

'Everything is much more complicated'

By the early 1960s decorative artists were primarily expected to focus on elaborating new models for mass production, thus following the steps of industrial designers, or, in Soviet parlance, 'artists-engineers' (*khudozhniki-konstruktory*). However, professionals' optimism regarding their power to regulate mass tastes was gradually replaced by scepticism. Research in consumer needs, organized by VNIITE, the Institute for Public Opinion under the auspices of *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* newspaper, and central department stores, demonstrated the irrelevance of the accepted notion of 'good taste.' The gradual change of design thinking was carefully recorded by the journal *Decorative Art of the USSR (DI SSSR)*, founded in 1957 as a mouthpiece of reformist art professionals. The first signal of change was a report by art critic Leonid Nevler from his "field trip" to student and worker dormitories

in the town of Kalinin (now Tver') at the beginning of 1963. Instead of usual condemnation of domestic trifles like cross-stitched embroideries or clumsy faience figurines, Nevler characterised them as meaningful individual statements and as creative attempts to domesticate ugly dormitory interiors that had been left without designers' attention.²³ Designers should not condemn spontaneous people's creativity but find a proper way to carefully guide it, he concluded.

The title of Nevler's report, "everything is much more complicated," became the slogan of the heated debate that unfolded on the pages of *DI SSSR* from 1965. In this year's first editorial, chief editor Mikhail Ladur openly lamented the loss of the 'great mystery of art' in pursuit of rationality by 'the admirers of the aesthetics of numbers and compasses.'²⁴ The influence of standard mass housing on decorative art, celebrated half a decade ago, was now criticized as damaging both to artists' creativity and consumers' psychological well-being. No longer rejected as fake or fetishist, 'mystery' now was seen as necessary for art to stay humanistic and responsive to people's complex emotions. The terms 'spirituality,' 'depth,' 'width,' 'diversity' and 'complexity' became frequent in *DI SSSR* publications. '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,' recalled design theorist Viacheslav Glazychev three years later.²⁵

This "difficult break" was a Soviet response to the global mid-1960s crisis of modernist aesthetics and art professionals' fascination with "complexity and contradiction" (to cite the title of Robert Venturi's 1966 seminal book, quite probably known in the USSR design circles)²⁶ that would eventuate in postmodernist architecture and design. Soviet designers were well aware of these developments through available Western publications, such as Italian magazine *Domus*, through the mediation of East European colleagues, and through the participation in international decorative arts exhibitions (and, from 1965, in the congresses of International Council of the Societies of Industrial Design).²⁷ Another important factor of change was the recent emergence of Soviet semiotics and its growing influence on

designers, who were receptive to the idea that objects have important communicative function and 'speak' with consumers in specific language.²⁸

Consequently, role of tastemaker and organizer of socialist material environment became more challenging. In response to this challenge, two professional positions emerged: first, the elaboration of rigorous design methodologies, with strong reliance on cybernetics²⁹; second, trust in consumers whose wishes cannot always be rationally explained. The first position was more characteristic for VNIITE and voiced in its publications, first of all the bulletin *Tekhnicheskaya Estetika*, while the second – to a great extent, a reaction to the first - was professed by art reformists within the USSR Union of Artists, who granted significance to artistic intuition and spontaneous creativity. One manifestation of the latter position was the Central Educational and Experimental Studio of the Union of Artists of the USSR, established in 1964, which emphasized artistic rather than engineering component of design.³⁰ Decorative artists working in traditional spheres of textile, metalwork, ceramics and glass put forward yet another manifestation.

Beyond utility, towards amazement

As VNIITE designers turned to cybernetics for systematizing objects, needs and uses, decorative artists turned to reconsidering their role in industry. From the mid-1950s, decorative artists' efforts to comply with the parameters of mass production became subject to criticism. In the *DI SSSR* editorial from March 1965, Ladur censured the abundance of imageless 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 moving on 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 neither to himself nor to his friend viewer.'³¹ The reformulation of professional duty, publicized in an authoritative journal, reads like a radicalization of the notion of 'honesty': not only truth to materials, but also honest expression of one's own artistic visions. But it also restated the dilemma first voiced

by Smirnov and Saltykov in the early 1950s: unique artistic imagery vs. mass production (or, to use Benjamin's famous formulation, 'the work of art in the age of its mass reproducibility').

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 industrial designers and 'strive forward' to experimenting with craft-based imagery? Then would they still be useful for the Soviet society? Could they compete with industrial designers for the status of taste arbiters? Or could they answer people's spiritual needs, not calculable by statistical methods? To rephrase the question, which a Constructivist Vladimir Khrakovskii raised in 1921, how could a Soviet decorative artist of the post-Khrushchev era justify his or her existence?³²

One possible response was to treat the work on unique pieces as a laboratory for the formulae for mass-produced socialist objects. This approach legitimized artists' work on forms and techniques that were 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 exhibits' limited reproducibility, from 1965 *DI SSSR* admitted 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 exhibition 'Soviet Russia,' held in Moscow in spring 1965. She illustrated her thesis by reviewing three works of the Moscow ceramic artist Vladimir Ol'shevskii (who worked in Leningrad until 1962) [2]. His large decorative vase, made of chamotte,³³ 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 an element of a park environment. The hand-made geometric relief added the perception of integrity and

‘architectural character.’ 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.’ Finally, the silhouette probed in these two works found its way to people’s homes in a porcelain tea set mass-produced at the Dmitrovskii porcelain factory. Here, easy reproducibility and ‘machine clarity,’ accentuated with a mechanized geometric décor, compensated for the loss of the ‘feeling of the natural life of the material.’ Stepanian noticed a similar skill of adopting artistic ideas to mass production in the work of many of the exhibition’s participants, especially the artists of the Leningrad Porcelain Factory. The article concluded that the interrelation between unique works and the artistic industry, whatever form it might take, always essentially reflects ‘the dialogue between the human being and the machine.’³⁴ [INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

The ‘Soviet Russia’ exhibition signalled the growing emphasis on experimentation in decorative art. Since this new tendency did not receive a single clear term, I chose the one used by a prominent art critic, advocate of modernism Iurii Gerchuk.³⁵ While Gerchuk’s use was critical (he worried about the artists’ neglect of mass production), I believe that the term aptly captures the urge to redefine the decorative and its relation to the utilitarian. Neodecorativism affected artists working in different media - ceramics, textile, wood, metal, glass, or multiple - indeed, its distinguished feature was artists’ striving to move beyond one particular material.³⁶ Neodecorativism was also stimulated by the reinvigorated interest in folk art (this time far beyond the USSR borders, in tune with new Soviet internationalism) not only as a model of good socialist taste, but also as a source for diverse artistic motives and techniques.³⁷ Creative reinterpretations of folk art, often in a playful, theatrical manner, were especially characteristic of decorative artists in the Baltic and Caucasian Soviet republics, whose example their colleagues in Soviet Russia perceived enthusiastically. Further research is needed to discover to what extent ‘decorative turn’ was informed by nationalist moods, or related to the development of the ‘village prose’ (a movement in post-Stalin literature focusing on rural life, often with Russian nationalist subtext); however, *DI SSSR*

portrayed it as a new, 'sincere' affirmation of cultural diversity and dialogue – not just between a human being and a machine, but between people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Though it was, in a way, a critique of Soviet art and design policy, neodecorativism developed within the official structure – experimental laboratories at factories and combines (*kombinaty*, institutions managing artists' contracts with the state), supervised and financed by the USSR Art Fund. Such experimental laboratories were instituted in the mid-1960s with the aim to give artists the opportunity to develop new forms, textures and combinations of materials, without being constrained by contracts or thematic requirements.³⁸ The resulting works were shown at regular exhibitions – all-Union as well as regional and republican – as showcases of cutting-edge ideas to be adapted to industry or used in the design of public interiors. By the expression of one artist, such exhibitions demonstrated “artistic capital in the sphere of decorative-applied art.”³⁹ Thus, the state, in fact, encouraged decorative artists to experiment quite freely – and they used the chance to challenge the canon of utility, just like they challenge the canon of socialist realism a decade ago. This was, however, not a universal privilege: experimental laboratories were only a few, concentrated in big cities, and thus access to them was not easy, especially for the artists not attached to particular factories but working on contracts through the Art Fund.⁴⁰ Using their limited time in the laboratories to the utmost, artists produced sophisticated, playful and sometimes paradoxical works and thus questioned the accepted notions that irritated some art critics and excited others.

Neodecorativism signalled the need for decorative artists to reconsider their professional criteria. Symptomatically, 'Our Criteria' was the title of an article by critic K. Makarov, published in November 1967 as a reflection on the latest experimentations by decorative artists. In a reversal to the 1950s portrayal of honest 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 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 form. Bottles, flasks and cups exist today not for wine, vases not for flowers, carpets not for warming the living space, spinning wheel not for spinning, and chandeliers with candles not for lightening the house.⁴¹

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 artist is honest in his or her choices, the artworks are not any more required to honestly express function. 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. Purely decorative objects were now rehabilitated, and beauty emancipated from the dictate of utility.

One of the most vivid examples of neodecorativism is Leningrad glass-making, in particular the work of Boris Smirnov. A versatile architect and designer, Smirnov had experience in the 1920s Constructivism and by the mid-1960s was the Chief Designer at Leningrad State Optic Institute and the Head of Glass and Ceramics Department at Leningrad School of Art and Industry. In that time he was increasingly interested in the tradition of Ukrainian blown glass (*gutnoe steklo*) and, together with his Leningrad and Moscow colleagues, mastered traditional techniques at the experimental workshop of Ceramics and sculpture factory in Lviv.⁴² His 'Tea couple' of colourful glass, implemented by L'viv glassblowers, can be termed 'decorative sculpture'. It represents a small teapot placed on the top of a larger one – a method of making tea that VNIITE designers criticized as 'unhygienic' in the same year. Critic Natalia Titova praised its work for 'diversity and mirth of colours',⁴³ while the author himself referred to the images of a traditional Russian tea-room, celebrated in the famous late 19th century plays by Aleksandr Ostrovsky and paintings by Boris Kustodiev⁴⁴ – that is, the images of pre-revolutionary lower urban classes and merchants, whose tastes art reformists (including Smirnov himself) had criticized just a few years earlier. Openly declaring his intention to amaze the viewer, Smirnov referred not to the

tricks of commercial production, but to the tradition of peasant art: 'Amazement is the folk principle. Take everything from fairy tales to ceramics and glassware: all these aim to amaze. This is what an artist should provide... Where amazement appears, art begins.'⁴⁵ As it is clear from Smirnov's later writing, these ideas were influenced by the concept of defamiliarization, famously developed by literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky in 1916. Following Shklovsky, Smirnov saw a designer's task in disrupting the automatism of everyday actions through defamiliarizing habitual forms and inspiring people to reflect on their daily life, to think creatively.⁴⁶ Thus, Smirnov claimed that he could not imagine a viewer who would perceive his decorative work as 'real teapots.'⁴⁷

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 can be considered an emblem of neodecorativism. Definitely, the 'Tea couple' was a far cry from the ergonomic and highly functional teapots designed at VNIITE: it was of no practical help to a Soviet housewife, but, as Smirnov would argue, was of importance to 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 utility' – quite possibly, under the influence of semiotics and the idea of objects as signifiers rather than just utilitarian things, promoted in design circles by literary scholar Dmitrii Segal.⁴⁸ 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 the objective-spatial environment' and elevates people's feelings.⁴⁹ 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 or her 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 industrial design and decorative art were being differentiated, Makarov reasoned, the latter tended to elaborate objects for contemplation and aesthetic pleasure.

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. Made of transparent colourless glass, it was decorated with a stylized image of three harnessed horses – the traditional Russian *troika* – by the method of sand blasting [3]. 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?'⁵⁰ In the time when VNIITE employees, following Western thinkers like Reyner Banham, discussed the prospects for synthetic built environment, where functions are not tied to particular objects,⁵¹ 'new decorativists' offered objects not tied to particular functions. [INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

To be precise, neodecorativism 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' [4], 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.⁵² In this statement, joy, or pleasure – 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. [INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Probably, the most vivid pronouncement of neodecorativism in Leningrad glass is Smirnov's 'Festive table,' first exhibited in 1967 – a large composition of coloured free-blown glass, consisting of multiple objects, hardly attributable to customary categories [5]. 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 various demons, as well as to traditional vessels for a peasant feast.⁵³ While producing, as critic Irina Uvarova noted, the overall impression of a traditional trade fair,⁵⁴ 'Festive table' can be also seen as a (self-)ironic commentary on the modern urbanite's fascination with tradition and penchant for spontaneous play as a retreat from order and rationalism (especially poignant given Smirnov's position as chief designer of the Leningrad State Optics 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.'⁵⁵ 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.'⁵⁶ 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, famous for his provocative objects that betokened postmodern design.⁵⁷ [INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

A large 1968 exhibition 'Decorative art of the USSR,' where Biakov's 'Troika' spurred a debate, was the triumph of neodecorativism. The exhibition was highly attended.⁵⁸ Visitors' responses were mixed: some complained about unavailability of the exhibited commodities,

some found them unsuitable for daily use; others, on the contrary, praised colourfulness and diversity, and still others wanted more sophisticated decoration.⁵⁹ About two-thirds of *DI SSSR* January issue of 1969 featured reviews of this exhibition and reflections on new directions for decorative art. Kramarenko positively admitted the arrival of 'a special genre of decorative-unique art.'⁶⁰ Defending the anti-utilitarianism of recent art, Makarov welcomed the 'division of labour' 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 [industrial] design, decorative art broadens its special rights in the synthesis, thus pressing monumental art to focus on certain urgent ideological tasks.'⁶¹ The concern with new synthesis became a publically pronounced justification of decorative artists' existence as professionals within Soviet field of (cultural) production.

Neodecorativism signalled art professionals' disappointment with the populist aspirations of the Khrushchev era and, evidently, their 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 neodecorativist objects were produced more for the authors' colleagues than for 'the people.' Probably neodecorativism 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 built and natural environment. And yet, the practitioners of neodecorativism hoped for an impact on the viewer/consumer. 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.’⁶² 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 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 artwork, not the values of everyday life objects.⁶³

From this perspective, neodecorativism seems like a new, post-Constructivist attempt to create an alternative to a capitalist commodity in spite of the stubbornness of Soviet industry: an affective object, not reproducible on mass scale, but responsive to people’s longing for beauty and amazement.

Conclusion

The Soviet orientation towards industrial design as a tool of scientific and technological progress and a Cold War weapon did not bring traditional decorative art to a halt. Far from being a trivial and marginal sphere, Soviet decorative art in the 1960s became a forum for commentary on the fundamental challenges of Soviet modernity, such as the place of individuality in the world of uniform mass production and consumption, the fate of traditional crafts in industrial age, the role of diverse folk motives in Soviet cultural internationalism and the meaning of sincerity and emotional connection in a socialist society guided by Party dogmas. Working within the framework of Soviet institutions and policy guidelines, decorative artists and critics of the 1960s advocated the personal freedom of artists and of ordinary people without explicitly resorting to the language of human rights and civil society.⁶⁴ At the same time, the recourse to play and spontaneous expression as a means to handle recent social and political traumas and the current pressure of modern rationalism unites Soviet decorative artists with post-war designers and architects across the

globe.⁶⁵ Thus, neodecorativism was a response to both the Soviet and the global situation with arts and politics. Of special importance is neodecorativism's concern with traditional arts and cultural diversity, which can be studied further in comparison with contemporary Western interest with the vernacular: this is a fruitful subject for the incipient field of global design history.⁶⁶

¹ S. E. Reid, 'Destalinization and Taste,' 1953-1963,' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 177–201. IU. Gerchuk, 'The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64),' in S. E. Reid and D. Crowley (eds), *Style and Socialism: Modernity and material culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, Berg, Oxford, 2000, pp. 81-100; Y. Karpova, 'Accommodating Design: Introducing the Western Concept into Soviet Art Theory in the 1950s – 60s,' *European Review of History – Revue européenne d'histoire*, Vol. 20, no. 4, 2013, pp. 627-47.

² Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2171. l. 3.

³ V. Runge, *Istoriia dizaina, nauki i tekhniki. Kniga vtoraiia*, Arkhitektura-S, Moscow, 2007, p. 285; D. Azrikan, 'VNIITE, Dinosaur of Totalitarianism or Plato's Academy of Design?' *Design Issues*, Vol. 15, no. 3, 1999, pp. 45-77.

⁴ S. E. Reid, 'Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home,' *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, Vol. 47, no. 1/2, 2006), pp. 227-68.

⁵ Reid, 'Destalinization and Taste'; V. Buchli, 'Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against 'Petit-bourgeois' Consciousness in the Soviet Home,' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 61-176.

⁶ A. Kurg, 'Feedback Environment: Rethinking Art and Design Practices in Tallinn During the Early 1970s,' *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture/Studien für Kunstwissenschaft*, no. 1-2 (20), 2011, pp. 26-58; M. Laamanets, Art Against Art. Rethinking the Role and Position of the Artist in Estonian Art in the 1970s, *Ibid*, pp. 59-97; D. K. West, 'CyberSovietica: Planning, Design and the Cybernetics of Soviet Space, 1954-1986 Ph. D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2013; T. Cubbin, 'The Domestic Information Machine: Futurological Experiments in the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1968–76,' *Home Cultures*, Vol. 11, no. 1, 2014, pp. 5–32; A. Kurg, 'The Prehistory of Contemporary Environment: Multimedia Program in the ICSID' 75 Congress in Moscow,' in N. Podgorskaya et al (eds.), *The Islands of Yuri Sobolev*, The Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2014, pp. 274-78. New directions in Soviet design studies were discussed at the conference (De)Constructing Utopia: Design in Eastern Europe from Thaw to Perestroika, May 2-3 2014, Sheffield University, <https://deconstructingutopia.wordpress.com> accessed 18.01.2016.

⁷ The lack of comprehensive design terminology is a distinctive feature of soviet aesthetics. In the Stalin era and in the early 1950s, the terms 'decorative,' 'applied,' 'decorative-applied' and 'industrial' were used in relation to art unsystematically. The art reformists' attempt to create a comprehensive system of terms resulted in 1962 in a following scheme: decorative art is a sphere encompassing not only applied and monumental art, but also all sorts of decorative works, as well as folk crafts organized in the USSR in the form of artisanal cooperatives ('XX s"ezd KPSS i zadachi dekorativnogo iskusstva,' *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 1, 1962, pp. 1-2. However, by mid-1950s the notion of 'decorative art' narrowed to exclude monumental art and folk crafts, even though this usage remained the subject of debate. In this paper, I use 'decorative art' in the latter, narrower sense.

⁸ N. S. Khrushchev, 'O shirokom vnedrenii industrialnykh metodov, uluchshenii kachestva i snizhenii stoimosti stroitel'stva,' *Moskovskii Stroitel'*, December 28, 1954, p. 1.

⁹ V. Lagutenko, 'Vedushchaia Rol' Zhelezobetona v Industrializatsii Stroitel'stva,' *Stroitel'naia Gazeta*, September 1, 1954, p. 3.

¹⁰ E. Mehilli, 'The Socialist Design: Urban Dilemmas in Postwar Europe and the Soviet Union,' *Kritika*, Vol. 13, no. 3, 2012, p. 652.

¹¹ A. Saltykov, 'Voprosy razvitiia dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva,' *Iskusstvo*, no. 2, 1955, p. 30.

¹² 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. 'Protokol no.9 of 1/1-1921 g. Rabochaia gruppa ob"ektivnogo analiza Inkhuka. Analiz poniatii konstrukttsiia i kompozitsiia i moment ikh razgranizheniia,' private archive, the copy was provided by courtesy of S. Oushakine. The results of this debate were crucial for the development of Constructivism as the movement for integrating art into industrial production and social policy. Like the 1950s discussion of the '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 analysed in a number of scholarly works. For the concise analysis of this debate, see: C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Ct, 1985, pp. 83-94. For the more detailed discussion, based on newly available archival documents, see M. Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2005, pp. 21-60.

¹³ A. Rodchenko, *Opyty dlia budushchego. Dnevnik. Stat'i. Pis'ma*, Grant, Moscow: 1996, p. 152.

¹⁴ Central State Archive of Literature and Art in St. Petersburg (TsGALI SPb), f. 266, op. 1, d. 291, ll. 72-89.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ TsGALI SPb, f. 266 op. 1, d. 291, l. 82.

¹⁷ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 4, d. 287, l. 56.

¹⁸ 'Iskusstvo v byt,' *DI SSSR*, no. 6, 1961, p. 5.

¹⁹ TsGALI SPb, f. 78, op. 5, d. 413, l. 10.

²⁰ 'Iskusstvo v byt.'

²¹ S. Gurov, 'Dlia vashego doma,' Central Red Banner Studio of Documentary Films, 1962, Russian State Archive of Cine- and Photo-documents, d. 18199.

²² Reid, 'Khrushchev Modern,' 255-67.

²³ L. Nevler, 'Tut vse gorazdo slozhnee,' *DI SSSR*, no. 3, 1963, p. 29.

²⁴ M. Ladur, 'Zametki redaktora' *DI SSSR*, no. 1, 1965, 1.

²⁵ V. Glazychev, '1968 god – ot osnovaniia 'DI SSSR' odinadtsatyi,' *DI SSSR*, no. 1, 1968, p. 21.

²⁶ R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1966. It is safe to presume that people like V. Glazychev (see next endnote), who attentively followed Western literature and had strong reading skills in English, became familiar with this book soon after it was published.

²⁷ Leading reporters on the latest development of Western design were architect V. Glazychev (who studied in Warsaw in 1961-62 and in 1968 defended his dissertation 'Social Function of Design in the System of Modern Capitalism') and art historian Larisa Zhadova (who, thanks to her status as a daughter of high-ranking military commander and the wife of celebrated poet Konstantin Simonov, could travel to Western Europe and collect first-hand information). See for example: V. Glazychev, 'Zhurnal Domus,' *DI SSSR*, no. 9, 1966, pp. 41-43; L. Zhadova, 'Skul'ptirnyi dizain Italii,' *DI SSSR*, no. 1, 1969, pp. 41.

²⁸ D. Segal, 'Mir veshchei i semiotika,' *DI SSSR*, no. 4, 1969, pp. 38-41.

²⁹ Cybernetics is an interdisciplinary field, founded by American scientists Norbert Wiener, Warren Sturgis McCulloch and others in the late 1940s and focused on elaborating theories of control and communication in animal and machine behaviour. In the 1950s-60s it was embraced by Soviet scientists and designers, in tune with the spirit of Khrushchev's 'Thaw,' as a radical means of modernizing science and society. At the same time, it appealed to Soviet establishment as a potential tool of comprehensive governance and total control. On the role of Cybernetics in the Soviet design see: West, op. cit.; Kurg, "Feedback Environment," Cubbin, "Domestic Information Machine."

³⁰ Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2082, op. 2, d. 2797, ll. 7-54; d. 2209. The activity of Senezh studio has been thoroughly examined in a recent dissertation by Tom Cubbin: *Soviet Design on the Edge of Utopia: Senezh Studio 1964-1984*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2015.

³¹ M. Ladur, 'Zametki Redaktora,' *DI SSSR*, no. 3, 1965, p. 1.

³² 'Preniia po dokladu t. Stepanovoi 'O konstruktivizme' 22 dekabria 1921 goda,' 1921, typescript, 13 pp., S. O. Khan-Magomedov collection. Quoted in Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, p. 104.

- ³³ Chamotte, or grog – ceramic raw material with high percentage of silica and alumina.
- ³⁴ N. Stepanian, 'Unikal'nye obrazy i khudozhestvennaia promushlennost', *DI SSSR*, no. 6, 1965, pp. 2-6.
- ³⁵ Iu. Gerchuk, 'Buria v stakane bez dna,' *DI SSSR*, 1969, no. 2, pp. 45-47.
- ³⁶ L. Kramarenko, 'O tvorchestve Shushkanovykh,' *DI SSSR*, no. 7, 1966, pp. 27-29.
- ³⁷ This interest to folk art was also internationalized in terms of professional dialogue. In July 1965 *DI SSSR* sent the poll 'Folk Art in the Age of Automatics' to artists, designers and curators based in Eastern and Western Europe, as well as in 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 industrial societies.
- ³⁸ N. Titova, 'Khudozhniki eksperimentiruiut,' *DI SSSR*, no. 11, 1966, pp. 20-22; J. Gusarova, "Leningradskaia keramika kak Fenomen Otechestvennoi Kul'tury Vtoroi Poloviny XX veka" (PhD Diss.: Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, 2011), 55-58.
- ³⁹ 'O krasote i pol'ze – eshche raz,' *DI SSSR*, no.4, 1969, pp. 38-41.
- ⁴⁰ TsGALI SPb, f. 78 op. 4. d. 408, l. 51.
- ⁴¹ K. Makarov, 'Nashi kriterii,' *DI SSSR*, no. 11, 1967, p. 11.
- ⁴² Titova, 'Khudozhniki eksperimentiruiut.'
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ L. Karateev, 'Vsesoiuznaia vystavka dekorativnogo iskusstva,' *DI SSSR*, no. 9, 1970, p. 6.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Titova, op. cit., 21. This idea received further development in Smirnov's 1970 book: B. Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, Khudozhnik RSFSR, Leningrad, 1970.
- ⁴⁶ B. Smirnov, *Khudozhnik o prirode veshchei*, Khudozhnik RSFSR, Leningrad:, 1970.
- ⁴⁷ Karateev, op. cit., p. 6.
- ⁴⁸ Segal, op. cit.
- ⁴⁹ Makarov, 'Nashi kriterii,' p. 11.
- ⁵⁰ G. Kapelian, 'O krasote i pol'ze – eshche raz,' *DI SSSR*, no. 6, 1968, p. 2.
- ⁵¹ V. Loktev, 'O dinamicheskom funktsionalizme,' *DI SSSR*, No. 1, 1966, pp. 6-8; K. Kantor, *Krasota i pol'za*, Iskustvo, Moscow, 1967. For a detailed discussion of this research at VNIITE, see Cubbin, 'The Domestic Information Machine.'
- ⁵² L. Kramarenko, 'Prazdnik vokrug tebia,' *DI SSSR*, no. 12, 1969, p. 5.
- ⁵³ Boris Smirnov, 'Krizis? Chego?,' *DI SSSR*, no. 12, 1969, pp. 27-29.
- ⁵⁴ Irina Uvarova, 'Rus'-67,' *DI SSSR*, no. 12, 1967, p. 4.
- ⁵⁵ Makarov, op. cit., p. 12.
- ⁵⁶ Smirnov, 'Krizis? Chego?,' p. 29.
- ⁵⁷ L. Zhadova, 'Ettore Sottsass,' *DI SSSR*, no. 12. 1969.
- ⁵⁸ Kramarenko, op. cit., p. 5.
- ⁵⁹ 'Govoriat zriteli,' *DI SSSR*, no. 1, 1969, p. 7.
- ⁶⁰ Kramarenko, op. cit., p. 4.
- ⁶¹ K. Makarov, 'Novye formy, novye zhanry,' *DI SSSR* 1 (January 1969): 27-29.
- ⁶² Smirnov, 'Krizis? Chego?,' p. 29.
- ⁶³ Karateev, op. cit., p. 7.
- ⁶⁴ However, there evidently existed interaction between design reformists and human rights activists. Two cases are well known. Boris Shragin in 1968 signed petitions in defence of four Moscow intellectuals accused of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation, thus lost his position at the Research institute of Theory and History of Fine Arts; then he actively published in uncensored periodicals and in 1974 emigrated to the U. S. Irina Uvarova, though not a human rights activist herself, belong to the circles of critically-minded intellectuals sympathetic to the liberal dissident movement; in the 1970s she became married dissident writer Iulii Daniel. Further research is needed on the extent and impact of such interactions.
- ⁶⁵ S. W. Goldhagen and R. Legault, 'Introduction: Critical Themes of Postwar Modernism,' in Goldhagen and Legaut, eds., *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture* (Montréal : Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 11-24.
- ⁶⁶ D. J. Huppertz, 'Globalizing Design History and Global Design History,' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2015, pp. 182-200.

Figure 1. S. Beskinskaia, glassware set “Domashnii,” sulfide glass; E. Ivanova, vase “Romashka”, sulfide glass, both early before 1961. Reproduced/ *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 6, 1961, p. 3, with permission from the Managing Editor of the *Dialog of Arts* magazine.

Figure 2. V. Olshevskii's works (1965). Left to right: decorative vase, chamotte; teapot, faience; sugar bowl, porcelain. Reproduced/ *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 6, 1965, p. 3, with permission from the Managing Editor of the *Dialog of Arts* magazine.

Figure 3. IU. Biakov, object “Troika,” glass, sand blasting, depolishing (1968). Elagin Palace Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph by the author. Reproduced/ *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 2, 1969, p. 45, with permission from the Managing Editor of the *Dialog of Arts* magazine.

Figure 4. V. Gorodetskii, tea set “Blossoming cobalt,” porcelain, underglaze painting (1968). Reproduced/ *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 1, 1969, p. 23, with permission from the Managing Editor of the *Dialog of Arts* magazine.

Figure 5. B. Smirnov, fragment of decorative composition ‘Festive Table,’ coloured glass (1966). Reproduced, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, no. 12, 1967, p. 5, with permission from with permission from the Managing Editor of the *Dialog of Arts* magazine.