Introduction: Soviet things that talk

'A silent speech that things address to us every day in an artistic language is infinitely more convincing than dozens of lectures about aesthetic education, good taste, etc. To make this language of things contemporary and expressive is the exciting but difficult task of an artist.'[1] This was how the Soviet art critic Nina Iaglova opened her article in the journal *Decorative Art of the USSR* in June 1961. Here, 'things' (*veshchi*, material objects) appear as active participants in people's lives, as agents by virtue of being speakers. However, their 'speech' is possible only through the power of human agents – artists. Art infiltrates into everyday life through objects; objects affect everyday life through 'speech' composed by artists; artists educate society in aesthetics through objects.

The interplay between art and the quotidian, between people and objects, described by Iaglova, has also informed recent developments in the humanities and social sciences. The 'material-cultural turn' that emerged in the mid-1980s in archaeology and anthropology converged with critiques in other social sciences and humanities disciplines in the following decade.[2] In the late 1990s–2000s, this resulted in a flow of new theoretical streams that shifted scholars' focus from discourse to materiality and from human to non-human agents (described through 'bio-, eco-, geo-, neuro-, necro-, zoo- concepts', as historian Ewa Domanska summarises).[3] Actor-network theory, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, material feminisms, thing theory and other branches of critical theory offer different reconsiderations of the social and political role of objects. A growing body of scholarship in anthropology, archaeology, history, art history, science and technology studies, and across other disciplines, treats objects not as mere inert possessions or carriers of symbolic meaning, but rather as agents of social relations that communicate with people in various ways, not the least of which is sensory qualities.[4]

Design history and the study of materialities

This non-anthropocentric, post-humanist paradigm offers new perspectives to scholars of design, as well as critical and methodological tools. Since the 1980s, and concurrently with the development of material culture studies, design historians have been increasingly critical of older interpretations that saw design as the elite activity of 'geniuses' which produces the sleek and evocative masterpieces that sit in museum displays. In his seminal book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), the leading scholar of material culture studies, Daniel Miller, criticised design history as a 'bizarre' field of inquiry, 'intended to be a form of pseudo art history, in which the task is to locate great individuals such as Raymond Lowey or Norman Bel Geddes and portray them as creators of modern mass culture'.[5] As Kjetil Fallan notes, design historians accepted this reproach and, moreover, found in it the inspiration to expand their research to consumer practices. The critique within the field of design history was developing at the same time. In her 1987 textbook, Hazel Conway criticised the so-called 'heroic approach' to design history, explaining to students that just as social historians inquire into the lives of various social strata and communities, design historians should do 'more than the study of key figures and key objects' and view design as 'an activity within a social and material context'.[6] A decade later Judy Attfield, Miller's student, dedicated a book to the 'wild things' of everyday life and called for a broadening of the meaning of design to include not just objects as 'celebrities', but also 'that larger part of the designed object's biography when it is no longer sacred, when it forms part of the disordered everyday clutter of the mundane, and joined the disarray of wild things that don't quite fit anywhere – the undisciplined'.[7] Attfield's call proved popular and by the end of the millennium everyday objects appeared central to the history of design.

Over the last two decades a significant number of monographs and articles written by design historians have explored not just everyday consumption, as Attfield proposed, but also intermediary stages between production and consumption: manufacture, marketing, distribution, retailing and reception.[8] This prompted the inclusion of various mediators such as 'dealers, distributors, sales managers and product testers' as agents of the design process. Many of these studies also demonstrate a sensitivity to the sensory qualities of objects,[9] and with the recent turn towards global and transnational design history, scholars have also incorporated the role of materiality in design and consumption outside of the Euro-Atlantic world.[10] Further, the recent interest in the environmental aspects of design and in sustainability as a part of design culture has prompted inquiry into the post-consumption life of objects, such as disposal, recycling and reuse.[11] Fallan argues that this latter trend in particular can benefit from new

materialist optics in reconsidering the history of interrelations between humans, objects and nature.[12]

This decentralisation of 'heroic' designers and increased attention to materiality provides broad opportunities for examining design under state socialism. While collectivist institutional culture and planned economies precluded designers from obtaining full-fledged individual recognition, let alone stardom, material culture and consumption continuously preoccupied the minds of state and Party authorities, experts of different profiles and ordinary people. However, state socialism not only provides fertile soil for 'new materialist' and 'object-oriented' design histories. It also offers a theoretical precedent: the concept of a 'comradely object'. This idea developed within the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and proved resilient, lasting well into the late Soviet period.

Comradely objects and overlooked subjects

One branch of the Russian avant-garde in the early 1920s is known as 'productive art' (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*) or 'productivism' (*proizvodstvennichestvo*). At its core was the repudiation of easel and figurative art and the critique of the elevated role of the artist as separate from industrial production. Artists such as Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova and Aleksandr Rodchenko, supported by such theorists as Boris Arvatov, Nikolai Tarabukin and Osip Brik, centred around the avant-garde journal *LEF* (*Left Front of Art*), put forward a vision of the artist as just one of many industrial workers involved in the making of an object. The productivists believed that organising the production process was a crucial task of an artist.[13] Another, no less important role was as a producer of useful objects for the masses rather than pure art for a select public. This vision radicalised the Arts and Crafts movement's call for aestheticising labour by reconceptualising art as 'intellectual-material production',[14] and at the same time proposed an alternative to a capitalist commodity by promoting the self-conscious creation of objects for everyday consumption. In opposition to seductive commodities – or as Rodchenko called them, 'dark slaves' of the market[15] – the socialist object was to be modest and utilitarian, clearly manifesting the way it was produced, that is, the labour invested in it. According to productivist theorists and artists, the structural transparency of an object would eliminate commodity fetishism and stimulate rational and 'comradely' relations between people and objects. As Boris Arvatov argued in 1926,

> The exposure of the methods of artistic skill, the liquidation of fetishist 'mystery', the transfer of these methods from the artist-producer to a consumer – this is the only condition for the disappearance of the age-old border separating art and practice. Artistic products, which exist within *byt* [everyday life] and develop together with it, thus cease to be distinguished from the rank of 'unique objects'…[16]

In another article, Arvatov envisioned socialist objects of the future as dynamic things, similar to Western objects such as moving staircases and sliding doors in American public buildings, but integrated into the socialist economy and daily life. For Arvatov, the socialist object was to become 'an instrument and a co-worker'.[17]

Christina Kiaer's impressive study of the objects of Russian Constructivism (an avant-garde stream that included productivism) indicates that the idea of the 'comradely object' not only opposed the commodity culture of capitalist countries, but also responded to the partial revival of market mechanisms under the New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced by Lenin in 1921 as a temporary measure to develop the economic basis for a Soviet industry ravaged by the Civil War. As Kiaer suggests, NEP policies such as the legalisation of private wholesale and retail trade and private manufacturing 'acknowledged that functioning systems of consumption were the necessary counterparts to modern systems of production, and that a path toward socialism that took consumption into account was more likely to succeed in the conditions that the Bolsheviks faced in 1921'. The ideological opposition to the NEP inspired the productivists to confront the problem of consumer desire with designs for everyday objects such as stoves, babies' bottles or dresses that they viewed as capable of 'fulfilling or amplifying the sensory capacities of the human organism'.[18] The curtailment of the NEP in the latter half of the 1920s and the launch of a full-scale industrialisation campaign was followed by the restriction of such cultural policies and a ban on independent artistic movements, so these comradely objects did not reach a mass audience through mass production as the productivists had planned.

However, what happened to productivism after Stalin's death? In the late 1950s Soviet cultural policies softened and opened, though only moderately, to international influences, and the state proclaimed a new dedication to improving living standards. My hypothesis is that these changes allowed for the resurrection of the theoretical foundations of productivism and the revitalisation and spread of those design philosophies into the socialist material culture and everyday life of Soviet Russia. I will demonstrate how the objects designed in the late socialist period – from dinnerware to vacuum cleaners – echoed the avant-gardist dream of a well-organised and socially impactful material culture.

This book, therefore, examines the second historical attempt to create comradely socialist objects, instituted as a response to burgeoning Western consumer culture that was being used as a tool of soft power in the cultural Cold War.[19] Methodologically, I combine the insights of new materialism and recent design histories with the theoretical framework of Soviet productivism. In addition, I engage with an idea from Russian avant-garde's literary theory, the 'biography of the object', which Serguei Oushakine reads as one of the precursors to new materialist thinking.[20] In his 1929

essay, the critic Sergei Tretiakov coined the term 'biography of an object' as an innovative method for creating a literary plot. Tretiakov argued that an object passing through a range of people acts as a measure of collective emotions and the dynamics of social relations.[21] 'Object biographies' resurfaced in the 1980s' 'material-cultural turn'[22] and inspired an interest in everyday things in a new cohort of design historians such as Attfield.

However, despite drawing on Tretiakov's concept, it is beyond my capacity to follow all the stages of the biographies of late Soviet objects. The history of consumption and daily life under state socialism is a burgeoning field of inquiry with contributions from historians and anthropologists.[23] However, few studies consider the materiality of objects and the interrelation between design, production, mediation and consumption.[24] This would be a challenging task, because recurrent problems in the Soviet planned economy – such as quantitative indicators of performance, poor supply of raw materials, and lack of coordination between industry and retail trade – precluded the smooth implementation of designs into consumption. This contrasted with the situation in East Germany, where designers were moderately successful in getting their projects implemented and so as to reach people's homes, as Katharina Pfützner indicates in her recent book.[25] Accordingly, the scholarship on socialist design, since it began in the late 1990s, has focused on normative statements by artists, designers, architects and critics concerning what makes good taste, and how this was disseminated through mass media and exhibitions in museums and galleries and at national and world fairs. Though identifying a range of complex issues, these studies mostly provide a narrative of a state-sponsored drive towards functionalism and against 'petty-bourgeois' tastes and 'excessive' decoration.[26] These studies have mostly focused on the period of Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, when the Soviet Union positioned itself as a modern state *inter pares*, encouraged the development of certain modernist trends in art and architecture, and recognised design as a full-fledged profession. As Susan E. Reid aptly summarises, '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'.[27]

From the second half of the 2000s, a younger generation of scholars has been complementing and expanding the narrative of the 'Khrushchev modern', often tracing design developments after the early 1960s. They have explored the tensions within design reformism, identified earlier by Reid: tensions between artistic individuality and mass production, between folk traditions and advanced industry, and between professionals' critical thinking and the necessity to fulfil Party guidelines.[28] My book contributes to this body of scholarship by examining the dynamic relations between objects and those human subjects, who have not received nearly as much

attention as Western 'celebrity' designers. Soviet designers worked as collectives and representatives of institutions, sectors, bureaus and factories – a system that the director of the Moscow Design Museum, Alexandra Sankova, considers to be a historical injustice.[29] Anonymity was typical of industrial designers under state socialism. The names of decorative artists were usually known from exhibitions, but the marginal status of these artists in Soviet artistic communities diminished their social outreach and fame.

My intention, however, is not to 'restore justice' through a 'heroic' approach to Soviet design by finding some unrecognised Soviet Raymond Lowey. Rather, I speak to the ongoing scholarly discussion concerning the position of professionals under state socialism and contest the dual image of them as either repressed, innocent intellectuals (a label usually applied to avant-garde artists)[30] or as opportunistic collaborators with the regime.[31] A number of recent studies provide a more balanced view, presenting professionals' diverse strategies for navigating Soviet institutions and ideological guidelines, and creating spaces for debate and critique within the official culture.[32] Likewise, I argue that Soviet artists, designers and critics could be dedicated to the improvement of people's everyday lives while also seeking opportunities for professional recognition, or could adopt certain forms of institutional critique without becoming dissidents. My desire to provide a nuanced picture of people who cared about household objects in difficult political circumstances is precisely what drives the inclusion of both human and inanimate agents in this analysis.

The discrepancy between the designers' visions of highly functional, rational objects and the shabby, monotonous pool of available commodities has become a commonplace element of studies of Soviet design. Looking at alternative design communities, not directly related to economic guidelines, appears to be a more rewarding task than venturing into the routine of designing household objects. Tom Cubbin's recent book explores precisely such an alternative community – the Senezh Experimental Studio, which was affiliated with the Artists' Union of the USSR but whose members were critical of institutional Soviet culture and expressed alternative visions of socialist everyday culture through their conceptual work in interior, exhibition and graphic design.[33] My book examines the heterogeneity of Soviet design from a different perspective: the contesting ideas of objects, their uses, their social roles and their power to transmit messages from designers to consumers – or the power to subvert these messages. Tracing the implementation of this vision in production, retail trade, mass media and consumption is a task that would require extensive archival and oral history research in multiple geographical locations: the concentration of certain industries in specific Soviet regions meant that objects had to travel long distances before reaching consumers, if they ever did. An added complication is that factory

archives rarely preserve records of the production of specific prototypes. The full story of the production of late Soviet objects requires the inclusion of those who gained even less recognition than designers: engineers, technical workers and craftspeople of different backgrounds. This book, therefore, can be taken as the beginning of a longer story, outlining how everyday objects were conceived and presented in institutional reports, in the press and at exhibitions.

Terminological challenges

As is well known, the term *design* is broad: it may mean anything from decorative work to form-giving in mass production to the many ways of finding optimal solutions to complex problems in the information age.[34] The concept of the object, on which this book is centred, highlights the material aspect of design across modes of production: different industries, semi-mechanised manufacture and handicrafts. Accordingly, 'design' is understood here not as a 'universal project-oriented activity'[35] but, instead, in the materialist sense proposed by Judy Attfield: as 'just one aspect of material culture of everyday life'.[36] Yet, as I have explained, unlike Attfield's inquiry into the post-production stages of the life of objects, I focus on pre-production and production stages of objects, including other material structures such as interiors or complexes of objects (so-called 'design programmes').

My preference in referring to the *object* over the *thing* as the central concept of this book derives from the new materialist distinction between two concepts that have a long tradition, beginning with Heidegger. In short, things are often presented as 'larger' than objects, as material entities irreducible to their functioning in human everyday life. Since my book focuses on design professionals' ideas concerning the material culture of daily life, *object* is a more appropriate operative term. However, I use the term 'things' when I need to emphasise the limits of designers' intentions to rationalise consumption and everyday life. This distinction is helpful in analysing Soviet professional discourse, which was based on an ambiguous vocabulary. Soviet design professionals usually used the term *veshch* (pl. *veshchi*), which can be translated both as 'object' and 'thing' (the latter can be used similarly in an abstract, non-material sense). Another popular and similarly ambivalent term was *predmet*, which means object, but can also be used in the sense of 'subject', like 'the subject of conversation'. My aim is to identify and characterise the gradations of meaning behind either usage among Soviet designers. For example, in the quote opening this introduction, critic Nina Iaglova acknowledges the possibility that objects might have a message larger than the designers' intention and that artists may act as interpreters rather than masters and creators of *veshchi*. The interplay between the two meanings of *veshch* is perhaps the most

interesting aspect of the second historical attempt to create a socialist material culture that commenced in the 1960s.

In addition to a professional design vocabulary, Soviet material culture was affected by economic categories. Household objects, together with sports equipment, musical instruments and other accessories for leisure activities, constituted the category *tovary kul'turno-bytovogo naznacheniia* (commodities of cultural and everyday purpose), which was a subcategory of *tovary shirokogo potrebleniia* (consumer goods or commodities). However, this terminology appeared in design professionals' parlance rather infrequently, usually when they discussed retail trade and consumption, the desired targets of their work. For analytical purposes, I use the terms 'commodity' and 'consumer goods', but they do not apply to the entire area of professional activity considered in this book. My focus is on the different attempts to address the problematic nature of commodity culture in socialist society and to create non-capitalist commodities, or even non-commodities.

A late Soviet object could not entirely belong to commodity culture. This was not only because of its subjection to the planned economy, but also because of its proximity to the category of art. The complex interrelations between art, design and production is a crucial theme of this book. It poses another terminological challenge: finding a vocabulary for artists' efforts to create a world of comradely objects. The terms *decorative art* (*dekorativnoe iskusstvo*) and *applied art* (*prikladnoe iskusstvo*) became popular in Russia from the mid-nineteenth century under the influence of the European, primarily British, movement for art reform, prompted by rapid industrialisation and mass production. In Russia, both terms were associated with the decoration of objects mass-produced for utilitarian use and, more broadly, with the establishment of art and industry schools and the reorganisation of peasant craftsmen into cooperative handicraft workshops beginning in the 1860s, a process that reached its peak at the turn of the century.[37] In the education of decorative and applied artists, the main emphasis was placed on the meticulous study of traditional Russian and European ornaments, understood as decisive stylistic elements. The promotion of artisanal industry also played a role in popularising traditional ornaments. The leftist artists of early Bolshevik Russia, especially productivists, dismissed this approach as backward and described it pejoratively as *prikladnichestvo* ('corny craft') and *ukrashatel'stvo* ('kitsch decoration'). After the reform of artistic organisations in the early 1930s, accompanied by the condemnation of avant-garde movements as 'bourgeois', the terms *dekorativnoe iskusstvo* and *prikladnoe iskusstvo* were used more frequently, but usually to describe minor forms of art, secondary to painting and sculpture. At the same time the Soviet artisanal industry was instrumentalised for souvenir production and to showcase the diversity of traditional crafts in the Soviet republics.[38]

After Stalin's death, art professionals had to modernise this terminology. Aleksandr Saltykov, an expert on Russian religious art and peasant crafts, popularised the somewhat cumbersome term *decorative-applied art* to signify the art of organising everyday life. The term appeared in official names of specialised departments in artists' unions and sections of exhibitions and became part of the official terminology. However, not all of Saltykov's colleagues were satisfied with the term, and theoretical objections and corrections were continually expressed. Many thought that *applied* should instead signify the superficial application of decoration to poorly made utilitarian objects. *Decorative art*, though not totally satisfactory, caused fewer objections.

Drawing the line between 'decorative art' and 'design' is not always easy for a historian of state socialism, and neither was it for the protagonists of my story. Therefore, the choice of term is conditional in every instance. When speaking about the projects of the main Soviet design organisation, the All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE), I use 'design' as a shortcut for 'industrial design' – the activity concerned with the visual coherence, functionality, economic feasibility and user-friendliness of industrially produced objects. In the chapters dedicated to the artistic work on limited-edition or unique objects in traditional materials (e.g. ceramics, glass, textiles), I find *decorative art* to be the most succinct term, not least because my protagonists chose it as a compromise in terminological battles. In general discussions, I use the term 'design' with what Glenn Adamson et al. call an 'ecumenical attitude'[39] – that is, inclusively. I understand design as the creative work aimed at producing various objects. This choice of terminology is, I believe, the most useful in a book centred on the biography of objects across different professional settings before the consumer stage (which, in many cases, never occurred). In accordance with this choice, the umbrella term 'design professionals' will appear throughout the chapters to include decorative artists, designers and critics.

A historical overview of Soviet design

The 1920s productivist vision of the artist as a producer of 'comradely' objects waned and eventually dissipated with the state's campaign for centralising art policies in the early 1930s. This period was marked by rapid industrialisation and mass mobilisation. The Soviet state promoted modest luxury objects as the reward for the hard work of outstanding workers, technical specialists and engineers; these objects were often decorated with conventional ornaments.[40] Beginning in 1932, with the (in) famous resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party 'On the reconstruction of literary and artistic organisations' (23 April 1932),[41] the avant-gardist idea of the artist as an organiser of life gave way to the

view of the artist as a collaborator with power, obedient to the tastes of the Party leaders. Visual artists were now expected to celebrate the Soviet 'bright future' in paintings, sculpture, graphic arts, monumental art (frescoes, mosaics or tapestries), and by decorating public interiors, city squares, parades and festivals. In the field of transportation and military hardware design, specialists responsible for the appearance of items and how this connoted their practical function were not called 'designers' but 'constructors' (*konstruktory*).[42] Their activity was perceived as purely technical and not aesthetic; the predominant criteria for their designs were practicality, durability and economic considerations.[43] The sole Soviet art journal *Iskusstvo* did not pay attention to their work, as its editors did not even regard it as related to aesthetics.

This did not mean the end of design, however. After 1932, many of the survivors of the avant-garde movement found refuge in set design, book illustration, clothing design and organising public celebrations. Soviet industrialisation and the thriving of transport engineering created a need for designers of vehicle interiors – ships, boats, aeroplanes, trams – many of whom came from architectural backgrounds. For example, the architect Iosif Vaks, an employee of the Leningrad Research and Project Institute of House Building and Civil Engineering (Lenproekt) in the 1940s–1950s, designed interiors for a number of passenger ferries and a tram car manufactured by the Leningrad car-repair plant.[44] Engineering and decorative art had little in common at that time: the former was oriented to solving utilitarian tasks, the latter to creating new socialist 'beauty'.[45] No systematic guidelines for creating different types of material objects existed at that time.[46]

However, the first steps towards establishing a design profession in the USSR were made in the midst of the Second World War in the besieged city of Leningrad: Vaks, then a camouflage-maker for the air division of the Baltic Fleet, recognised the need to train specialists for the restoration of damaged monuments and buildings after the war's end. In October 1943, with the support of the chief architect of Leningrad, Nikolai Baranov, Vaks obtained permission from the executive committee (Ispolkom) of the Leningrad Soviet of workers' deputies to establish a school of art and industry, based on the model of the Central School of Technical Drawing, which had been liquidated in 1922.[47] The LKhU (Leningrad Art School) officially opened, with the sanction of the Council of People's Commissars of RSFSR, on 1 January 1944 (a year after the siege had been partially broken).[48] It was staffed by pre-war graduates from the Ilya Repin Institute[49] and the School of Technical Drawing, who had survived the war and whom Vaks summoned from the far-flung destinations they had previously been evacuated to. Notably, the enrolment provided students – 15–18-year-olds who had earlier been evacuated from Leningrad and had now returned to be trained as restorers – with access to free housing, basic clothing and free meals, a real privilege in an exhausted city during wartime.[50]

The next step in making design a profession in the USSR was the governmental resolution 'On preparing cadres for art industry and art-decorative works' in February 1945. This document sanctioned the development of LKhU into a larger institution, the Art and Industry School, named after Vera I. Mukhina (known as the Mukhina School for short), which together with the Moscow Art and Industry School (a revived pre-revolutionary Count Stroganov School of arts and crafts) became the very best of Soviet design education and guided the thirty art-and-industry vocational schools nationwide, with a total of 3,140 students.[51] A parallel development occurred in engineering design, under the guidance of Iurii Soloviev, a son of an aircraft factory director who, thanks to his privileged social position, could influence the decisions of government officials.[52] As a graduate of the Moscow Printing Institute in 1943, Soloviev created and headed the Architecture and Art Bureau under the aegis of the Ministry of Transport Industry in December 1945.[53] The Bureau was responsible for designing public transport including river boats, railway carriages, Moscow trolley buses and, most prominently, the atomic-powered ice-breaker ship *Lenin* (designed in 1953–55).[54]

Meanwhile, some restructuring occurred 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 divided into three sub-sections: decorative-ornamental works, textiles and applied art.[55] This section, like its counterpart in Leningrad, became a centre for vibrant discussion on the social significance of form-giving to useful objects. In early 1953, and increasingly after Stalin's death, when the ideological grip on artistic communities loosened, applied artists argued that their art was as important as painting and sculpture, if not more so. The latter affected Soviet people only in museums and public spaces, they argued, while 'decorative-applied art' permeates everyday life.[56] Such statements resonated with the state leadership, which had already realised in the early 1950s that the improvement of living standards and consumer goods could be an effective instrument for maintaining the public's loyalty and the Soviet Union's positive image vis-à-vis the capitalist West.[57] In October 1952 the XIXth Communist Party Congress outlined directives for the fifth Five-Year Plan, including a large-scale expansion of the state's housing construction programme.[58] The new Party regulations, adopted at the Congress, guaranteed to satisfy 'the constantly growing material and cultural demands of the Soviet People',[59] a promise that necessitated intensive investment in the development of decorative art.

A crucial intersection between the interests of the state and of applied artists was mass housing. The post-war Soviet Union experienced a catastrophic shortage of living space, with barracks and communal flats as standard homes for a large majority of urban dwellers. A new housing

programme had already been developed by the Stalinist leadership, and between 1944 and 1954 some measures were taken. In November 1955 the Party and government issued a resolution 'On the liquidation of excesses in planning and building'[60] that called for the development of uniform housing complexes, the rational use of materials, and that rejected façade and interior decoration in favour of simplicity and economic feasibility. Later the housing decree of 31 July 1957 recognised the right to housing of all Soviet citizens and promised to overcome the housing shortage within 10–12 years. By then every Soviet citizen was to be provided with a separate, though small, flat.[61] People were gradually moving into their new flats and needed to turn them into homes, to furnish them with appropriate commodities, and the state needed experts to control and guide the new inhabitants.

Khrushchev's famous secret speech at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956 greatly affected the development of Soviet design. However incomplete the process was, the de-Stalinisation that followed stimulated the liberalisation 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 of the Russian avant-garde, including productivist art. A key event for the generation of professional design discussions was the First All-Union Convention of Artists, which took place in Moscow from 28 February to 5 March 1957.[62] This Convention not only completed the process of organising the Artists' Union of the USSR. It also responded to the vocal appearance of decorative art professionals by granting them representation on the Secretariat of the new Union's governing board, sanctioning the establishment of 'committees on decorative art'[63] on the governing boards of the Artists' Union of the USSR and the Art Fund (the social organisation that managed state commissions from artists), and founding an unprecedented monthly journal, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR* (*Decorative Art of the USSR*). This journal would become a forum for debates on aesthetics, society and culture in Soviet society virtually until the end of the Soviet Union.[64]

The themes covered by the new journal grew to include the aesthetics of machines and appliances at the same time as the USSR was famously hosting the US national exhibition in the midsummer of 1959. This exhibition familiarised a broad stratum of Soviet society – not just the attendees but all those who followed the press coverage – with the appealing image of Western consumer culture. This momentous event has been described in detail by several historians, particularly emphasising the famous 'kitchen debate' between Khrushchev and the American Vice-President Richard Nixon. The debate made obvious the significance of domestic consumption as a component of political power.[65]

By the end of the 1950s several factors had come together for the emergence of the design profession in the USSR. First, Soviet trade organ-

isations, which provided commodities for export, showed an interest in the commodity culture of western Europe, especially Britain. Second, factory managers were interested in increasing labour efficiency.[66] Third, Iurii Soloviev strove to achieve the recognition and nationwide use of the methods that he practised in his Bureau. At the beginning of 1961 in the wake of the Soviet–British exchange of trade fairs, which included the showcasing of consumer goods, Soloviev travelled to England to learn from British design ideas and practical approaches to industrial design.[67] Upon his return, he managed to convince the stubborn Soviet authorities that industrial design was worth funding as 'a powerful tool to improve the standard of living without substantial investment', stressing its utilitarian aspect.[68] The confluence between the interests of applied artists, engineers, factory managers, trade workers and state leaders resulted in the governmental decree 'On perfection of the products of machine-building industry and commodities of everyday purpose by the means of implementing methods of artistic engineering' in April 1962.[69] Prepared by the State Committee on Science and Technology and formulated mostly by Soloviev, this document sanctioned the establishment of the All-Union Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE), a socialist counterpart to the UK Council of Industrial Design (CoID, est. 1945), with whose work Soloviev was familiar. Not surprisingly, Soloviev became the institute's director (and retained this position until his emigration to England in 1991). The major aim of VNIITE was to develop a comprehensive theory of Soviet design and to establish design guidelines for prototypes for capital and consumer goods, as well as industrial graphics and corporate identity nationwide.[70] The decree authorised the establishment of design bureaus at major factories and regional economic councils and obliged all factories to have an 'artist-engineer' (*khudozhnik-konstruktor*) on the staff. The latter term was used instead of the Anglophone and then-considered capitalist term 'designer', while the term 'design' was considered too vague and was thus replaced by three different terms (these will be explained in Chapter 2). By the end of the 1960s VNIITE had ten regional branches in Leningrad, Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), Khabarovsk, Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk, Vilnius, Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku.[71]

From the start, VNIITE actively strove to build an international network. Its monthly bulletin *Tekhnicheskaia Estetika*, which first appeared in January 1964, regularly featured articles from Western design journals, and each issue was appended with an English summary. Acting as a skilled design diplomat, Soloviev consistently convinced the Soviet authorities to grant his employees access to foreign literature, research trips to the Eastern bloc countries and even, albeit less frequently, to the West. He also secured permission to host foreign designers, including such stars as Raymond Lowey and Kenji Ekuan, and to hold regular design exhibitions in the USSR.[72] From 1965 VNIITE was a member of the International

Council of the Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) and participated in its annual congresses. In 1969 Soloviev was elected vice-president, along with such outstanding designers as Eliot Noyes and Gino Valle.[73] In this capacity, Soloviev organised an international design seminar, 'Interdesign', approved by both the ICSID and the Soviet government, which was held in Minsk, Belarusian SSR, and became an annual event.[74] In October 1975 Moscow hosted the 9th ICSID Congress.[75] In 1987, after years of negotiation, Soloviev convinced the government to authorise the establishment of the Designers' Union of the USSR.[76]

Another major institution related to the design of objects was the Artists' Union of the USSR. Through its regional branches and its Art Fund and through a complex system of workshop cooperatives, artists' retreats and exhibitions, the Artists' Union nurtured a vision of design as aesthetic and artistic, rather than just technical and economic. Even though the administrators of art institutions expected decorative art to act as an aid to traditional artistic industries such as textiles, porcelain, glassware, etc., they continually encouraged decorative artists to participate in general art exhibitions, thus placing their work in the category of visual culture.[77] Moreover, the label 'decorative art' often functioned as a pass for unconventional formal experiments. Decorative artists had more space for expression than their 'easel' colleagues. For example, the textile artist Anna Andreeva recalled working on state commissions for festivals and international exhibitions, where she was granted more freedom than easel painters, muralists and graphic artists. The marginal status of a decorative artist allowed Andreeva to experiment with techniques (such as *trompe-l'œil*) and motifs (such as Latin fonts) that would be unthinkable in 'big' art. As Ksenia Guseva notes, such 'visual experiments would have been impossible if not protected by the very logic of the textile media'.[78] Likewise, glass and ceramic art became leading arenas for daring compositions and imagery in the late 1960s and 1970s respectively, thanks to the 'protection' of the media.[79] Materiality, therefore, was the prerequisite for aesthetic breakthroughs. In addition, like VNIITE, the Artists' Union sponsored interregional and international exchange in the form of exhibitions, symposia, workshops and field trips, all of which stimulated a free flow of ideas that could otherwise prove challenging even in the seemingly safer waters of decorative art.

With all the differences between VNIITE and the Artists' Union in terms of principles, goals and approaches to managing Soviet socio-economic and cultural life, the two were interconnected through their personnel and agenda. Both, though to different extents, addressed the problem of educating the tastes of the Soviet people while also fulfilling their desires as consumers. In the time of Khrushchev's Thaw, both dealt with the organisation of labour and leisure of a society still overcoming the traumas of Stalinism and the Second World War. VNIITE and the decorative-applied art sections

of the Artists' Union played an important part in the post-Stalinist renegotiation of aesthetics and politics (this process may be compared to the efforts of the employees of the famous Ulm School of Design in West Germany to aid in the de-Nazification of culture, as Paul Betts demonstrates).[80] While Soviet design, broadly conceived, included a large number of organisations and institutions at different levels, my book focuses on these two as key players in conceptualising late socialist material culture, which created a space for the breaching of ideology and a debate about what constitutes properly socialist comradely objects.

The geographical challenge

The geographical scope of this study is confined to Soviet Russia to avoid generalisations about the many different republics and regions of the USSR. Even though the design system, like all Soviet institutional structures, was centralised, design developed differently according to each republic's economic situation, local public attitudes to art and craft traditions, and the use (or invention) of these traditions by state-employed specialists.

Needless to say, there was also a great diversity of design and material cultures within Soviet Russia. Regional and local histories of the Soviet era have become an important trend in scholarship, and a case study can reveal striking aspects of Soviet history that are not evident in those studies that only focus on Moscow or Leningrad. Recording the design histories of different Russian regions is a much-needed enterprise. However, arguably, such an enterprise would benefit from building on a general history of theories of objects, and the principles of design that in the Soviet case often started from the centre, and demonstrating how these authoritative guidelines were challenged or influenced by local initiatives. My aim is to provide the basis for such case studies by telling a story based on centrally issued documents and professional periodicals and by exploring the influential art/design collectives based in the two cities that concentrated a lot of creative forces – Moscow and Leningrad. Alternative geographies of Soviet design and material culture that would dispute this book's theses will be extremely valuable for studies of late socialism as well as for the general discussion of the global vs. the local in the history of design.

Chapter outlines

The chapters proceed in a non-linear chronology. They trace the entangled development of the two professional spheres concerned with objects: industrial design and decorative art. Chapter 1 expands on the historical background of socialist objects sketched briefly in this introduction. It introduces the concept of the *aesthetic turn* to describe the gradual

broadening of the meaning of aesthetics after Stalin's death in 1953, which culminated in the early 1960s. The aesthetic turn resulted in the formation in the USSR of what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls an 'aesthetic regime of arts' – a mode of identifying different arts as equal and valuable in their specificity. I will analyse the new aesthetic regime of arts by highlighting its key categories: realism, contemporaneity and taste. These categories acquired new meanings during the 1950s and early 1960s. Realism was then seen as a specific quality of things, not as a way of depicting them. Contemporaneity appeared as a measure of the social relevance of an object. Finally, taste turned into a tool for probing the limits between authenticity and appearance. The chapter draws on professional discussions and designs from the 1950s–1960s to illustrate the new roles of these three categories.

The promise of the Soviet Communist Party and the government to 'fully satisfy the constantly growing material and cultural demands of the Soviet people' was central to the socio-political reformism of Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev. It meant the mobilisation of various specialists in the campaign to increase the quality and quantity of available consumer goods and create a strong alternative to Western consumer culture. While historians have thoroughly explored the role of consumer goods' design during the Cold War, I will focus, in Chapter 2, on the designers' approach to the existing pool of Soviet goods as unruly things that needed to be ordered into rational and well-functioning objects. The chapter will demonstrate how the professional debate regarding the borders between art, technics and everyday life paved the way for theorising industrial design under state socialism while some of its complexities became rapidly outdated with the institutionalisation of the design profession by the government. The chapter further analyses the methodology of VNIITE at the initial stage of its operation and thereby addresses the contradictions of the Khrushchev-era vision of the perfect order of things.

From the early 1950s Soviet decorative artists used their connection to everyday life as the main argument for their highly important status in the Soviet artistic community. The establishment of VNIITE in 1962 seemed like the beginning of a system of clear principles and guidelines for all types of objects and for the many different professionals who helped produce them. Decorative artists and designers all assumed the role of experts in improving material culture and particularly the modern home. This was the apogee of the Khrushchev-era aesthetic turn. However, as recent studies have shown, beginning in around 1965 with the removal of Khrushchev from power, the state and the experts that it employed changed their rhetoric from the praise of standard interiors and rational objects towards the permitting of a diversity of tastes and spirituality as an essential component of daily life. Chapter 3 analyses the mid-1960s' conceptual change in decorative art and argues that it stemmed not only

from the official backlash against Khrushchev's reformist policies, but also from the Soviet designers' responsiveness to the global crisis of modernist aesthetics in the mid-1960s and the rise of the postmodernist critique of design. Comparing works of decorative art from the early and the late 1960s, the chapter reveals the techniques that the artists used in order to criticise the state-sponsored campaign for improving consumer culture. Far from an instrument of state propaganda regarding material well-being under socialism, Soviet decorative art in the late 1960s became a forum for commentary on the fundamental challenges of Soviet modernity. It raised such questions as the place of individuality in the world of uniform mass production and consumption, the fate of traditional crafts in the industrial age, the role of diverse folk motifs in Soviet cultural internationalism and the meaning of sincerity and emotional connection in a socialist society.

Meanwhile, the vision of a socialist object, promoted by VNIITE, was also far from uniform. Chapter 4 identifies the elements of critique in state-sponsored industrial design of the 1970s. It shows that just as VNIITE designers had built a theoretical basis for action by the late 1960s and started developing new prototypes for modern domestic objects, such as vacuum cleaners and refrigerators, they also started to recognise the inadequacy of the object as a basic unit of socialist material culture. Following the theorists of the Ulm School of Design (1953–68) who were critical of American styling and promoted an interdisciplinary approach to design, VNIITE designers tended to see environments, and not objects, as ideal end products of their work. Without abandoning the avant-gardist idea of a comradely object, Soviet designers and theorists dwelled upon another notion of the avant-garde from the late 1960s: the artist as an organiser of all aspects of society's life, including the material environments of work and leisure. After discussing several projects for home appliances from the early 1970s, the chapter explains the notion of a design programme that answered to the interests of both the state and designers regarding the optimisation of life in late Soviet society. Through a case study of an early 1980s design programme, I will demonstrate that this type of designing was at once totalistic and flexible: it tended to regulate broad areas of human activity but also left space for consumer activity and variation.

Finally, the fifth chapter considers the identity crisis of the 1970s–early 1980s, experienced by decorative artists in the system of traditional art industries, state-sponsored workshops and exhibitions. It shows the joint attempt of artists and critics to renegotiate the position of decorative art vis-à-vis industrial design, industrial production and easel art. The proposed solution – the creation of a vigorous interdisciplinary production culture based on mutual respect between artists, engineers, technicians and administrators – proved insufficient to satisfy the decorative artists' creative and critical urges. Even factory-employed artists tended to dissociate themselves from the state-run campaign to improve consumer

products and life standards, instead focusing on consumers' 'spiritual needs'. While this tendency was connected to the rise of neo-traditionalist ideas and anti-Western attitudes among Soviet intellectuals, it was ideologically heterogeneous and was comprised of very different positions and motives. Ceramics came to be the leading arena for the seeking of a non-commodity-based material culture. I follow this role of ceramics through the decade-long activities of a group of Leningrad ceramic artists called One Composition (OK). Founded thanks to favourable institutional circumstances, the group reconsidered what constituted a useful object and questioned the role of decorative artists in a socialist society. Uncomfortable with their position as producers only of utilitarian objects, they advanced the concept of 'image-ceramics'. Limited by modest technical capabilities, the Leningraders tried to achieve the kind of expressive power usually associated with easel art. Though they focused on the symbolic meanings of objects, materiality instantly fascinated and informed them. The internal dynamics of the OK group reflected the tensions between Soviet intellectuals and the state in the early days of political and economic change under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, known as *perestroika*, which would ultimately lead to the disintegration of the Soviet art and design system.

Notes

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