

Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

UK, London.

London College of Fashion, University of the Arts.

Senior Research Fellow.

Великобритания, Лондон.

Лондонский колледж Моды, Университет Искусств.

Старший научный сотрудник.



FROM ARTISTIC UTOPIA TO MYTHICAL REALITY: FASHION UNDER SOCIALISM

Fashion became a despised activity immediately after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, and continued to be ideologically distrusted, since it originated in the West and was part of the rejected bourgeois cultural and commercial heritage. The 1920s constructivist utopia was informed by an urge for a total change in dress and for a total change of the previous gender order. In contrast, fashion was embedded within the Stalinist myth and its general return to history from the 1930s on. As a conventional field of fashion with its market-led activities was abandoned, the concepts of utopia and myth were played out in the field of art. Thus changing aesthetics of dress corresponded to the contemporary artistic expressions. In the utopian phase these included: constructivism, Cubo-Futurism and Russian Art Deco, while Socialist Realism was preferred aesthetics in dress during the mythical period.

Key words: *fashion, utopia, myth, art, constructivism, socialist realism*

От художественной утопии к мифической реальности: мода при социализме

Сразу же после большевистской революции 1917 года мода стала пониматься как презираемая, пустая деятельность, к моде относились с недоверием как к продукту западного, буржуазного образа жизни, культуры потребления. В 1920-е возникает конструктивистская утопия, порожденная стремлением к тотальному изменению платья как такового, и гендерного порядка в обществе в целом. Однако в 1930-е мода возвращается — как часть сталинского мифа. мода не была частью успешной индустрии, в ней не действовали рыночные механизмы, полем ее деятельности стало чистое искусство, где она разыгрывалась по законам утопического и мифологического сознания. В это время изменение эстетики костюма соответствовало изменениям художественных канонов. К утопической фазе можно отнести: конструктивизм, кубо-футуризм и русский ар деко. К фазе мифологической — социалистический реализм.

Ключевые слова: *мода, утопия, миф, искусство, конструктивизм, социалистический реализм*

Following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Russia went through a series of very different socialist practices, from the initial Leninist period, through the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its reintroduction of semi-capitalism in the 1920s¹, to Stalinism which economically and politically centralized the country and isolated it from the West, and to a new political turn introduced by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s, which attempted to abandon Stalinist isolationism and modernize the Soviet Union. Fashion was ideologically suspected throughout these various political and social changes. In the early 1920s Russia, the Con-

structivists fiercely opposed fashion. Politically closed to the Bolsheviks, they embodied Bolshevik anxieties concerning dress as a carrier of status and gender differences. However, there were both genuine efforts and politically motivated attempts to reintroduce fashion in socialism even during that period, as well as afterwards. However, fashion could be acknowledged only when perceived as art. During the historical period of 72 years, dress bowed to different aesthetics, from the Constructivist utopian abstractionism, to the Cubo-Futurist sartorial explorations, to a Russian version of the Art Deco style, and, finally, to the paradigms of Socialist Realism, which started during Stalinism, and remained the official artistic expression until the end of the socialist period. In the following four sections, this essay covers the politically approved appropriations of these four contemporary artistic movements in dress practices under socialism.

¹ The New Economic Policy (NEP) was established in 1921, with a Council of People's Commissars' decree that legalized private trade in a desperate attempt to improve the supply of basic goods in a country exhausted by the political and social disturbances that followed the revolution and the civil war (1918–1921).



Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

Adhering to the Straight Line: Constructivism

Situating the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in a historical context, E. H. Carr stated: “Never had the heritage of the past been more sharply, more sweepingly or more provocatively rejected; never had the claim to universality been more uncompromisingly asserted; never in any previous revolution had the break in continuity seemed so absolute” (Carr 1970: 13). The ideological rejection of the phenomenon of fashion following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution was thus a part of a broader picture. Dress of straight geometrical lines, as promoted by the Constructivists in the 1920s, was informed by an urge for a total change of taste and for a total change of the previous gender order. Constructivist engagement with dress started in theatre, with the costumes that Liubov Popova designed for the play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, and Varvara Stepanova for *The Death of Tarelkin*.² Both Popova and Stepanova used simple cuts of functional overalls and two-colour geometric juxtapositions to achieve dynamic effects, and called their theatre costumes *prozodezhda* (production clothing).³ *Prozodezhda* brought about a huge rupture with the preexisting sartorial practices only when Stepanova decided to move it from the theatre design into the field of total redesign of everyday life. In her article “Today’s Clothing: *Prozodezhda*,” published in the Constructivist journal LEF, she completely rejected decorative pre-revolutionary fashion and insisted on functionality, anonymity, simplicity and efficiency of the new production clothing (1923: 65–68). Stepanova did not specify the shape of her *prozodezhda*; neither did she divide it according to gender. *Prozodezhda* was never mass produced, but four drawings of geometric sports clothing that accompanied her programmatic article demonstrated consistency with her radical theory. Stepanova’s article was delivered in an imperative tone, reflecting the highly ideologized texts of the Constructivists’ manifestos. In her 1921 lecture *On Constructivism* presented at the meeting of the INKhUK⁴, Stepanova had already stated that Constructivism was not an artistic trend but an ideology, and emphasized that a rupture between artistic culture and Constructivism was an intended consequence of the Constructivist programmatic rejection of arts and applied arts.⁵ In this context, for Stepanova, fashionable dress, with its tendency towards decoration, its hand-crafts techniques and its frivolous uses, was innately conservative and backward-looking.

The past was not to disturb the realizations of the Constructivist ideals, and the line leading to their fulfilment was supposed to be straight. In the 1921 booklet *The Line*, Stepanova’s husband and fellow Constructivist, Aleksandr Rodchenko stated that: “... the in-

accurate, trembling line traced by the hand cannot compare with the straight and precise line drawn with the set-square, reproducing the design exactly. Handcrafted work will have to try to be more industrial” (1921: 294). In a theatre journal *Zrelishcha* (*Spectacles*), Emilii Mindlin declared that the “...style of the U.S.S.R. is the straight line!”, and elevated a traditional peasant collarless shirt *tolstovka* to an ideal socialist vestimentary code by stripping down its shape to a network of vertical and horizontal lines which matched the Parthenon’s geometrical structure (Mindlin 1922: 10–11). V. Mass claimed in the same journal that the theatre audiences “have fallen out of love with (Lev) Bakst and have fallen in love with *prozodezhda* ... and are increasingly courting the Constructor Popova” (1922: 8).

Stepanova and Rodchenko strictly adhered to the geometrical cuts in their dress designs throughout the 1920s. The monochrome appearance of a woman’s *prozodezhda* suit in 1924 Stepanova’s drawing, was interrupted only by visible vertical and horizontal lines which accentuated its large pockets, waistline and seams. On the other hand, while Stepanova insisted on austere and functional clothes, her drawings resembled in their geometric cuts modernist shapes of contemporary Western fashion and were clearly influenced by cubist devices such as geometry, flatness, and the plane. Rodchenko designed similar, geometrically-cut costumes for the theatre play *Inga* in 1929.⁶ Its heroine Inga was the director of a sewing factory, thus symbolically pointing towards the fields of dress and textile design, in which the Constructivists especially attempted the merger between art and production. But, by that time Rodchenko understood that Inga’s geometrically cut suits would not automatically transport her in a Constructivist ideal future. Writing in the brochure that accompanied the play, Rodchenko admits that the costumes:

“... are made with the intention of emphasizing Inga’s inherent aestheticism in a search for an yet as unfound rationalization of the female suit. In the costumes demonstrated on the mannequins the question of rationalization is raised, but only theoretically, because of course its solution is an extremely difficult assignment. This question needs work and more work, connecting the artist’s search with everyday conditions” (Lavrentiev 2005: 199).

The constructivist credo, “art into life,” was put in practice only when Popova and Stepanova entered into real production by becoming textile designers in the First State Textile Print Factory in Moscow in 1923. They did not perceive themselves in the restrictive role of applied artists, but as constructivist artists–producers. Adhering to the Constructivist aesthetics, Popova and Stepanova tried to abolish the traditional flower motifs that the factory was still producing and instead proposed novel geometric patterns. Their motifs revealed a rationalized way of thinking, and embodied a desire to organize and structure utopia. Indeed, in their effort to turn the artistic and ideological anarchy of the early Soviet period into an ideal, well-ordered new world, Popova’s and Stepanova’s patterns became ever busier and more and more geometrically complicated. While their new textile patterns evoked the on-going western European fascination with geometry, the differences between their visual languages were embedded in the contemporary ideological and technological differ-

² Both plays were directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold and premiered in 1922 to a huge public acclaim.

³ The word *prozodezhda* merges two words: *proizvodstvennaia* (industrial) and *odezhda* (clothing).

⁴ INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) was founded in Moscow in 1920. Its first president was Vasili Kandinskii, but Rodchenko took over as a president in 1921. The Constructivist group was founded there in the same year. The INKhUK was dismantled in 1924, at the point when the power, which the Constructivists gathered marching through the new artistic institutions, also started to fade away.

⁵ Stepanova’s lecture was mentioned in the programme of the activities of the INKhUK, as taking place on December 22, 1921 (“The Institute of the Artistic Culture”, in: *Russkoe Iskusstvo* (*Russian Art*), 1923, N 2–3, pp 85–88). Stepanova’s lecture on Constructivism is reprinted in Lavrentiev (1988).

⁶ Rodchenko worked on both set decorations and costumes for this production, which was based on Anatolii Glebov’s play *Inga*, and premiered in the Theatre of Revolution in 1929. An accompanying brochure addressed the problems of everyday life. Rodchenko signed his text as ‘worker-creator’.



Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

ences between the West and the East. Western geometric patterns relied on an uneven, hand-traced line, while Constructivist patterns depended on a ruler because an unwavering straight line was the most important element in the Constructivists' visual language. The West visually tried to preserve the presence of the human hand in its highly industrial products, while the Constructivists' craving for a totally industrial design led to the attempt to abolish all traces of handicraft.

While some of Stepanova's and Popova's textile designs were put into production, and some of them were present in retail windows, the artists' minimalist abstract patterns never had a real chance compared to the old decorative floral motifs, either on the factory floor or among the traditionally oriented mass consumers. Moreover, their reliance on a compass and ruler in their design practice was often misunderstood by the factory board as indicating an inability to draw, and they were asked to make their avant-garde designs more acceptable for the mass public. Additionally, the Constructivist fierce approach towards the arts and applied arts was also questioned by their peers. The contradiction between their passionate proletarian position on production art in the combination with their modernist, cosmopolitan aesthetics provoked the strong reactions in Russia. Reviewing the 1925 Paris International Exhibition, a prominent art critic Iakov Tugendkhol'd questioned the identification between Constructivism and a proletarian country, claiming that Constructivism is not an extremely leftist trend, but that it shared its aesthetics with the bourgeois world:

"The exposition has revealed that Constructivism is identifiable equally with bourgeois countries too, where 'leftist' bourgeois bedrooms ...and leftist ladies' coats/manteaux of ermine and sable are being made...Does this mean that the revolutionary ideology is triumphing over the bourgeois consciousness, that it is entering the bourgeois world or, on the contrary, that these principles are not so revolutionary indeed? I would think that the latter is the case" (Tugendkhol'd 1925a: 66).⁷

Tugendkhol'd was well-informed about the avant-garde movements both in the West and in Russia, and very supportive of the Russian artists who engaged in the new artistic dress explorations. Thus, he primarily challenged the Constructivists' ideology, and not their modernist aesthetics. There is no doubt that both Stepanova's manifesto about *prozodezhda* and her textile designs are in many ways modernist statements. In opposing ornament and advocating functionality and efficiency, Stepanova was in line with Adolf Loos' and Le Corbusier's opposition to decoration. But she went much further. Both Loos and Le Corbusier justified certain types of ornamentation, as well as an interest in the arts. Indeed, the Constructivists were the only Modernists who could afford to reject ornament completely, because they rejected history in the first place.

Playing with Triangles and Rectangles: the Sartorial Cubo-Futurism

The Constructivists' ontological rejection of history informed both their rejection of fashion and their purge of traditional decorative flowers in favour of minimalist triangles, circles and rectangles in their textile design. However, apart from their severe Bolshevik

stance, their aesthetics itself was a continuation of their pre-1917 artistic explorations. In fact, prior to the revolution, both Stepanova and Popova had already participated in the Russian avant-garde artistic movement known as Cubo-Futurism, which continued for some time after the Revolution.⁸ Like French Cubists and Italian Futurists, the Russian Cubo-Futurists reduced reality into abstract. But, unlike their western counterparts who favoured muted grey and brown tones, the Russians executed their paintings in dynamic, bold-coloured blocks. This shockingly modern style suited the Bolshevik search for a radically new dress. In general, geometry was the universal visual language of modernity. Its pace and technological achievements were embodied in flatness of the modernist Cubist paintings, as well as in bold geometric textile patterns. Geometric cuts and abstract patterns were appropriated both in the West and in Russia in the 1920s outfits, as they contributed to their modernist credo. In his book on *Cubism and Fashion*, Richard Martin claimed that: "Cubism was a means for fashion to appear modern" (1998:109), enabling it to play an important role in "the twentieth century's burning drive to become modern" (ibid: 111). While ideologically biased against the West, the Bolsheviks shared its modernist urge for change and appreciated the aesthetics that expressed it best. They only needed more pragmatic sartorial solutions than those proposed by the Constructivists, whose concept of the total submission of the arts and applied arts to industry was eventually rejected as too extreme. Yet, the People's Commissar of the Ministry of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii continued to support more realistic and moderate versions of their fusion, as well as other variants of modernist aesthetics in dress and textile design.⁹

In that sense, Nadezhda Lamanova's dress proposals suitably matched the Bolsheviks' cravings for simplicity and functionality in dress, and their dreams of its industrial production. As owner of a famous pre-revolutionary fashion house that was nationalized after the revolution, Lamanova was an unlikely candidate for the main propagandist of a new socialist dress. But, Lunacharskii trusted her with that task¹⁰, and from 1919 on, Lamanova exchanged both her previous rich clientele for the state-sponsored dress initiatives, and her previous voluminous Belle poque aesthetics for flat, Cubist-style sartorial shapes. In her discussion at the First All-Russian Conference on Art and Production in August 1919, Lamanova applied a pragmatic approach concerning a much-discussed merger between art and industry. She claimed that dress was one of the most suitable mediums for the dissemination of art into all the manifestations of the everyday, and called upon artists to design beautiful dresses using plain fabrics, corresponding to the new mode of working life.¹¹

⁸ Cubism developed in Russia into different branches, like Cubo-Futurism and Suprematism, and engaged different artists, from the Constructivists to Kazimir Malevich, Nataliia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov.

⁹ Anatolii Lunacharskii had been a playwright and his wife was an actress. While he was most dedicated to the Bolshevik project, he was also close to many pre-revolutionary artists. Thus, after the revolution, Lunacharskii attempted to attract as many artists as possible for Bolshevik artistic and cultural projects, as long as they did not challenge basic revolutionary values.

¹⁰ Lamanova's activities were embedded in the Subsection of Art and Production within the Fine Art Department (IZO) of the Ministry of Enlightenment. Throughout the 1920s, she was also active in the Academy of Artistic Sciences' proposals which addressed new dress design.

¹¹ Protokoly I Vserossiiskoi konferentsii po khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti (Minutes of the First All-Russian Conference on Art and Production),



Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

Similar to the Constructivists, Lamanova writes about the need to construct modern clothes in her propagandistic articles:

“Thus, before being sewn, a dress must be constructed. In order to construct a dress well, a figure should be mentally divided in into geometric shapes to invoke a clearer image of its proper shape. In projecting the figure onto the plane, and drawing it, we should regard it as a series of planes. If, due to the defects of the figure, these planes are disproportionate, by dividing these planes by other planes of different shapes (for example, by intersecting them with triangles or rectangles), we can achieve a more harmonious correlation of parts, and thus a more constructed silhouette. In contemporary dress, divisions can be used to conceal a long waist, to make a short figure look taller or a tall figure look shorter (by dividing it in two)” (Lamanova 1924: 663).

Yet, Lamanova’s modernist discourse about planes, triangles and rectangles is not over-burdened with ideology. As a practitioner, she wants to use construction in perfecting both the dress and the look of its wearer. Lamanova abandons the phenomenon of fashion, embedded in the rejected bourgeois past, and advocates beautiful dress instead of a fashionable one. But, she does not reject the tradition altogether. In contrast to the Constructivists, she finds dynamism and contrast in ethnic dress, singling out the Ukrainian skirt (*plakhta*), and claiming that its narrow shape around the hips, in the combination with a wide chemise, results in an ingeniously contrasting outfit (*ibid*).

Due to her ideologically susceptible history of an elitist fashion designer, Nadezhda Lamanova could find ethnic sartorial references very useful in her work for the Bolsheviks. In truth, she arrived to the geometric dress shapes through the 1920s western fashions, as her expertise lay in the understanding of fashion and its innate will to sudden changes. On the other hand, the Cubo-Futurists, such as Aleksandra Ekster¹², approached socialist dress design through their pre-1917 artistic practices. In her article “On Construction of Dress”, Ekster also advocates basic geometric triangular and rectangular shapes of clothes as the most suitable cuts for the proletarian masses and their dynamic work conditions and their vigorous lifestyles (Ekster 1923a: 4). Addressing simplicity and functionality in dress in another article, Ekster again emphasizes that the simplest geometrical forms such as the rectangle, the square and the triangle should be used in design of mass-produced dresses (Ekster 1923b: 31). In a true cubo-futurist spirit, she encourages the use of bold colours, as “the rhythm of colours varies the impact of the form” (*ibid*). Ekster further praised “the vivid colours so characteristic of ethnic costume, particularly of the Slavs”, insisting that “the very environment of Russia demands colour: rich, primary colours, moreover, and not mere tones, as, for example, with the diffused colour of France” (Ekster 1923c: 18). Only by relying on its own heritage, Ekster reasoned, Russia could oppose the homogenizing European spirit (*ibid*). Moreover, she stresses: “If one makes intense colour the basic element of the garment, as it happens in Russian

ethnic dress, then by no means should one adopt West European models which are based on a different ideology” (Ekster 1923a: 5).

Such statements were certainly in line with the current political situation, but Ekster’s interest in domestic ethnic dress was embedded in her earlier attempts to merge ethnic tradition and avant-garde. From the early 1910s on, Ekster and her colleague and friend Evgeniia Pribyl’skaia were among the main protagonists in the new aestheticized ethnic style which flourished in the surroundings of the broader modernist interest in peasant themes and naïve art.¹³ In 1923, they were among the founders of a new fashion magazine *Atel’e*,¹⁴ in which Ekster presented her geometric-style dresses in vivid colours and Pribyl’skaia her colourful textile patterns. The latter were hand-stitched and based on ethnic motifs, but Pribyl’skaia stripped down the original motifs to the point when they turned into pure abstracts. In *Atel’e*, both artists were already adopting the emerging aesthetics, which was about to move from the rigorously geometricized shapes and muted tones of Cubism towards the more colourful and more ornamental shapes of Art Deco. Ekster’s biographer Iakov Tugendkhol’d stated that: “...however near she is to cubism, (she) has never been able to kill in herself love of bright and rich colours” (1922: 9). So, when the West gradually started to exchange cubist severity for a much more appealing style of the Art Deco around 1925, some Russian artists had been already experimenting with a new style for some time, and with the full approval of the Bolshevik regime.

Ethnic and Modernist: Bolshevik Art Deco

The Bolsheviks embraced the colourful Art Deco aesthetics and embellished it with reinterpreted ethnic motifs for various reasons. First, their initial attempts to abolish fashion and invent a completely new dress did not succeed by the mid-1920s. Further, the Bolshevik values were under the threat of the advancing NEP culture, as the NEP, by recognizing private ownership and entrepreneurship, signalled the return of capitalistic practices and a bourgeois way of life. In the NEP circles of new-rich Russian capitalists, Western fashion experienced a true revival. Many pre-revolutionary fashion magazines that had been abolished after the revolution reappeared on the market. During the NEP period, the Western-style flapper-dress found itself in the company of jazz and Hollywood movies, as attitudes toward Western bourgeois urban culture shifted. In such a climate, the constructivist textile and dress proposals proved too austere.

Introduced at the beginning of the 1920s by Nadezhda Lamanova and the ethnic expert Evgeniia Pribyl’skaia, ethnic motifs were gradually established as the approved type of embellishment in the new Soviet dress. Their contemporaries Constructivists would never use ethnic motifs as they were marked by the past and tradition, while they planned to re-construct everyday life from zero in a new

¹³ The avant-garde artists adjusted the earlier Art Nouveau aesthetics of Sergei Diaghilev’s journal *Mir iskusstva* (*World of Art*) to the new artistic sensibility. The Futurists, Cubists and Suprematists exhibited not only paintings but also embroidery. Their abstract artistic images were embroidered by peasant women working in a few handicraft enterprises in Ukraine (for an overview, see: Douglas (1999)).

¹⁴ The journal *Atel’e* was started in 1923 by a group of pre-revolutionary artists who attempted to mediate a truce between the Bolshevik project and fashion through the arts and applied arts. Only one issue of *Atel’e* was published.

Moscow, 1920: 37–38

¹² Aleksandra Ekster started as a Cubo-Futurist, moving between Paris, Kiev and Moscow during the 1910s. She worked as painter, and theatre and film set and costume designer before and after the revolution. While she was supportive of the Bolshevik project, and exhibited at the Constructivist exhibition *5X5=25* in 1921, she never shared with the Constructivists their revolutionary zeal.



РУССКАЯ УТОПИЯ / RUSSIAN UTOPIA

Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

geometrical and cosmopolitan order. But, Lamanova, who used Lev Bakst's and Nataliia Goncharova's embroideries in her pre-revolutionary elitist dresses, relied on the past. Elitist dress as such was excluded from the new order, but its strategic positioning in the field of applied arts and crafts was useful to both the designer and the regime. Embedded in such a background, ethnic motifs not only embellished dresses, but granted them an artistic existence in opposition to a fashionable one. However, in order to use ethnic sartorial heritage in the still dynamic, post-revolutionary surroundings of the 1920s Russia, the practitioners of the Bolshevik Art Deco turned an otherwise immutable ethnic motif into a vibrant modernist statement, by purifying it into a neutral geometric pattern.

In 1925, in an attempt to visually compete with the westernized decorativeness of the dresses presented in the NEP fashion magazines, the Bolshevik weekly journal *Krasnaia niva* (*Red Field*) published a supplement *Iskusstvo v bytu* (*Art in Everyday Life*). Drawings for coats, dresses, jackets, ensembles, sports outfits and the pioneer's uniform were accompanied by precise instructions and paper patterns. Produced by Lamanova and the artist Vera Mukhina, this proposal, like their other creative sartorial interventions in the 1920s, was supported by Lunacharskii who was the co-editor of *Krasnaia niva*. Well informed about the current Western fashion trends, Lamanova and Mukhina chose rectangular cuts to achieve clean elongated lines of clothes, decorated either with ethnic applications or accentuated with stripes in contrasting colours. As hardly any fabrics had been on offer in the shops, their linen dresses were, for example, simply sewn from a couple of embroidered towels patched together, suggesting to Soviet women that they could, using towels and tablecloths from their cupboards, make these dresses themselves. Skilfully, Lamanova made the cuts simple for the inexperienced domestic seamstresses, but these were still luxurious outfits. Justifying the high decorativeness of western Art Deco through the use of heavily embroidered traditional ethnic textiles, Lamanova only proved that, in her attempt to reach the masses, she remained an elitist at heart. Yet, these and similar proposals deserved only praise by the regime.

Indeed, embellished with refined ethnic motifs, artistic dresses served well the Bolshevik needs for representative dresses at various international events and fairs. Nadezhda Lamanova and her collaborators — Vera Mukhina, Aleksandra Ekster, Evgeniia Pribyl'skaia, and Nadezhda Makarova — used Russian ethnic motifs on current Western-style women's dresses for the Soviet presentation at the International Exhibition of Applied Arts in Paris in 1925.¹⁵ Due to the ideological dictate of the day there was no space for fashion, and Lamanova's dresses were displayed in the ethnic art section under the *Moskust*, the Moscow branch of the national artisans' association *Kustexport*.¹⁶ In his essay in the exhibition catalogue,

Tugendkhol'd supported the Russian ethnic arts, praising their diversity among various nationalities within the Soviet Union, as well as their fresh and 'primitive' qualities (1925b: 30). This recognition of craftsmanship was nevertheless interwoven with the dreams of industrial development. The influential art critic David Arkin from the State Academy of Artistic Sciences, which organized the Soviet display in Paris, emphasised in the exhibition catalogue that the new Russian artist did not experience industry as strange or hostile, and understood its technical formulas (Arkin 1925: 43). The photograph of Lamanova's dresses, covered in hand-stitched ethnic motifs, accompanied Arkin's article. The debates on handicrafts and industry were embedded within a broader European discourse on the relationship between the crafts and industrial production which took place at the time. However, the development that was needed to transform the artisanal pieces into sophisticated, but industrially manufactured goods never took place in Russia, unlike in the western well-established and market-driven markets. In contrast, in a poor and industrially under-developed Russia the new regime invested its hopes in highly impractical projects based on the union between traditional crafts and high technologies.

Nadezhda Lamanova won the Grand Prix at the 1925 Paris exhibition for contemporary clothes based on ethnic art¹⁷, but 'spoilt' Paris was not really interested in her ethnic-embellished dresses. Their pared down modernist style was far less attractive than the splendid and exotic Russian looks that, at that very moment, the West enthusiastically enjoyed through the Les Ballets Russes performances and lavish ethnic style of the fashion salons that several Russian émigrés of aristocratic origin opened in Paris, such as the House of Kitmir, which was founded and run by the grand duchess Maria Pavlovna Romanova. Very soon, interest in Russian ethnic style started to fade in the West, but the ethnic embellishment continued in the Soviet Union, as it seemed the safest Bolshevik engagement with the Art Deco, both at home and abroad. In the pages of a new journal *Zhenskii zhurnal* (*Women's Journal*), started in 1926 and close to the Bolshevik values, both Lamanova and Pribyl'skaia advocated the application of ethnic motifs in everyday dress. In one of her articles on new dress, Lamanova insists that the research in ethnic art will provide "abundant opportunities to use the magnificence of ethnic art motifs and their profound rationality, which matches the new way of life" (Lamanova 1926:16).

Once established, the ethnic motif remained as an appropriate Bolshevik decorative element, as many fashion pages show in journal *Iskusstvo odevat'sia* (*The Art of Dressing*), which was started towards the end of the NEP in 1928. Moreover, it only became more ornamental, corresponding to both its mature NEP surroundings and the dominant Art Deco aesthetics in the Western fashion. The most prominent fashion designers promoting ethnic decoration in *Iskusstvo odevat'sia* were Mariia Orlova and O. Anisimova. Orlova's style was closest to Lamanova's rationalized use of embroidery, which she sparingly used along the neckline or the seams, in order

founded in 1920 in collaboration with the Ministry for Foreign Trade to export ethnic art.

¹⁷ Covering different categories and consisting of French and foreign members, the various juries eventually awarded between 7.000 and 8.000 prizes at that exhibition. As reported in the journal *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* (*Soviet Art*), Russia had been awarded 59 golden, 45 silver and 27 bronze medals, apart from some other prizes (N 9, December 1935, p 89).

¹⁵ The fate of the main protagonist of the Bolshevik artistic dress took different paths after 1923. Lamanova and Pribyl'skaia had stayed in Soviet Union and both occupied a series of important functions related to fashion and theatre design and ethnic dress respectively. Following an apprenticeship with Lamanova, Nadezhda Makarova became the first director of the Soviet central fashion institution *Dom modelei* (*The House of Prototypes*) in Moscow in 1934, and stayed in that position throughout the 1950s. Vera Mukhina became one of the most prominent Soviet sculptors, but continued her involvement with fashion as a member of various artistic boards, while Aleksandra Ekster emigrated to Paris in 1924.

¹⁶ Nadezhda Lamanova was put in charge of the artistic laboratory that supplied prototypes for the *Kustexport*, the national artisans' association



Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

to accentuate the simple shapes of her dress drawings. Anisimova's ethnic applications were fashionable, relying on Sonia Delaunay's visual vocabulary, and her simultaneous fabrics and dresses from the mid-1920s. Endorsing a unique Bolshevik Art Deco aesthetics, bold Russian ethnic motifs in saturated colours adorned western style dresses, while fashion accessories, from hats to shoes, resembled contemporary western fashion. Although the artists gathered around the journal *Iskusstvo odevat'sia*, favoured a visual merger between Western fashionable dresses and Russian ethnic decorations, proposals for working clothes were also published, as well as examples of the genuine French fashion, and its Russian copies.

Inventing New Reality: Dress and Socialist Realism

David Arkin changed his opinion on the uses of a handicraft ornament in mass-dress production only in 1929. He proclaimed a union of handicrafts and industry as an unrealistic ideal and even bad practice, as it relied on an exquisite prototype which could not be industrially executed:

"The technique of ornament, as presented at the 1925 Paris International Decorative Exhibition revealed high achievements but it was mainly embodied in unique, hand-made pieces. The mass market was left with a surrogate of an artistic object, with imitation, with waste" (Arkin: 1929: 22).

But, the beginning of the 1930s did not mark the end of the relationship between fashion and art. At that time, dress however became engaged with a completely different and new art: Socialist Realism. The earlier Russian artistic movements had still been involved with their western counterparts — Futurism, Cubism and Art Deco — in dynamic relationships of rejection, comparison, collaboration and exchange. In contrast, Socialist Realism declared a clear break in the direct relations with the West. Different elements of Western culture and aesthetics now became only a raw material in the production of its own new art and its imagery. Socialist Realism was born within Stalinism, but it would continue as the prevailing aesthetics long after Stalin's death in 1953.

Stalin's rise to power and the First Five-Year Plan in 1929 brought the commercially oriented NEP to an end, introduced the planned economy and imposed a severe process of industrialization on the country. At the representational level, Stalinism abolished the earlier pluralism of ideas and dress aesthetics, from the austere Constructivist approach to Cubo-Futurist experiments and Art Deco artistic explorations relying on the ethnic. All of these approaches attempted to grant dress an artistic credibility, as fashion was officially abandoned. In a sharp ideological turn, Stalinism granted fashion a highly representational role and eventually imposed an over-decorated style of its own on its ideal dress matched the main characteristics of the aesthetics of Socialist Realism: grandness, classicism, uniqueness and preciousness. Drawing on classicist traditions, Socialist realist aesthetics was a pastiche of different visual forms. Russian art historian Joseph Bakshtein observed that Socialist Realism homogenized ideologically different forms at the plastic and stylistic level, adding an archaic quality to modernist form, and charging it with mythological content (1993: 49).

Stalinism established socialist fashion in the newly opened *Dom modelei* (House of Prototypes) in Moscow. Situated within the Stalinist myth, it was expressed through dresses of eternal, timeless

style. The new conservative aesthetics of socialist fashion was established by blending disparate elements, from an ideological use of ethnic motifs to selective borrowing from western sartorial traditions, which positioned it within the realm of socialist realism. This newly approved fashion appeared in a variety of aesthetic expressions, from the imposingly glamorous to the conventionally pretty. Stalinist fashion from the Moscow *Dom modelei* shared not only its aesthetics but also its ontological status with Socialist Realism. Its perfect beauty in magazine drawings conjured up a life that did not exist. As Evgeny Dobrenko observed:

"Socialist realism is a highly aestheticized culture, a radically transformed world. Nothing could break through its texture of pure aesthetics. ... Aesthetics did not beautify reality, it was reality. By contrast, all reality outside of Socialist Realism was but the wilderness of everyday life, waiting to be rendered fit to be read and interpreted ... 'Hiding' or 'glossing over' truth, portraying it through representative types, 'romanticizing' it, and the like are merely mechanisms of aestheticization. To aestheticize is to re-create the world, to transform it 'according to the laws of beauty and harmony'" (Dobrenko 2007: 4).

While the avant-garde wanted to change the world, Socialist realism aimed to embellish it. Stalinist fashion was increasingly adorned with ethnic motifs from an imaginary past. Earlier ethnic explorations, pioneered by Ekster, praised by Tugendkhof and applied by Lamanova and Pribyl'skaia, had been mediated through pre-revolutionary artistic practices that cherished difference. In contrast, the 1930s uses of ethnic heritage were informed by the all-encompassing Stalinist myth. Appropriated ethnic images blended the enormous ethnic variations that existed throughout the Soviet Union, and domesticated the otherness that had been recognised in the 1920s. Furthermore, the new aesthetic merged Russian ethnic tradition and Hollywood glamour. The drawings of opulent dresses worn by stylish and highly polished women, which were published in the luxurious fashion magazine *Modeli sezona* (*Fashions of the Seasons*) were designed in the Moscow *Dom modelei*, but could almost have been designed by Adrian, a leading Hollywood couturier of the day.

While Stalinism was not interested in the western latest artistic explorations and achievements, it borrowed heavily from its mass culture. Similarly to the West, new Stalinist culture was expressed through film, musicals, fashion and new mass magazines. This move from the paradigms of the so-called high culture to the paradigms of the so-called low culture happened as Stalinism wanted to engage the masses in its project. The avant-garde also aimed to involve the masses, but their projects were too elitist and cosmopolitan for their contemporaries. While Stalinism could not deliver in everyday life its promises on new enchanting life and glamorous dresses that fitted it, Socialist Realism provided a desired reality. In this context, the concept of the unique prototype, which was first introduced with the 1920s Bolshevik artistic dress continued to live throughout the socialist times in various guises of representational dress, which in a form of a precious sample was supposed to mask all failures of the socialist textile and clothing industries.

Soviet officials from *Dom modelei* had started to visit Paris couture shows in the late 1950s, precisely after Nikita Khrushchev officially denounced Stalin's politics and his excessive aesthetics. They were most interested to master technical skills, but also appreciated



РУССКАЯ УТОПИЯ / RUSSIAN UTOPIA

Dr Djurdja BARTLETT / Джурджа БАРТЛЕТТ

| From Artistic Utopia to Mythical Reality: Fashion under Socialism |

Dior's sumptuous elegance and his opulent fabrics. An elitist, haute couture type dress never failed to fascinate the Soviet regime. The elitism and exclusivity that lies at the core of high fashion enduringly suited the high-minded aspirations of totalitarian ideology. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the long dresses, lavishly decorated with ethnic motifs, which Soviet designers, such as Slava Zaitsev, presented at the annual socialist fashion congresses and at the highly representational fashion shows in the West, were still embedded in the timeless mythical narrative established during Stalinism. In his *System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard emphasized the crucial difference between functional and mythological object:

“The functional object is devoid of being. Reality prevents its regression to that ‘perfect’ dimension ... Rich in functionality but impoverished in meaning, their frame of reference is the present mo-

ment, and their possibilities do not extend beyond everyday life. ... Mythological object, on the other hand, has minimal function and maximal meaning ...” (Baudrillard 2005: 85–86).

An opulent dress adorned with an ethnic-inspired decoration was a mythical object par excellence within the socialist dress narrative. Visually, ethnic motifs' lavishness fulfilled the myth's aesthetic criteria. Moreover, due to the richness of its complicated embroidery and lace ornaments, which involved highly skilled hand-made techniques, such an outfit could not be mass-produced. It instead languished in an everlasting perfect world. Just as any other artistic artefact.

The research for this essay was generously supported by a British Academy Small Research Grant (2009–2010) and by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship (2012–2013).

REFERENCES

1. Arkin, D. (1925) *L'artiste et l'industrie in: L'art décoratif U.R.S.S. Moscou — Paris 1925*, Moscow, pp. 39–47.
2. Arkin, D. (1929) *Estetika veshchi i nasha khudozhestvennaia kul'tura (Aesthetics of Object and Our Artistic Culture)*, in “Pechat' i revoliutsiia”, n. 4, pp. 18–30.
3. Bakstein, J. (1993) “Notes on the Origin of Socialist Realist Iconography.” In *Aesthetic arsenal*, ed. M. Banks, P.S. 1 Museum, pp. 47–60, New York
4. Bartlett, D. 2010 *FashionEast: the Spectre That Haunted Socialism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
5. Baudrillard, J. (2005) *The system of Objects*, Verso, London.
6. Bowl, J. (1985) *Constructivism and Early Soviet Fashion Design*, in *Bolshevik culture*, eds. G. Abbott, P. Kenez and R. Stites, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, pp. 203–219.
7. Carr, E.H. (1970) *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926*, Penguin, Harmondsworth
8. Dobrenko, E. (2007) *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London
9. Douglas, C. (2000) *Six (and a few more) Russian women of the avant-garde together in Amazons of the avant-garde*, eds. J. Bowl, M. Drutt and Z. Tregulova, Guggenheim Museum, New York, pp. 39–57.
10. Ekster, A. (1923a) *V konstruktivnoi odezhdě (On the construction of dress)*, in “Atel'e”, n. 1, pp. 4–5.
11. Ekster, A. (1923b) *Prostota i praktichnost' v odezhdě (Simplicity and practicality of dress)*, “Krasnaia Niva”, n. 21, p. 31
12. Ekster, A. (1923c) *V poiskakh novoi odezhdy (In search of new dress)*, in “Vserossiiskaia vystavka (All-Russian Exhibition)”, n. 2, pp. 16–18
13. Lamanova, N. (1924) *O sovremennom kostiume (On Contemporary Dress)*, “Krasnaia niva”, n. 27, pp. 662–663.
14. Lamanova, N. (1926) *O kostiume (On Dress)*, in “Zhenskii zhurnal”, n. 1, p. 16
15. Lavrentiev, A. (1988) *Varvara Stepanova: A Constructivist Life*, Thames and Hudson, London
16. Lavrentiev, A. (2005) *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
17. Mass, V. (1922) *Pankrasi levogo fronta*, in “Zrelischa”, n. 10, p. 8
18. Mindlin, M. (1922) *O priamoi, ob evoliutsii pidzhaka i o stile v RSFSR (On straight line, the evolution of the jacket and the style of RSFSR)*, in “Zrelischa”, n. 8, pp. 10–11.
19. Misler, N. (1987) “La Scienza' dell' abbigliamento dall'atelier all'industria”, in: *L'Abito della rivoluzione*, eds. Lidya Zaletova, Fabio Ciofi degli Atti and Franco Panzini, Marsilio, Venezia, pp. 45–50.
20. Richard M. (1998) *Cubism and Fashion*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
21. Rodchenko, A. (1921) *Liniia (Line)*, MS, Rodchenko Family Archive, Moscow
22. Stepanova, V. (Varst) (1923), *Kostium segodniashnego dnia — prozodezhda (Today's clothing: Prozodezhda)*, in “LEF”, n. 2, pp. 65–68.
23. Strizhenova, T. (1979) *Moda e rivoluzione*, Electa Editrice, Milano
24. Tugendkhol'd, I. 1922. *Alexandra Exter*, Sarja Edition, Berlin
25. Tugendkhol'd, I. (1925a) *Stil' 1925 goda. Mezhdunarodnaia vystavka v Parizhe (The 1925 style: The Paris international exhibition)*, in “Pechat' i revoliutsiia”, n. 7, pp. 29–66.
26. Tugendkhol'd, I. (1925b) *L'Élément national dans l'art de l'U.S.S.R.*, in *L'art décoratif U.R.S.S. Moscou — Paris 1925*, Moscow, pp. 27–35.

