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**The «Modern style» in Soviet furniture design, its establishment and  
transformations: 1956 — 1968**

PhD dissertation SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Khrushchev-era USSR, furniture was in the focus of public attention. It was regularly observed in the press. The State rulers attended furniture exhibitions. Photos of the exhibitions were often published in advise literature addressed to a mass audience. Albums with projects of new furniture were outstanding examples of book design. The main goal of the thesis is to discover what caused the interest of contemporaries in the topic, what was the significance of the short period of the Thaw in the history of furniture design, and to explain why the period began in the mid-1950s and ended by the end of the 1960s.

**The relevance of the research** is confirmed by its growing popularity among modern academic authors, as well as by the fact that in recent years, the design of the Thaw has often become the subject of exhibitions in Russian museums. Moreover, the museums now acquire the Thaw-era furniture and include it in their permanent collections. The started museumfication of that legacy needs deeper and more detailed historical knowledge about it.

Despite the interest in the topic in recent years, **the degree of its scientific elaboration** remains insufficient. The most important events in the history of Soviet furniture, the all-Union exhibitions, not all are mentioned in historiography. Russian-language authors tend to explore only Russian design, leaving the experience of other republics of the USSR beyond their interest. Of the Russian designers, they mostly mention Moscovites. The legacy of top-ranked designers has been studied so poorly that their key works have been sometimes published as anonymous in academic writings.

A huge array of historical sources remains unseen by researchers, not only archival documents, but also published materials that can be easily found in libraries: magazines, conference abstracts, catalogs of furniture models. Some magazines, for instance, "Arkhitektura i stroitel'stvo Leningrada", "Novye tovary», and the most important of them, "Derevoobrabatyvaiushchaia promyshlennost'", have never been cited in the academic literature. Works of designers presented at each competition and each major furniture exhibition in the USSR were published in special albums, which

are the main sources of information about Soviet experimental furniture. The researchers do not refer to any of the albums.

Nevertheless, historiography, primarily the Anna Cherepakhina's texts, published in the late Soviet era, and articles by Maria Maistrovskaya, the leading contemporary historian of late-Soviet furniture design) formed a general knowledge about the era, which generally seems to be correct. According to them, the main events in the history of furniture design in the USSR since the mid-1950s have been four all-Union competitions for the best furniture in 1958, 1961-63, 1975 and 1983. The competitions, especially the first two of them, were closely bound to the State housing program. Since the late 1950s and especially in the 1960s, the domestic furniture industry has been switching to new, industrial methods of production, and all-Union competitions set the vector of its transformations. Finally, the first two competitions strongly influences the expansion of a new style of architecture and furniture throughout the country, a style that was usually called simply "modern" in the USSR. The thesis confirms these conclusions, but clarifies them and supplements them with many previously unknown facts, names, and hypotheses.

**The object** of research is the entire set of sources, both texts and images, related to the design of furniture, which was designed in the USSR from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s; as well as the pieces of furniture themselves, designed during this period and produced by the Soviet industry. The study is focused only on domestic furniture. Furniture for public buildings is a quite different topic, for it had its own production infrastructure and its own sales economy, which was not related to the consumer market. Geographically, the study covers the entire Soviet Union within the boundaries that it had during the period under review.

**The particular subject** of research is not furniture itself, but particularly its design, that is, its appearance and artistic characteristics. The questions of its production and marketing are touched upon as much as they come into contact with artistic subjects. The study focuses on the style of the Thaw-era furniture, which was called by contemporaries "the modern style". The most important events in the history of furniture design, which significantly influenced, among other things, the evolution of

style, are the all-Union furniture exhibitions and competitions, which were regularly held in the period from 1956 to 1968, which determined the chronological framework of the study.

The selected chronological framework is also due to **the hypothesis** of the thesis, according to which the “modern style”, which was established in Soviet furniture design by the end of the 1950s, has completed its development in the mid-1960s. Economic and ideological prerequisites had a significant impact on the formation of the style, its evolution, and the quickly onset of its crisis. **The purpose** of the study is to observe and characterize the style of Soviet furniture design of the Thaw era, to find out its origins and its placing in the world context, to describe its evolution and to determine what factors influenced it. To this end, the author of the dissertation solves three intermediate **tasks**: he examines what was the role of furniture design in the system of the Soviet economy, analyzes what was the new furniture from the point of view of art criticism and State propaganda, and gives a description of the style of furniture of this period. The concluding parts of the dissertation show how the three aspects of the history of furniture design, economic, ideological and artistic, are related to each other.

#### **Theoretical and methodological base of the research.**

The research is an interdisciplinary study at the intersection of design history, economic, and social history. Methodologically, it is close to the social history of art. In a hermeneutic way, studying of primary sources gave directions to further research.

It is widely believed among Russian design historians that the product designer’s personal piece of art is only a project, not a factory product. The author of the thesis considers furniture as a reproducible art. A furniture designer should be considered the author of every copy released according to his drawings, not excluding cases when the project is distorted against his will (of course, specimens made in exact accordance with the author's intention are of greater value). The chosen position allows us to apply to the material a standard set of methods of art history: formal-stylistic and comparative analysis, on the basis of which conclusions can be drawn about artistic connections and influences, and attribution can be set.

In the chapter entitled *The Economics of Furniture Design*, the study draws on agency theory applied by Susan Reid to the Khrushchev Thaw. Reid interpreted the typical small-sized Soviet apartment as an arena where the interests of three agencies collide, “designers” (they are also “experts” and “intelligentsia”), “bureaucrats” (who, upon closer examination, turn out to be retailers), and consumers. This approach is productive, since such identifications can be found in the texts of the Khrushchev period. However, it seems necessary to clarify and complicate the classification of agencies proposed by Reid, partially identifying them not with social groups, but with bureaucratic corporations.

In the chapter entitled *New furniture as an ideological project*, the study analyzes the discursive practices adopted in artistic criticism of the Thaw era, relying on the theory of authoritative discourse by Alexei Yurchak. Developed mainly on the basis of later material, this theory is not fully applicable to the Thaw texts. Master figure in Yurchak’s discourse model is fundamentally indistinguishable, but in Soviet texts of the 1960s it sometimes takes on a slightly clearer outline of “objective scientific laws”, which endows the symbolic power of experts, holders of scientific knowledge.

### **The scientific novelty of the research.**

1. The dissertation introduces into scientific circulation more than 200 printed sources related to the Soviet furniture design of the mid-1950s — mid-1960s. These are texts of different character and volume, from short news reports in newspapers to multi-page books. The most important of them are nine albums of all-Union furniture exhibitions.

2. Based on new sources, the author of the dissertation introduces a large amount of facts into scientific circulation. The thesis lists for the first time all the all-Union furniture exhibitions held in Moscow from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. The study describes for the first time the system of Soviet furniture design institutes. It is unveiled what was the fate of furniture projects which had been recommended for mass production at all-Union competitions and exhibitions. The dissertation also provides statistics on the volume of production, imports and demand for furniture in the USSR in the 1960s, which had not been previously published in the research literature.

3. The author of the thesis introduces into scientific circulation more than fifty names of designers that have not been previously mentioned in the Russian-language historical literature. Many furniture projects published in sources have been attributed as works of certain designers.

4. The research included furniture pieces from 33 private collections in Moscow, Kyiv, Odessa, Vilnius, Almaty, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok. The author revealed 50 items of models, which have been published in the sources of the 1950s and 1960s. In several cases, it was possible to establish the names of their authors. Two objects, created according to one project, the authorship of which was established during the research, on the recommendation of the author of the dissertation, were acquired by the Moscow Design Museum and the All-Russian Museum of Decorative Arts.

5. While historiography on Soviet furniture design pays special attention to schools and designers of Moscow, the thesis, in addition to them, highlights the work of local furniture design centers in the Baltic republics, Leningrad and Kiev.

6. The dissertation examines artistic relations both between schools of furniture design within the USSR and between Soviet and foreign schools. Many of the previously made assumptions about the sources and nature of the influences that their foreign colleagues and entire national schools had on Soviet designers have been revised.

7. The methodological innovation of the dissertation is a view on Soviet art criticism not as a reflection of reality, but as a declaration of what should be done, playing the role of a “self-fulfilling prophecy”. Perceived by contemporaries as a voice of power and a guide to action, it shaped historical reality.

### **General conclusions of the research.**

The furniture design reform that began in the USSR in the mid-1950s is linked to the government's program of mass housing construction. The new furniture had to match the layouts of small apartments in typical houses. It also had to be produced in a new way, using advanced industrial technologies. This made it possible to increase the volume of furniture production, reduce its prime cost and satisfy the massive demand for it from modest new settlers. The organizers of the reform, employees of the

Academy of Constructing and Architecture and the Central Furniture Design Bureau, initially did not set the designers with tasks of an aesthetic nature. However, an important result of the reform was that Soviet furniture design abandoned historical stylizations and turned to forms of international modernism.

All-Union furniture competitions and exhibitions were the most important occurrences of the furniture reform. They contributed to the formation, development and propaganda of the "modern style" in Soviet furniture, and also played a connecting role between local design schools and Moscow institutions, that ruled the reform.

The development of furniture design in the USSR in 1956-1968 considered in three aspects, economic, ideological and artistic ones. Three chapters of the dissertation are devoted to each of them.

From an economic point of view, furniture design in the Soviet Union was commonly viewed as a project support for the woodworking industry. However, in a short period from 1957 to 1962, it was institutionally close to architecture. Because of this, furniture designers, on the one hand, quickly and successfully developed furniture projects that are convenient for placement in small apartments, but, on the other hand, they underestimated the difficulties that arose during the industrial development of new models and the organization of trade in them.

The contradictions between designers, manufacturers and sellers turned out to be so strong that full-scale production of new furniture in the USSR did not begin until 1963-1964. The difficulties were overcome only after complete rebuilding of the furniture industry, when it was united under the authority of the Union ministry and design bureaus were closely linked with factories.

The furniture reform was accompanied by widespread propaganda of "modern" way of life and "modern style" of private dwellings. The main means of propaganda were manuals and books on home economics and etiquette, which were published in large quantities. Thanks to them, the "modern" style of furniture, which was uncommon for many Soviet citizens in the early 1960s, became generally accepted by them by the middle of the decade.



The aesthetic program of "modern style", which was assuming as the only possible form of a modern interior, that does not provide the consumer with the right to individual taste and naively suggesting that the expert had the right answers to all questions, has already been criticized in the mid-1960s. At the same time, art criticism grows cold towards this very style. It became an ossified and boring canon, the monotony and "recipe" character of which must be overcome.

The period under review was the time of the formation and development of a new style of Soviet furniture. Contemporaries called this style "modern". In the USSR, it began to develop in the mid-1950s. It does not significantly differ from the international modernist style that then dominated the world.

The answer to the question of what foreign impressions were the most significant for Soviet designers is given in the dissertation partially. It is possible to give a more definite answer to it only when the interior design in the European countries of the Socialist camp, with which Soviet designers had the closest contacts, has been sufficiently studied. According to the available data, the style of Soviet furniture has developed under the strongest impression from the design of Eastern European countries. Then the role of the model passed to the Baltic republics of the Soviet Union (more precisely, to two of them — Estonia and Lithuania).

The transition from the soft organic forms prevalent in the 1950s to the stricter version of the style of the early 1960s in Soviet design occurs concurrent to one in the "outside" world. However, from this point on, the development of the style stopped. In the second half of the 1960s, folklore motives returned to Soviet furniture design. This alienated it from global trends. In the design of Western Europe and America, the second half of the 1960s was a time when both the forms and the typology of objects, and the very way of thinking and talking about design, were reinvented. The Soviet design practice, while not changing significantly during these years, was rapidly becoming obsolete.

The development of the modernist style in Soviet furniture in the 1950s — 1960s and its subsequent stagnation are due to economic and ideological reasons. Having become officials of the woodworking industry, designers stopped solving exciting

problems of organizing everyday life in apartments of a new type, and also stopped working with any other materials, except for wood and woodworking products. Ideology, on the other hand, predetermined their predominant orientation first towards Eastern European and then Baltic models and contributed to the formation of a modernist style of furniture of Eastern Europe, within which national schools are hardly visible.

**The theoretical significance** of the research is due to the fact that it clarifies the chronology of the history of domestic furniture design, highlights the main schools of furniture design in the USSR and analyzes the artistic connections between them, shows how information about foreign furniture could be accessible in the USSR, and what was the place of the newly formed "modern" style of Soviet furniture in a global context. The theoretical significance of the study also lies in the fact that its author views design as art and designers as artists, thereby presenting industrially manufactured Soviet furniture as a subject of legitimate interest of academic art history and art museums. **The practical significance** of the research lies in identification of surviving samples of Soviet furniture as objects which authorship can be determined relying upon printed sources. This experience provides a methodological basis for further attribution and museumification of Soviet design.

**The approbation** of the research results took place as reports at four conferences and the articles published in journals and peer-reviewed issues. Six articles are published. One article has been reviewed in the journal. Two more are under review.

## BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

The thesis consists of four chapters. In the first of them, the main events in the history of domestic furniture design from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s are presented. In the next three chapters, these events are examined and analyzed in three aspects, economic, ideological and artistic ones.

The first chapter, named "**Chronicle of Major Events**", describes the reform of furniture design in the USSR, which took place from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s, and led to the formation of the so-called "modern style" in the Soviet interior.

Furniture reform (**sections 1.1 and 1.2**) was part of the state program for mass housing construction. It was intended to provide small apartments in new standard houses with furniture that would fit their layouts and sizes. To satisfy the demand for furniture, which was growing due to the rapid increase of standard housing construction, it was necessary to produce furniture in much more amount than in previous years, and to reduce its cost. This could be achieved only by moving from carpentry, semi-handicraft production technologies to industrial ones.

Solving the tasks set before them by the headliners of the reform, Soviet designers developed a new principle of equipping a home, not with room suites, but with the so-called "sets" for the entire apartment. The juries of two all-Union competitions, held in 1958 and 1961-63, selected a total of 56 of these kits and recommended them for mass production.

All-Union competitions, as well as exhibitions during which competitions were not announced (there were eight all-Union furniture exhibitions in total in 1956-1968) (**section 1.3**) were the key events of the furniture reform. Thanks to them, (**section 1.4**) the Soviet furniture design abandoned historical stylizations and turned to international modernism. When the new style was established, exhibitions largely determined its further evolution. In the decentralized Soviet economy of the era of *Sovnarkhoses*, they were a necessary means of communication between the metropolitan departments and independent designers and furniture manufacturers in different cities of the USSR. The exhibitions played an important role in the mass promotion of a new way of life and

"modern style" in the domestic interior. Photos taken at Moscow furniture exhibitions at the turn of the 1950s — 1960s, where furniture was shown in exemplary apartments, were the main source of illustrations of Soviet popular advise literature until the very end of the 1960s.

A review of the sources undertaken in the second chapter, "**The Economics of Furniture Design**" (**section 2.1**), made it possible to establish the fate of 10 of 19 sets of furniture recommended for mass production at the 1958 All-Union competition. Only two of them were being produced at factories, only in republics where they had been designed, in Estonia and Lithuania. As far as we know, not all of the sets recommended for production by the jury of the second competition in 1961 were produced. In general, two all-Union competitions solved the problem set for them, to provide the furniture industry with furniture projects suitable for use in small apartments, but the industry was unable to accept these projects.

As the main cause for this failure the primary sources unanimously esteem the gross planning, because of which it was unprofitable for factories to update the assortment and reduce the cost of production. While recognizing the importance of this circumstance, I draw attention to three others: the technical backwardness of factories, the conservatism of trading agencies, and the disunity between designers and manufacturers. The furniture was being designed not for specific producers, but for the state furniture industry as a whole, relying on technologies that factories have just begun to use. In addition, factories were under the jurisdiction of the *Sovnarkhoses* and were not subordinate to the institutions that held furniture competitions. They could only give them manufacturers recommendations, which were not binding.

Until 1963, the right to distribute projects that won all-Union furniture competitions belonged to their organizer, the Moscow Central Design Bureau (TsMKB, later VPKTIM) (**section 2.2**). Then it returned to the bureaus that developed the projects. The approval at the all-Union competition did not guarantee that the factories would take the project into production. Moreover, the procedure was not a necessary prerequisite for industrial development. In the early 1960s, many of new models of furniture produced in the USSR have not even participate in the competitions. In 1963,

a new procedure for approving furniture samples for industrial development was established. Competition was not a necessary element of it. Since then, all-Union furniture exhibitions have not been accompanied by competitions. They showed less prototypes and more serial products.

The study identified 60 names of designers, authors of furniture presented at all-Union exhibitions. To achieve it, it was necessary to collect information bit by bit from a large number of historical sources. In the main sources (albums of competitions and design bureaus, magazine reviews of exhibitions), personal authorship is systematically, although not always, hushed up (**section 2.3**). Based on the testimonies of the Soviet designers themselves, I conclude that, contrary to the prevailing stereotype, their creative work was highly appreciated and generously rewarded. Hiding information about authorship was beneficial to the heads of design bureaus, for it gave them the power upon the prize funds.

The dissertation provides statistical data on how much furniture was produced and sold in the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s, what was the demand for it, and how much foreign-made furniture was imported into the country (**section 2.4**). Even the full implementation of the plan would not lead to full satisfaction of consumer demand for furniture. These statistics cannot explain why the furniture of the 1960s preserved in the cities of the former Soviet Union is mainly imported. According to statistical tables, in those years the volume of furniture production in the country was many times greater than the volume of imports. A possible explanation is this: the furniture that was produced in the USSR was mainly sold not to consumers, but to institutions.

The most stubborn opponents of furniture reform according to historical sources appear to be trade officials (**section 2.5**). They refused to accept furniture of new designs and new appearance, unusual for consumers. Disagreements between vendors and designers were not resolved in the mid-1960s. Disillusioned with the mediation of trade organizations, the designers sought to establish direct contact with the consumer, using opinion books and questionnaires at exhibitions to study public opinion and pinning high hopes on a new way of selling furniture, atelier shops, where the furniture was exhibited in exemplary interiors and was sold in whole sets for the whole

apartment. Designers worked there as consultants. If necessary, they could prepare a complete interior design for the customer, with the complete harmony of all details. Because prices for furniture at that time were relatively high and the average income of a city dweller was relatively low, this method of equipping an apartment was available to very few, and the atelier shops did not multiply in the USSR.

Due to the fact that furniture sets designed for the all-Union exhibitions of the late 1950s and early 1960s were not mainly in mass production, and due to the fact that the principle of equipping an apartment with a single set recommended by the designers did not take into account the purchasing power of mass consumer, the overall view of typical Soviet small-sized apartment turned out to be different from what the headlines of the furniture reform imagined it to be. They believed that there should be almost no cabinet furniture in the apartment. Large items were supposed to be stored in built-in wardrobes, and small ones in light modular systems, of which assembler and shelving ones were considered especially promising. They were going to make furniture, widely using new technologies and materials. It was assumed that the new interiors will have a lot of bright colors. The furnishings of the apartment were conceived as an integral system that cannot be divided into parts. However, even with the funds to purchase a furniture set for the entire apartment at a time, it was not easy to find it on sale. Assembled and shelving systems were especially rare, as manufacturers systematically refused to release them, and stores to sell them. The capacity of built-in furniture in typical apartments was never sufficient, and the demand for wardrobes was not diminished. The furnishings of the apartments were formed by room suits or items purchased at different times separately.

The final paragraph of the second chapter (**section 2.6**) shows how the institutions involved in the design of furniture were organized in the USSR, and how this system has changed over time. Until 1957, furniture design bureaus were closely associated with manufacturing and were regarded as enterprises in the furniture industry. The furniture industry, in turn, was part of the vast sphere of forestry under the control of the Union ministry, whose jurisdiction included the production of everything that is made of wood. The industry was organized in the same way after 1965. But between 1957 and

1965 it was arranged differently. After the establishment of economic regions in 1957, the system became dual: at the local level, furniture was designed at factories or in design bureaus under *Sovnarkhoses* (more precisely, under the Directorates of the furniture industry of *Sovnarkhoses*), and at the Union level, the institutions where furniture was developed became structures of the USSR State Construction Committee (*Gosstroy*).

This administrative decision is linked both with the general reform of the Soviet industry (in 1957 all industrial ministries were disbanded) and with the reform of furniture design. It was believed that architects designing new homes and designers designing furniture for those homes would be better able to work together if they worked within the same system. In general, furniture design was considered a form of architectural design at the time.

The lack of administrative communication between the Directorates of the furniture industry of *Sovnarkhoses* and the State institutions is one of the causes for which factories were reluctant and slow to master new furniture projects. *Gosstroy* tried to reform an industry that it did not manage, and, naturally, did not succeed in this. The furniture industry reforms of 1962 and 1965 bridged the gap.

Founded in 1962, the State Committee for the Forestry, Pulp and Paper and Woodworking Industry under the USSR State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*) received the right (with the agreement of the State Construction Committee and the State Committee for Trade) to change the range of furniture factories. Taking advantage of this right, the Committees immediately removed from production more than half of the furniture models that were produced at that time by Soviet factories.

After the State Committee for the Forestry, Pulp and Paper and Woodworking Industry was transformed into a ministry (*Minlesbumdrevprom*) in 1965 and almost all furniture factories in the USSR were subordinated to it, *Minlesbumdrevprom* reformed the industry. The basis of the system became territorial furniture clusters, within which factories received a narrow specialization. Furniture clusters received their own design bureaus, whose developments, intended for implementation at specific enterprises, were mastered by the industry with less difficulty than the competition projects of 1958 and

1961 and later projects of *VPKTIM*, an institute under the *Minlesbumdrevprom*, created on the basis of *TsMKB*.

The third chapter of the dissertation, "**The Style of New Furniture as an Ideological Project**", examines how the new furniture and its style were represented in the official texts of the Thaw era, art-critical articles and propaganda texts addressed to the general public.

The art criticism discourse, which had developed by the beginning of the 1950s, did not change significantly during the Thaw (**section 3.1**). This is due to the fact that the previous structure of art institutions and the function of the art press were preserved: it was the instrument with which the Party bureaucracy controlled Soviet artists. The stable set of definitions that criticism used ("socialist realism", "nationality", "formalism", "modernism" and so on), was used not to give a qualitative description of works of art, but as mean of approval or condemnation. Critics were accustomed to use these definitions completely freely, without any connection with the own qualities of the art pieces.

Initially the art critics appear to be hostile to the modernist style of the new Soviet furniture. But, since at the all-Union exhibitions the style received the approval of the Party authorities, critics had to speak about it with approval. Their discourse adapted to this task with no difficulty: they attributed to the "modern style" all the qualities that the criticism of that time discovered in any art that was praised for: presence of national spirit, soulfulness, adherence to the method of socialist realism, and so on. At the same time, its closeness to the modernist design of the West was denied.

This way of perceiving art was so unsuitable for a substantive conversation that the competition, during which the jury members, without commenting on their choice, simply pointed to the projects they liked, was the only way for them to clearly explain what kind of furniture design they like.

On the other hand, the language of conservative art criticism turned out to be a very effective tool for promoting the new style in advise literature — books and brochures about modern housing and household encyclopedias (**section 3.2**). The authors of these texts were experts, art historians and designers, and the addressee was



the mass consumer. During that period, Soviet cities grew rapidly, and the most important task of the advice literature was to explain to recent peasants and residents of the suburbs, who moved from their village houses and dorm rooms to standard apartments in new buildings, what the urban lifestyle looked like.

The "modern style" of the interior in the advice literature of the Thaw is considered as an integral feature of a modern home, as is the presence of a gas stove and central heating in it, and the desire to surround oneself with modern things as part of the general norm, which includes the good manners and political loyalty. Conservative taste was moved outside the approved norm. Advice literature was published in large number of copies, it was often reprinted, and its audience was very wide. The fact that the "modern style" of the interior by the mid-1960s was universally recognized in the USSR is largely due to its influence. In addition to exemplary apartments at furniture exhibitions, photographs of which were often published in advice literature, public interiors, decorated in a new way, primarily cafes, served as an important means of popularizing the "modern style". In them, the new style reached its fullest embodiment, and in them its crisis was indicated earlier on (**section 3.3**).

The authors of texts on the "modern style" were confident that they had an accurate and complete knowledge of what a modern home should be like (**section 3.4**). They had a vague idea of the consumer and did not intend to enter into an equal dialogue with him. He was offered a choice of two roles: either to be an obedient performer of expert recommendations, or to be considered a retrograde with wrong values and "philistine" taste. The flaw in this position became clear to the experts themselves, at least to some of them, already in the mid-1960s. Since that time, the discussion about modern design has become more complicated. In it, for the first time, the personal positions of different participants become noticeable.

Already in the mid-1960s critics noted the uniformity of solutions in the interiors of cafes, and soon noticed it in city apartments as well. One of the means to diversify the look of the interiors seemed to them to turn to "folk" motives. Some of the consumers shared these sentiments with critics. In the mid-1960s, when the "modern style" was still being established in the distant outskirts of the USSR, it was already out

of fashion among the intelligentsia of large cities. A new fashion has appeared, suggesting the proximity in the same room of samples of modern factory production and works of folk art, objects of different styles and ages. Initially it was a highbrow fashion, but by the end of the decade it had spread quite widely.

The fourth and final chapter of the thesis, "**The Style of Soviet Furniture**", examines the genesis and evolution of "modern style" of Soviet furniture of the Thaw era, its local versions and its place in the world context. This style is the same that was widespread in those years in many other countries. In the USSR, it was perceived as borrowed from the West.

The chapter begins with a general outline of modernist furniture design in the 1940s —1960s in the world. Its leading schools are briefly characterized. Design of some countries of the socialist camp, the DDR, Czechoslovakia, Poland, is described in somewhat more detail (**section 4.1**). Then (**section 4.2**), three ways are described, in which knowledge about furniture design of foreign countries could be appear in the USSR: foreign business trips of designers, foreign press, which was subscribed by design bureaus and schools of arts and crafts, industrial and furniture exhibitions of foreign countries in the USSR. Having studied them, I conclude that the closest artistic contacts between Soviet furniture makers were with colleagues from the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The turn of furniture design from retrospectivism to modernism took place simultaneously throughout the Socialist camp, and it cannot be ruled out (although at the present stage of the study of the issue it cannot be proved) that Soviet designers played an important role in the development of the style of late modernist interior in Eastern Europe.

A significant part of the dissertation is devoted to a review of local schools of furniture design in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev (**section 4.3**), as well as in the three Baltic republics (**section 4.4**).

Judgments about "modern style" in articles and books of the Thaw era reflect the stereotypes of that time and throw light not on the reality of Soviet design, but on the symbolic picture of the world in the minds of the authors who wrote about it (**section 4.5**). However, a priori judgments about style, shared by, among others, furniture

designers, inevitably influenced formation of that style. The “West” of these texts is not the real countries of Europe and America, but an element of that symbolic picture of the world. In it, the West plays a contradictory role: it is both a source of hostile influences and a standard of modernity, towards which anyone who does not want to lag behind the times is inevitably guided.

To overcome the paradox, the theorists of the “modern style” split the image of the West, declaring the presence of “comradely” West, from which it is not shameful to borrow. This role was first played by the European countries of the Socialist camp, and later, at the turn of the decade, by the three Baltic republics within the USSR. The dissertation provides examples of artistic borrowings, first from Czechoslovakian, and then from Lithuanian and Estonian furniture, which convince that the ideological affirmations really influenced the preferences of Soviet designers.

Another ideological attitude, reverence for folk art and the desire to see signs of national identity in any art that the critic liked, also reflected in the evolution of the style. In the mid-1960s, when the trendsetters of interior fashion were bored with “modern style”, the cult of national identity led designers to the rehabilitation of folklore motifs in furniture.

Thus, ideological attitudes significantly influenced the evolution of the “modern” style of furniture in the USSR, which in the period from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s went through three stages: the rapid development of a vocabulary of forms common for the world modernist design of the 1950s, abandoning sculptural forms in favor of strictly geometric ones, and then, in the second half of the 1960s, turning to “national” motives. The evolution of style in different parts of the USSR did not proceed simultaneously: changes took place first in the Baltic republics and Moscow, and then, sometimes with a delay of several years, in other parts of the State.

In the early 1960s, the leading schools of the USSR did not lag behind world trends. However, in the mid-60s the situation changed. In the Soviet Union, the “modern style” ossifies in the forms found at the beginning of the decade. But in the outside world, it was rapidly receding into the past under the onslaught of various new trends in design. The USSR again, as before the Thaw, was thrown back into

"yesterday". In the decades that followed, Soviet designers strove to bridge the gap. In particular, it was one of the tasks of the third All-Union competition for the best furniture in 1975, the history of which remains outside the scope of the thesis.

The fact that the "modern style" of Soviet furniture, lively and changeable, stopped developing in the mid-1960s, is primarily due to socio-economic reasons (**section 4.6**). Since the late 1950s, furniture designers have worked with architects to furnish a small apartment for mass consumer. There was no such type of housing in the USSR before. The designer was an experimentalist designing a new way of life for millions of his fellow citizens. By 1965, the designer again became an employee of the woodworking industry, which set him much more narrow tasks. He lost access to promising technologies, moved away from architectural practice. A new, more modest role in the economic system prevented him from responding to the changing world agenda. The development of the "modern style" ended there.

As part of the dissertation research, for the first time a complete list of all-Union furniture exhibitions that took place from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s was compiled, and the most important text and illustrative sources associated with each of them were identified. From the sources it was found out what the exhibits of these exhibitions were like and how their expositions looked like. The results of this source study are presented in **Supplement 1**, which is an album of 137 photographs of expositions of 9 Moscow furniture exhibitions. If the names of the authors of the furniture have been established, they are indicated in the captions under the illustrations. 109 pieces of furniture made in the Soviet Union, survived in private collections, and studied by the author of the dissertation. Authors of 31 of them were identified based on primary and secondary sources. 25 pieces were identified as corresponding to the models shown at all-Union exhibitions in 1959-1965. Information on them is collected in the table in **Supplement 2**.

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

1. The thesis confirms the opinion, often expressed in historiography, that the furniture reform of the 1950s — 1960s began in connection with the State program of mass housing. More precisely, it was an important and necessary part of this program.

2. The main events of the furniture reform were eight all-Union furniture exhibitions held in Moscow in 1956 — 1958. They served as a link between metropolitan and regional design bureaus, as well as between design bureaus and factories, played an important role in the formation, dissemination and development of "modern style" in Soviet furniture, provided illustrative material for propaganda literature about "modern style".

3. Most of the furniture models shown at all-Union exhibitions at the turn of the 1950s — 1960s did not enter mass production. Until the mid-1960s, the production of new furniture in the USSR was not widespread. Mostly, consumers had access to furniture designed before the mid-1950s or imported furniture.

4. Three main reasons for which furniture of new models did not reach the mass consumer were the technical inability of factories to master these samples, gross planning system and the conservatism of trade organizations. The first of these three reasons is rarely and reluctantly mentioned in historical sources. However, it seems to be the most important.

5. From 1957 to 1962, the main organizations in the USSR that were engaged in the furniture design were subdivisions of Gosstroy. In general, furniture design was considered in those years as one of the branches of the country's architectural and construction industry. Before and after this period, furniture design bureaus were subordinate to departments related to the forest industry.

6. "Modern style" in furniture and interiors, unusual for most in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, had spread throughout the country and was perceived as a new generally accepted norm by the middle of the decade. This happened because samples of the new style were approved by the Party authorities at the all-Union furniture

exhibitions in 1959 and 1961, and then the popularization of the new style became the task of mass State propaganda. It successfully fulfilled the task in several years.

7. By the mid-1960s, when the "modern style" was widely recognized in the USSR, and the furniture of new models finally began to be produced in large quantities, the Soviet "arbiters of taste" (art critics, designers, and creative intelligentsia) was already bored of this style. By the end of the decade, it was out of fashion.

8. Artistic criticism of the Thaw era does not fundamentally differ from the criticism of the previous, Stalinist, period. In order to fit the modernist style of the new furniture into the framework of the ideological norm, critics ascribed to it features that normative art should have from the point of view of the ideological attitudes of the 1930s and 1950s.

9. Soviet texts on "modern style" furniture do not describe this style as it really was, but rather explain what it should be. However, in the USSR where the artist was a state official and perceived the authoritative speech of official press as orders of the authorities, such texts had great generative power. Reality did take on the features that they arbitrarily ascribed to it. Ideological attitudes largely influenced the evolution of the style of furniture in the USSR. They predetermined its orientation towards the samples of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and then, at the next stage of its development, towards the design of the Baltic republics. The cult of national tradition, which has long been established in Soviet artistic journalism, influenced the fact that designers, having exhausted the artistic possibilities of "modern style" by the mid-1960s, often turned to the legacy of folk crafts in the second half of the decade.

10. The artistic evolution of Soviet furniture was also influenced by administrative reforms. At first, they stimulated the development of the style, and then led to its stagnation. After furniture design bureaus had been finally absorbed into the woodworking system in the mid-1960s, furniture designers abandoned experimentation with typology, technology and form. This explains the stylistic similarity of the exhibits at the all-Union exhibitions of 1965 and 1967-68 with items shown at exhibitions in the early 1960s.

11. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s furniture design in the USSR developed in line with world trends. Since the second half of the 1960s, the paths of Soviet and world furniture design diverged again.

12. The style of Soviet furniture of the Thaw epoch is closest to one of the furniture of the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe. This can be explained not only by the ideological guidelines that instructed Soviet designers to adopt the experience, first of all, of their closest foreign colleagues, but also by the close economic ties between the countries of the Socialist camp, and the similarity of their economic systems. The stylistic differences between the furniture that was designed at that time in the USSR and other countries of Eastern Europe, as well as in different parts of the Soviet Union, are insignificant. We should rather speak not about the Soviet "modern style", but about the general style of furniture in Eastern Europe as a version of the international modernist style of the mid-20th century.

## **Approbation of the work**

### **Publications:**

#### **Articles which are published in journals indexed in international indexing and citation databases and included in the list of high-level journals by HSE**

1. Dezhurko A. K. "Sovremennyi' stil' inter'era v sovetskoi kritike 1960-kh gg. / A. K. Dezhurko // *Iskusstvoznanie*. — 2020. — №1/2. — P. 214 — 229.
2. Dezhurko A. K. Vsesoiuznyi konkurs na luchshie obraztsy mebeli 1958 goda: povorot ot istoricheskikh stilizatsii k modernizmu / A. K. Dezhurko // *Kommunikatsii, media, dizain*. — 2021. — Vol. 6. №1. — P. 112 — 138.
3. Dezhurko A. K. Sovetskaia Pribaltika i stil' inter'erov Ottepeli // *Iskusstvoznanie*. — 2021. — (forthcoming)

### **Other publications on the topic of dissertation:**

1. Dezhurko A. K. Zabytye mebel'nye dizainery epokhi "ottepeli' / A. K. Dezhurko // *Dom Burganova. Prostranstvo kul'tury*. — 2020. — №1. — P. 114 — 143.
2. Dezhurko A. K. Atributsiia mebeli, massovo proizvodivsheisia v SSSR v 1960-e gody / A. K. Dezhurko // *Khudozhestvennaia kul'tura*. — 2020. — №3. — P. 320 — 341.
3. Dezhurko A. K. Obraztsovye inter'ery na sovetskikh vystavkakh rubezha 1950-kh — 1960-kh godov / A. K. Dezhurko // *eSamizdat*. — 2020. — Vol. 13. — P. 375 — 381.
4. Dezhurko A. K. Chem byl Zapad dlia sovetskikh mebel'nykh dizainerov Ottepeli / A. K. Dezhurko // *Zapadnoe iskusstvo XX veka. Shestidesiatye gody* / ed. by Bartoshevich A. V. and Gnedovskaya T. Iu. — M.: BuksMArt, 2021. — P. 357 — 373.