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THE AVANT-GARDE ROOTS OF POLISH DESIGN IN THE SOCIALIST REALISM PERIOD. A CASE STUDY

Abstract: Due to the pragmatic orientation and continuation of modernist artistic solutions, it is difficult to find explicit Socialist Realist traits in the Polish design of that time, especially as the term “Socialist Realist design” remains undefined. Design that is neutral in form can be linked to the doctrine on the level of the socialist concept, aiming at consequent changes in the socialist forms of life. However, the idea of socially oriented design combined with modernization unquestionably had its roots in the broadly understood avant-garde movements.

We should not treat this phenomenon as an ideological contradiction. In spite of their avant-garde pre-war provenance, many ideas were (successfully) put into practice at that time as the design of life for a better tomorrow of the egalitarian (socialist) society.

Keywords: Socialist Realism, design, avant-garde

Introduction

The relation between modernism (the avant-garde) and the Polish design from the period of Socialist Realism is a complex phenomenon. This issue is becoming remarkably important in the year of the avant-garde’s centenary, when its legacy is being extensively discussed,¹ though seldom in the context of design.²

¹ It is worth remembering that contemporary reflection on modernism combining various research approaches has resulted in the reconfiguration of the concept. Cp. T. Majewski (ed.), *Rekonfiguracje modernizmu. Nowoczesność i kultura popularna*, Wydawnictwa Profesjonalne i Akademickie, Warszawa 2009.

² The events organized in Poland to celebrate the centenary of the avant-garde tended to avoid the questions directly concerning design, although much attention was paid to the avant-garde’s legacy. One of the institutions participating in the celebration was the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź. The Museum’s website announced that the “events prepared by tens of museums, theatres, galleries, as well as other cultural or research institutions will all be part of the celebrations to mark the 100th anniversary of the Polish avant-garde. They will serve as a reminder of the most prominent personalities and phenomena of interwar avant-garde and will draw attention to the artists who developed the principles of the avant-garde in the post-war period. Some projects will pose questions concerning the relevance of the avant-garde legacy for con-

A research perspective focused on the period of the thaw (1956), which gave rise to the myth of reborn modernity, making it possible to contrast modernism with Socialist Realism³, prevails in popular and academic discourse in Poland. As a result, contemporary analyses and descriptions of architecture and design from the period of Socialist Realism are often created on the basis of binary oppositions: socialist *versus* modernist or anachronistic *versus* progressive. This problem needs to be more thoroughly analyzed, especially with regard to design. Design is a discipline that, in a narrow sense, can barely be described by the terms derived from the history of art, such as “modernism”, “soc-realism”, etc.⁴ Although pragmatic and utilitarian design is often a tool of cynical manipulation, it is linked with industrialization, technology and modernization, and it cannot be comfortably fitted into aesthetic frames.⁵ Moreover, it is very difficult to clearly define the concept of Socialist Realism in the sphere of design. However, there is a visible connection between Socialist Realism, modernism, and modernization rooted in the tradition of the avant-garde. “The avant-garde” is obviously a simplified concept. I will refer to several currents in avant-garde discourse, especially Constructivism, which, according to Piotr Piotrowski, became the Polish national avant-garde tradition.⁶ Modernist emancipation of design will be particularly important here, with a focus on its utilitarian concept and social significance. These modernist ideas were accepted by the doctrine and suited the doctrinal slogan of the “socialist content” well.

temporary cultural practices.” See: <http://msl.org.pl/en/eventsms/events/100-years-of-the-avant-garde-in-poland,2107.html> [12 Aug. 2017]. A similar “visual” perspective was adopted by the MOMA, which prepared an outstanding presentation of the heritage of Russian Constructivism: *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde 3.12.2016-12.03.2017*. The main emphasis was put on poetry, film and photography. The website read: “In anticipation of the centennial of the Russian Revolution, this exhibition examines key developments and new modes of abstraction, including Suprematism and Constructivism, as well as avant-garde poetry, film, and photomontage”. More: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1668> [12 Aug. 2017].

- 3 “Universal palinode and the removal of any shameful trace of cultural Sovietization after the Socialist Realism period in Poland imperceptibly became a kind of moral blackmail: mentioning any artist as involved in previous art practices meant discrediting him”. See: A. Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1956 roku*, Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 2012, p. 469.
- 4 T. Fry, *A Geography of Power: Design History and Marginality*, in: *The Idea of Design*, eds. V. Margolin, R. Buchanan, The MIT Press, MA 1995, p. 217. “A non-universal design history is not simply an additional or supplemental approach within a plurality of positions. Rather, it is a fundamental challenge to the nature and authority of the current Eurocentric models of history writing. It will not be based on the same agenda, objects, rhetoric, or concerns”.
- 5 “Design is the product of our economic system. It bears the stamp of technology that we have to deal with. It is a kind of language and reflects emotional and cultural values”. See: D. Sudjic, *Język rzeczy. W jaki sposób rzeczy nas uwodzą*, Karakter, Warszawa 2013, pp. 57-58.
- 6 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989*, Rebis, Warszawa 2005, p. 51.

I propose looking at the complex issue of the so-called Socialist Realist design from a perspective which takes into account the continuity of the multilayered processes, including those characteristic for the avant-garde and modernization.⁷

The research conducted by two Russian scholars – Vladimir Paperny and Boris Groys in the 1970s and 1980s included the relation between Socialist Realist architecture/ design and modernism, and its strong influence on current practices. Paperny and Groys tend to place Socialist Realism in a broad context and employ Western theoretical frameworks, such as structuralism (Paperny⁸) and post-structuralism (Groys⁹). The legacy of the Russian avant-garde became the basic point of reference for the art and architecture of Socialist Realism in both researchers' papers. However, while Paperny focuses on describing them in terms of oppositions, contrasting what he calls “culture one” and “culture two”, Groys deconstructs these oppositions and tries to show that the avant-garde anticipated Socialist Realism and totalitarianism, fulfilling their ideas and goals. In this view, Socialist Realism becomes a concrete, and monstrous, realization of the utopian and totalist aspirations of the avant-garde¹⁰. However, although the avant-garde and Stalinism shared certain broad assumptions about modernization, Groys's conclusions go too far. His argument is a product of the postmodern revision of modernism and is a simplistic approach; it is therefore not useful for a study of the complexity of modernism or Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be placed in a simple opposition to modernism, nor can it be seen as a “shame” of the avant-garde.¹¹

Design national in form, socialist in content

The directives of the national variants of the doctrine were extremely difficult to implement in product design. However, the broader formula of “socialist content”

⁷ See: A. Sumorok, T. Załuski, *Rama teoretyczno-historyczna projektu*, in: *Socrealizmy i modernizacje*, eds. A. Sumorok, T. Załuski, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Wł. Strzemińskiego, Łódź 2017 (in print).

⁸ V. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin. Culture Two*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002.

⁹ B. Groys, *Stalin jako totalne dzieło sztuki*, transl. P. Kozak, Sic!, Warszawa 2010.

¹⁰ As a result, Groys's critical analysis is aimed not so much at Stalinist art, but, above all, at the modernist avant-garde: Socialist Realism becomes a tool for delegating and rejecting avant-garde projects concerning social life. In Poland, a similar approach is represented by W. Włodarczyk, *Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950-1954*, Paryż 1986; see also: L. Nader, *Co za wstyd! Historiografia o socrealizmie w latach 80.* (case study), <http://artmuseum.pl/pl/publikacje-online/luiza-nader-co-za-wstyd-historiografia-o-socrealizmie> [12 Aug. 2017].

¹¹ It is worth remembering that “the history of the Polish avant-garde goes beyond the interwar period. The avant-garde tradition and ethos had significant impact upon Polish artists decades later and largely determined the shape and direction of their work.” It should be added that this was also true of Polish design. Cf. <http://msl.org.pl/en/eventsms/events/100-years-of-the-avant-garde-in-poland,2107.html> [12 Aug. 2017].

was much better represented here. Most designers saw “socialist content” as a promise of attaining the avant-garde objectives of the social utility of art and design as a tool for changing and forming the new man.

The doctrine of Socialist Realism was a Soviet product from the beginning of the 1930s, initially concerning literature. It developed over the years and did not directly pertain to architecture or design. Its assumptions and guidelines changed with time, and were clearly represented in model works, such as, in the case of architecture and design, the Moscow subway, and later the construction of Moscow high-rise buildings (*vysotkas*).

The doctrine of Socialist Realism gradually implemented in so-called Eastern Europe since 1948, after the rejection of the Marshall Plan, took the form of ready-made slogans. In Poland, the doctrine was officially imposed in 1949. During carefully prepared meetings (so-called congresses), gathering the representatives of all art disciplines, schematic rules for each of them – literature, art (architecture), film and music were introduced and adopted. Notably, the sphere of applied art and design was not included in a separate program. David Crowley noted that “the politically correct face of design and the applied arts was (...) less clear. The tenets of Socialist Realism were difficult or even impossible to apply to the design of a vehicle or a teapot”.¹²

Design and interior design were situated at the intersection of art and architecture, though the program was defined according to the doctrinal guidelines concerning other disciplines, not directly design. The guidelines were made clear through exhibitions (occasionally devoted to design¹³) or model works. General slogans stated that forms must be socialist and humanist above everything else, to serve all human needs. However, the forms themselves were not clearly specified. They were to be easily recognized and therefore needed to refer to the well-known forms from the past. According to the Soviet model, history was understood as a kind of a bank of forms, details, and ornaments, from which it was possible to freely choose, although the state determined the degree of freedom.

The basic stylistic conventions were the European styles derived from the “classical” heritage: the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, elements of the Renaissance, and above all, the Neo-classicism, especially the academic style.¹⁴

¹² D. Crowley, “Design in the service of politics in the People’s republic”, in: *Out of the Ordinary. Polish Designers of the 20th Century*, ed. Cz. Frejlich, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Warsaw 2011, p. 186.

¹³ In fact, only one major exhibition devoted to design was held in the Socialist Realism period. Moreover, it was focused on the applied and decorative art rather than industrial or product design, whose role was downplayed. The First National Exhibition of Interior Architecture and Applied Art took place only in 1952. See: *I Ogólnopolska Wystawa Architektury Wnętrz i Sztuki Dekoracyjnej*, catalogue, Zachęta, Warszawa 1952.

¹⁴ See. B. Groys, *Stalin...*

The most important doctrinal postulate was that the new socialist forms were to be... NON-modernist.¹⁵ However, it was only the modernism in its avant-garde version that was condemned. In practice, continuity on both the ideological and the artistic level was clearly visible.

Design for the masses. The complex relationship between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism

The relationship between the prewar avant-garde design and the avant-garde of the Socialist Realism period cannot be reduced to the problem of style or forms. The issue of continuity lies in the sphere of ideas, especially those concerning the social role of design and its ability to create a new, better life for everyone. It must be remembered that the idea of designing everyday life was formulated in the 1920s by the avant-garde movement. Constructivists, like Osip Brik, postulated then that

our cultural creation is founded on a specific purpose. We do not conceive of a cultural and educational work unless it pursues some kind of a definite, practical aim. The concepts of »pure science«, »pure art«, »independent truth and beauty« are alien to us. We are practitioners – and in this lies the distinctive feature of our cultural consciousness.¹⁶

During the interwar period in Poland, the avant-garde ideas pertaining to space and design, particularly originating in Constructivism, were developed by such artists and designers as Władysław Strzemiński, Szymon Syrkus, Barbara and Stanisław Brukalskis – members of the groups Blok and later Praesens. The Constructivists strongly believed in the social equality of the New Man that can be attained thanks to a properly designed, modern and functional environment filled with mass-produced objects, especially steel furniture – the functionalist “fetish”.¹⁷ The avant-garde movements saw the role of design in a broader context, not only as the production of objects of daily use, but as an active factor in the transformation of the society.

This idea gained appreciation in Poland. However, avant-garde forms were not widely accepted in the Polish society. More familiar, not so anonymous objects

¹⁵ See: E. Goldzamt, *Zagadnienie realizmu socjalistycznego w architekturze*, in: *O polską architekturę socjalistyczną: materiały z Krajowej Partyjnej Narady Architektów odbytej w dniu 20-21.VI.1949 roku w Warszawie*, ed. J. Minorski, PWT, Warszawa 1951, p. 38; J. Minorski, *Architektura polska w dobie obecnej i odpowiedzialność architektów za jej dalszy rozwój. Referat Zarządu Głównego Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich na Krajową naradę Architektów*, rps, Warszawa 1953.

¹⁶ O. Brik, “Ot kartiny k sistu” *Lef* 1924, no. 2, p. 27-34; quoted after: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. J. E. Bowlt, Thames and Hudson, London 1988, p. 245.

¹⁷ D. Raizman, *History of Modern Design. Graphics and Products since the Industrial revolution*, Laurence King Publishing, London 2010, p. 196.

and furniture, moderately modern and made of wood, were much more popular among the intelligentsia.¹⁸

The co-operative of artists ŁAD (Order), established in 1926, was an influential group in prewar Poland. ŁAD's designers of pottery, textiles, and furniture promoted "good" design (believing in its potential of forming the new/modern man and his identity), manifested in not so extreme functional forms, closer to the tradition of Arts and Crafts.¹⁹ However, as argued by Crowley, "ŁAD's members saw their designs as prototypes for manufacturing, even if the group did not actively pursue strong connections with the Polish industry."²⁰

Regardless of the forms and the methods of their production, the new functional and moderately modern design played an important role in the process of modernization in interwar Poland. It is worth remembering that there were many concepts and models of modernization in the 1930s, often contradicting one another. Andrzej Szczerski, commenting on the inter-war modernization taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, notes that they showed "how differently modern mechanisms can be used to shape the unknown reality".²¹

After 1945, the idea of modernization, although subordinated to Communist politics, adapted to the local economic realities, and related to the process of the country's post-war reconstruction, gained even more intensity.²² Modernity, modernization, or futurology, although manifested in different forms and formulas, and dressed with ideological slogans, was more important than ever before. On the one hand, we are dealing with Soviet-imposed modernization. On the other, with overlapping pre-war ideas which, though subjected to a central program, were not always possible to control.

The pre-war model of modernization was still believed in, especially by the artists. In the domain of design and applied art, rational/modern organization of the living space for the new man seemed possible to implement. In fact, after 1945, design was to be transformed into an essential, modern element of the economic system. This was also the time of the consolidation of Władysław Strzemiński's functionalist ideas, such as the idea of using art as a tool for the modernization of everyday life, reflected e.g. in the curriculum of the newly founded art school in Łódź.²³ Moreover, Wanda Telakowska's concept of industrial design was also widely introduced. Telakowska pointed out that:

¹⁸ Compare: H. Bilewicz, „Meble w Zameczku prezydenta Ignacego Mościckiego w Wiśle. Kwestia chronologii, inwentarza i atrybucji”, *Porta Aurea* 2009, no. 7-8, p. 338.

¹⁹ D. Crowley, "Conflicting modernities: Design in the Inter-war Years", in: *Out of the ordinary...*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²¹ A. Szczerski, *Modernizacja: sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918 - 1939*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2010, p. 333.

²² Compare: A. Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2014.

²³ See: T. Załuski, „Futerał na ciało. Tayloryzm i biopolityka w koncepcji architektury funkcjonalistycznej Katarzyny Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego”, in: *Architektura przymusu*, eds. M. Domański, T. Ferenc, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Wł. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi, Łódź 2013, pp. 21-37.

Design is becoming increasingly visible in the city, the house, the environment in which people live and work, and the objects they use and are surrounded by. Not only personal items and everyday products such as clothing, footwear or furniture, kitchenware, sanitary ware and tableware – design goes further, affecting the appearance and performance of factory equipment, stations, means of transport, schools, hospitals, workplaces and leisure.²⁴

Telakowska understood design as the “beauty of everyday life, for everyone”. The program she formulated was directed against low-quality industrial production and quasi-folk objects. She put particular emphasis on the cooperation of designers with artists and folk craftsmen, leading to the establishment of creative collectives, combining experience and knowledge with natural “talent”. Telakowska believed that the products created in this way would be characterized by exceptional power of expression. Moreover, she demanded research on the issues of design and collaboration with the industry.

In the postwar reality, although externally imposed, the idea of involving artists in the production process and establishing creative collectives was put into practice. Professionally educated artists cooperated with amateur folk artists. It should be remembered that the roots of the creative collectives lie in the conceptions of the avant-garde of the 1920s, primarily the Constructivists. Telakowska argued that artists were responsible for the effective and creative operation of the collectives. She also stressed that the artists must have the highest professional competence, plus moral and pedagogical skills, and the knowledge of folk art.²⁵

Part of the Polish artistic community feared such far-reaching changes and limiting the role of the fine (pure) arts, especially when The Office of Production Aesthetics Monitoring (Biuro Nadzoru Estetyki Produkcji, BNEP) was founded in 1947. Its main goal was to stress the importance of industrial design and applied art. The BNEP Office established five workshops: metal, furniture, ceramics, glass, and fabrics and garments, in which models for both craft and mass production were developed by many artists of different backgrounds, including avant-garde ones, such as Władysław Strzemiński and the members of ŁAD, e.g. Władysław Wincze.²⁶

The Exhibition of the Regained Territories held in 1948 in Wrocław became a spectacular showcase of the actions undertaken to shape a new modern reality, manifested in new architecture, interiors, and design. Such promotion of modernity was also propagated at the same time in the press and professional magazines. *Architektura* – the only architectural magazine in Poland – claimed that “The

²⁴ Quoted after: *Sztuka dla życia. Wspomnienia o Wandzie Telakowskiej*, eds. K. Czerniewska, T. Reindal Warszawa 1988, p. 26.

²⁵ See: P. Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż, Bęc Zmiana*, Warszawa 2013, p. 215.

²⁶ W. Telakowska, *Wzornictwo, moja miłość*, “Biblioteka Wzornictwa Instytutu Wzornictwa Przemysłowego” 1990, no. 18, p. 16.

Exhibition (July-November) has been a proof of the innovativeness of modern Polish architecture and construction [as well as design - AS]”.²⁷

In practice, post-war interior and furniture design was initially associated with industrial production. In 1949, exhibitions devoted to cheap and functional furniture for residential interiors were organized, among others, on the initiative of the Central Board of Furniture Industry and Central Board of Wood Industry.²⁸ Jerzy Hryniewiecki noted in a review: “Mass-produced furniture based on artistic designs can and will become ‘functional’, an object of everyday use as well as of artistic expression. Like no other object, furniture is closely connected with life and is a true reflection of its era.”²⁹

Even after the adoption of the principles of Socialist Realism, much attention was paid to industrial design or to design adapted for industry, although this tendency gradually decreased after 1951. In 1950, the Museum of Creative Industries in Cracow held an exhibition entitled “Art for Industry”, where the students and professors from the Cracow State School of the Arts presented their works. In press commentaries and reviews, stress was put on the need to educate a new type of designer and artist, knowing both craftsmanship and the methods of industrial production, so that he could become a “rationalizer” in industry to enhance the aesthetics of the products.³⁰ Similarly to the modernist ideas of social art, emphasis was put on the art of everyday objects, which, thanks to the new methods of production, would become available to everybody.

It was already in 1951, on the occasion of the exhibition organized by the Association of Polish Artists in Warsaw, also including participants from the section of interior architecture and design, that the critics postulated an intense involvement of artists in fulfilling the requirements of mass production.³¹

Changes in design and applied art during the period of Socialist Realism were more related to political and organizational changes than to those associated with aesthetics and form. Crowley writes: “design was to be given an instrumental role in this new rational mechanism for meeting the needs of society”³², to be successfully included in the program of modernization originating in the 1920s. However, as he points out, “High demand and low level of production, as well as

²⁷ In fact, the whole issue of the architectural magazine was devoted to the exhibition. See *Architektura* 1948, no. 10, p. 33.

²⁸ J. Hryniewiecki, *Na drodze do nowego mebla*, “Architektura” 1948, no. 1, p. 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁰ W. Chomicz, *Sztuka dla przemysłu*, quoted after: *Polskie Życie Artystyczne 1944-1960*, rok 1950, ed. P. Strożek, v. 4, p. 24.

³¹ *Kronika krajowa. Wystawa malarstwa, rzeźby, grafiki, architektury wnętrza i sztuki dekoracyjnej Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków Okręgu Warszawskiego*, in: “Przegląd artystyczny” 1951, no. 3, p. 66.

³² D. Crowley, *Design in the service of politics in the People`s republic*, in: *Out of the ordinary...*, p. 188.

the artificial pricing regime, meant that this was a producers' market in which the consumer had relatively little sway over things which reached the shops".³³

Due to the political directive of centralization, there were two monopolist institutions in the field of applied arts and design: Cepelia (Polish Arts and Handicraft Foundation) and IWP (Institute of Industrial Design). The Institute of Industrial Design was transformed into a major company. However, its role was later diminished. Its priority, at least theoretically, were still the tasks of modernist provenance: the training of artists, establishment of creative collectives, and popularization of design and industrial production.³⁴ Both IWP and Cepelia were concerned with supporting the development of craftsmanship, deepening cooperation between artists and folk artists, and between artists and industry, according to the postulate of "spreading the ideas associated with art's new social function in the People's Republic of Poland".³⁵ Despite the monopolistic practices of these state institutions, it cannot be denied that they were based on the interwar legacy, especially that the designers continued to pursue their modernist interests often slightly adapted to the new, poorly defined and enigmatic guidelines.

It is also worth remembering that the state patronage and protection over art and design, based on the Soviet model, was the dream of many artists of the interwar period.³⁶ In practice, the new difficult political reality sometimes did provide new opportunities, but, on the other hand, economic and ideological constraints limited artistic freedom.

Public interiors were as a whole much closer to the Socialist Realist guidelines than single objects or products (il. 1, 2). However, even the most prestigious state buildings, historical reconstructions, details and ornaments remained aesthetically distant from the Soviet "wedding cake" eclectic style.

Design education, curricula, and (the absence of) Socialist Realism

The history of the curriculum development at the Academy of Fine Arts, renamed the State School of Arts, shows the vitality of the modernist ideas, including those of the avant-garde origin, in the field of design. The lack of tradition of design departments inevitably led to the references to the interwar period, when the idea of design as such began to take shape. Wojciech Włodarczyk emphasizes that "The authorities had no idea what Socialist Realism should look like at such a department. Instead of working out a common specific program, particular gro-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ IWP, *Z działalności instytucji plastycznych*, "Przegląd artystyczny" 1951, no. 6, p. 79.

³⁵ See: A. Wojciechowski, *O sztuce użytkowej i użytecznej. Zbiór studiów krytyk z zakresu współpracy plastyki polskiej z rzemiosłem, przemysłem i architekturą w latach 1944-1954*, Sztuka, Warszawa 1955.

Compare: I. Luba, *Duch Romantyzmu i Modernizacja. Sztuka oficjalna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Neriton, Warszawa 2012.

ups of academics were pursuing their own interests.”³⁷ Regardless of the political changes, the curricula differed, and the direction of research was determined by individuals (mostly deans), such as Jerzy Soltan in Warsaw, Władysław Wincze in Wrocław, Marian Sigmund in Cracow, Władysław Strzemiński and Stefan Wegner in Łódź, and their artistic interests, usually distant from the Socialist Realism doctrine and rooted in modernism.

One of the most interesting curricula that originated in the avant-garde tradition was introduced in Łódź for the new art school established there in 1945.³⁸ It was based on Władysław Strzemiński's theories and modeled in many ways on the Bauhaus tradition. Emphasis was placed on socially useful design, industrial design, and holistic interior design. The Department of Spatial Engineering, later transformed into the Department of Interior Architecture, oriented its educational program primarily towards architecture and construction. The program included such subjects as general construction, geometry, constructional law, statics, materials science, mathematics, public utility buildings design, housing design, urban planning, concrete and reinforced concrete structures, and steel structures. Although this modern curriculum was changed in the period of Socialist Realism and Władysław Strzemiński was expelled from the school, the Department of Interior Architecture was not formally closed until 1955.³⁹ The school was made to concentrate on textile design. The head of the Department of Textile Design was Lucjan Kintopf, who continued his pre-war work with jacquard.⁴⁰

The curriculum strongly rooted in the interwar tradition, promoting the mission of applied arts, but implemented in non-avant-garde forms was adopted by the Architecture Department at the Higher State School of Arts in Wrocław. The curriculum, created by Władysław Wincze⁴¹, member of the ŁAD group and its main postwar re-organizer, was based on the one developed at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in the interwar period. The program included such basic courses as interior design, furniture design, technical drawing, geometry, and composition, along with the history of interior and architecture, and workshops concentrating on the knowledge of materials. The students also took a general course in painting,

³⁷ W. Włodarczyk, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie w latach 1944-2004: 100 lat Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie*, Warszawa 2005, p. 128.

³⁸ Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi 1945-1995, ed. G. Sztabiński, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego, Łódź 1995.

³⁹ J. Ładnowska, *Kronika Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Sztuk Plastycznych w Łodzi, 1945-1994*, in: *Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi 1945-1995*, ed. G. Sztabiński, Łódź 1995, pp. 127-161.

⁴⁰ See: *Lucjan Kintopf: mistrz żakardu i jego uczniowie, exhibition catalogue*, ed. M. Wróblewska-Markiewicz, Centralne Muzeum Włókiennictwa, Łódź 2015.

⁴¹ I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze, twórca i pedagog*, in: *Szkice z pamięci. Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych we Wrocławiu, we wspomnieniach jej założycieli, studentów i pedagogów. Lata 1946-1996*, ed. A. Saj, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 1996, p. 109.

sculpture, and graphic forms. In accord with the tradition of craftsmanship and ŁAD, the main emphasis was put on furniture design.⁴² The artistic credo of Władysław Wincze he passed on to the students was: “interior design is a creative enterprise that brings harmony and order into a given space.”⁴³

Socialist Realist furniture design. Is there such a thing as a soc-realist chair?

Professional designers active in the period of Socialist Realism in Poland (1949-1956) were mostly representatives of the generation that began their careers in the 1930s and were influenced by modernist ideas. In fact, they continued their earlier artistic pursuits, slightly adapted to the requirements of the new doctrine, especially in the field of furniture design. The artists largely abandoned the avant-garde forms, but not the universal idea of social design (not contradictory to the doctrinal guidelines).

The new, imposed tendencies in furniture design affected more than just forms, the system of production, and the type of the produced/manufactured furniture. The main stress was put not on furnishing residential interiors (and therefore enhancing the culture of everyday life), but public interiors: the more luxurious ones of the state institutions, and those at public utility buildings – kindergartens, schools, social clubs and conference rooms. They represented traditional forms, slightly more massive than those of the pre-war period, but still far from the socialist realist guidelines concerning historical stylization. The furniture was manufactured in small series, sometimes handcrafted by local (often prewar) craftsmen. The mass production of furniture postulated at the beginning of the 1950s was fiction.

Despite the political and institutional changes, the formal tendencies in furniture design were similar to those observed in the prewar period. In fact, furniture was often the least Socialist Realist element of an interior. It was also difficult to formulate doctrinal expectations for furniture.

If any historical stylization was implemented at that time, it was subtle historical reference rather than formal eclecticism, as in the case of the furniture designed by Jan Bogusławski (for the Council of Ministers) or Czesław Konthe (Hotel Warsaw). Even the furniture created for the most important, prestigious state premises (e.g. the Parliament) presented elaborate elegant forms, avoiding pathetic solutions (e.g. Jan Bogusławski’s furniture for the party headquarters) (il. 3).

Moreover, traditional, mostly ŁAD-style (only slightly changed) furniture prevailed in the first half of the 1950s. Many utilitarian, non-representational sets of furniture were made for conference rooms, libraries, so-called “palaces of culture” (often typical buildings; the term “palace” was used figuratively) (il. 4).

⁴² I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze...*, p. 109-110.

⁴³ Quoted after: *ibid.*, p. 109.

Sets that were functional and simple in form were also designed for the interiors of state institutions (e.g. PKPG – State Economic Planning Commission) by Olgierd Szlekys and Władysław Księżyc, among others (il. 5).⁴⁴

Similar style was characteristic of the furniture designed by Władysław Wincze: harmonious, structural and logical, designed for representative state and public utility interiors in Wrocław. Wincze can be described as the “classic” of furniture design. This term can be also applied more widely to the whole generation of prewar designers and their students.⁴⁵ The group of designers educated by Władysław Wincze included Irena Pać-Zaleśna, Tadeusz Forowicz, Tadeusz Kowalczyk, Zbigniew Kawecki and Józef Chierowski.

Marian Sigmund was an influential designer representing the same prewar style and artistic background (ŁAD). Sigmund’s furniture intended for the interiors of Nowa Huta, especially the Administration Center, displayed substantial similarity to his earlier work, such as the lobby set of armchairs with a table. The armchairs were characterized by softly shaped forms, further emphasized by its colour of light volt and supported by thin, delicate legs characteristic for Sigmund's style.⁴⁶

In the case of textiles or metalwork, Socialist Realism manifested itself in figural forms, though we rarely encounter schematic, doctrinal realism. It is worth mentioning the textiles of Józefa Wnukowa, the jacquard fabrics designed by Lucjan Kintopf, the tapestries of their students Helena and Stefan Gałkowski, and Andrzej Milewicz, and the metalwork inspired by the art deco tradition (il. 6) by Henryk Grunwald. These artists, although far from closely following the directives of the doctrine (if any such directives indeed existed – sic!), were positively evaluated by contemporary critics, such as Aleksander Wojciechowski. Moreover, their work actively aided the process of reconstruction and the construction of the new country, and thus modernization.

Due to the pragmatic orientation of the artists and the continuity of modernist artistic solutions, it is difficult to find explicit Socialist Realist traits in the design of that time, especially as the term “Socialist Realist design” remains undefined. Design that is neutral in its forms can be linked to the doctrine on the level of the socialist context, aiming at consequent changes in lifestyle. However, the idea of socially-oriented design combined with modernization was unquestionably derived from broadly understood avant-garde movements.

⁴⁴ I. Huml, *Artystyczne curriculum Olgierda Szlekysa*, in: Olgierd Szlekys. *Wnętrza, meble, malarstwo*, ed. T. Wyderkowa, Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków, Muzeum Historyczne m. st. Warszawy, Warszawa 1982, pp. 5-17.

⁴⁵ See: I. Huml, *Władysław Wincze ...*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

We should not treat this phenomenon as an ideological contradiction. Despite the absence of avant-garde forms and of mass industrial production, many avant-garde and pre-war ideas were (successfully) put into practice at that time, such as the design of life for the better tomorrow of the egalitarian (socialist) society.

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AWANGARDOWE KORZENIE POLSKIEGO DESIGNU W LATACH 1949-1956. KILKA SPOSTRZEŻEŃ (streszczenie)

Trudno w sztuce użytkowej i designie lat 1949-1956 doszukiwać się cech jawnie socrealistycznych. Zresztą trudno byłoby je też precyzyjnie zdefiniować. Socrealistyczność designu, formalnie neutralnego, tkwić mogła co najwyżej w sferze socjalistycznego kontekstu, wytworzenia w konsekwencji zmian ustrojowych socjalistycznej formy życia. Ale sama idea zorientowanego społecznie designu połączonego z kwestią modernizacyjną wywodziła się z szeroko pojętych ruchów awangardowych. Relacja polskiego designu z okresu realizmu socjalistycznego z modernizmem i awangardą wcale więc nie jest oczywista. W powszechnym dyskursie dominuje jednoznaczne przeciwstawienie modernizmu socrealizmowi zakorzenione w odwilżowym micie przełomu 1956 roku. Problem ten zaś wymaga większego niuansowania, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do designu.

Słowa kluczowe: socrealizm, design, awangarda



1. Socialist Realist furniture? Furniture for the Medical University's auditorium, design W. Borawski, Łódź, photo A. Sumorok



2. The Parliament: hall, design B. Pniewski and team, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



3. Table designed for the former party headquarters, author Jan Bogusławski, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



4. Typical library furniture, Palace of Culture in Gdańsk Nowy-Port, photo A. Sumorok



5. Set of furniture for the former PKPG, design Cz. Knothe, W. Książyc, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński



6. The Parliament: metalwork, detail of the brass barrier, Henryk Grunwald, Warsaw, photo W. Kamiński