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Best of 1950s Soviet Design on Show in London

By Malika Giles

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"Work and Play Behind the Iron Curtain" at the Gallery for Russian Arts and Design in London brings together more than 50 key design objects from the 1950s. Part of GRAD's ongoing exploration of Russian design history, this show tackles a relatively unknown yet prolific period that produced designs that were quirky, colorful and often charming.

Alex Chiriac, co-curator of the exhibit, talked to The Moscow Times about a number of the objects currently on show.

'It's Time for a Grand Housewarming,' Poster, 1959.

This brightly colored poster promotes a 1959 documentary on urban reform in the Soviet Union. Wearing a lemon-colored dress, a modern Soviet housewife flings open the windows of her new home. Outside, cranes stand ready to haul concrete panels into place, adding the finishing touches to a new apartment building in cheery communist red. It depicts the mass housing drive launched by Nikita Khrushchev with the goal of giving every Soviet

family its own apartment. This in turn led to a new interest in domestic goods, and factories began branching out in new directions.

Nevalyashka Doll. 1950-1970s.

Generations of Soviet toddlers were entertained by some version of the Nevalyashka roly-poly doll, the matryoshka's less glamorous cousin. Wooden versions were popular in the 19th century, representing rubicund merchants and clowns. The first Nevalyashkas were probably inspired by Japanese Daruma dolls, which function as good luck charms and represent Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism. The principle is always the same: a weight placed low inside the hollow body of the toy ensures it always bounces back to a vertical position. Coupled with a colorful appearance and a tinkling sound, the Nevalyashka is a fun and engaging toy, still popular to this day. It assumed its shiny new plastic incarnation in the late 1950s at the Sergiev Posad toy institute and was rolled out to factories across the Soviet Union. The mass drive for consumer goods led to strange synergies, with one gunpowder plant adding the new toys to its production line in 1959. It still manufactures them today, in a range of 35 different models.

Soviet Music 'On the Bone'

These unusual records produced on recycled X-ray scans were part of an illegal practice by Soviet dissidents, begun in the late 1940s. It was often the only opportunity to enjoy Western music such as jazz and foxtrot, and hits by the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley or The Beatles. The just-visible grooves on the surface were made by pressing an original master recording against a heated and exposed X-ray film. 'Music on bones' as it was known was literally made on recycled X-rays of spinal cords, chest cavities and limbs taken from hospital bins and archives. As the grooves produced by this process were quite shallow, the records could only be played a small number of times, which enhanced their illicit quality.

Vending Machine. 1960s.

A Soviet take on beverage vending machines, these ubiquitous dispensers offered only two choices: fizzy water or fizzy water flavored with syrup of a dubious provenance. One kopek would get you the first, while the second option cost three kopeks, but it was much more satisfying to trick the machine into dispensing free soda. Children excelled at this, tying coins to fishing lines or kicking it in just the right spot. Mothers, however, viewed it as an unhygienic scourge. The machine came with another Soviet invention, the bevelled 12-sided glass. Each user was supposed to rinse out the glass by pressing it down onto the little fountain found inside the dispenser, making it perfectly safe for the next person to drink from, in theory.

"Chaika" (Seagull) Vacuum Cleaner. 1956.

Soviet women were soon being promised their own share of the Space Age, with cutting-edge domestic goods that would improve their quality of life. Designs reflected this new age of cosmic exploration. One vacuum cleaner was called the Seagull and resembled a speeding rocket. Another model was shaped like the planet Saturn, even with a ring surrounding it. Hardwearing and hardworking, these vacuums did not just suck air in, they could also expel it,

which made them popular tools for whitewashing ceilings and walls. Despite all these qualities, they were viewed with suspicion in some quarters. Mothers-in-law did not take kindly to these newfangled machines, viewing them as a helping hand for work-shy housewives. Rival designers criticized the arrow-shaped decorations on the Seagull's body, claiming that eight tons of metal a year were wasted on a superfluous element. Despite the naysayers, the vacuum cleaners soon became objects of desire that often had to be procured during a special trip to the capital and would then remain in the family for years.

Alyonka Chocolate Wrappers.

The Alyonka chocolate wrapper is one of the most iconic Soviet packaging designs, remaining a popular brand after more than 50 years. Urban legends circulated about the way the chocolate got its name, some claiming it was inspired by the offspring of cosmonauts Yury Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova, both of whom had daughters called Alyonka. In reality, photographer Alexander Gerinas took a striking image of his eight-month-old daughter in 1960. The portrait of the little girl, with her cherubic face framed by a colorful headscarf was widely circulated in Soviet magazines.

Four years later, in 1964, a painted version of the photo was adopted for the Alyonka chocolate wrapper by Moscow's Red October factory. The image proved to be incredibly popular among the Soviet public, even inspiring short poems which began to be included on the back of the wrappers. Although images of other children have featured on Alyonka bars over the years, the original painting of Lena remains the most popular design and continues to be produced today.

'Moscow' Perfume.

A bourgeois luxury once upon a time, perfume was rehabilitated with the rise of synthetic ingredients thanks to the the development of the Soviet chemical industry during Khrushchev's Seven-Year Plan. No longer an extravagance, it was now available to everyone, from factory girls to husbands looking for a handy gift on International Women's Day. The New Dawn factory produced a wide range of goods such as the 'Stone Flower' fragrance, with a decadent Faberge inspired box.

"Work and Play Behind the Iron Curtain" runs till Aug 24. The exhibit also features models and photographs from the famous ZIL factory. GRAD: Gallery for Russian Arts and Design. 3-4A Little Portland St, London. Tel. +44 207 637 7274. www.grad-london.com

See the photo gallery:

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