

FASHION DESIGN AT GUM,  
THE STATE DEPARTMENT STORE AT MOSCOW

# SOVIET INVESTMENT IN FLAMBOYANCE

Fashion at GUM – a “closed” demonstration of fashion designs to foreign haute couture delegation at the end of the 1950s.

**S**oviet fashion was institutionalized in the 1950s and 1970s. Hundreds of large and small design organizations were established. Thousands of professional designers and patternmakers were employed. Their numbers increased constantly during these twenty odd years. In the Soviet Union, the state financed all the fashion design institutions, but these belonged to different administrative units or ministries that organized their own networks and structures. In addition to design institutes and fashion ateliers, the ministries set up a great number of scientific institutes and laboratories that laid the foundation for the design and construction of clothes. In the Soviet Union, fashion design, like any field of activity, needed a solid scientific ground.

At least four main administrative systems were engaged in fashion design, the organization of which received their final shape in the late 1960s: the Ministry of Light Industry (fashion design for the purposes of industrial mass production), the Ministry of the Everyday Services (designs for individual sewing or custom-made clothes in the fashion ateliers), as well as the Ministries of Trade and Local Industry. Most important economically were the first two. Here we shall focus primarily on the characteristics of fashion design in the Soviet trade organizations, examining in particular the Fashion Department of GUM, the State Department Store in Moscow.

Contrary to what would have been expected with regard to the highly centralized and planned economic system, no single administrative body existed in Soviet fashion design. The idea of increasing specialization served as an antithesis to strict centralization and motivated new fashion houses as well as ateliers of individual sewing of custom-made clothes. The ministries responsible for providing the population with new and better clothes often referred to the principle of specialization in lobbying for their own administrative interests – and in particular for the necessity of establishing

their own new fashion organizations requiring additional financial resources from the state budget.

In practice, different units acted quite independently. In some creative questions and in their appeal to consumers they often engaged in competition with one another. Under conditions of chronic shortages, however, such competition was of quite limited character. Nevertheless, one should not neglect the reports that testify to strong ambitions among the directors of the units, as well as among the very designers themselves, nor the role of the socialist competition between the fashion houses in achieving the highest results. This tendency of administrative specialization had less positive consequences too, such as the overlapping of functions, parallelism, and the unnecessary waste of the limited financial resources of the state. Despite the great quantities of new designs and great efforts put into promoting fashion, a Soviet consumer could generally not buy the fashionable, higher quality clothes in the shops. Probably more than in any other sector of consumption, the Soviet consumers were dissatisfied with the garment industry and trade.

This raised the question of whether these design organizations really were of any use at all. This theme was openly discussed in the Soviet press and among the experts throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Many quite reasonable measures were suggested in order to improve the situation, some of which were also realized in practice. Often the decisions taken on the governmental level did not have the expected effects because other organizations worked against them. Gradually, the leaders and the planning offices became aware that one could not really regulate such a delicate and rapidly changing sphere as fashion industry with the same administrative directives as was common in many other fields of the Soviet economy.

**The search for** more effective forms of administration led in the 1960s to the emergence of the so-called main organizations of design which received additional authority and the status of an inter-administrative unit. This was true in particular of the four all-union houses of design under the Ministry of Light Industry, those designing clothes, tricot clothes, shoes, and other leather items. They had the responsibility to study the present and future trends and to help the centrally planned economy cope better with the seasonal stylistic changes of dress. They regularly presented their ideas and results to the fashion specialists at the annual methodical meetings of fashion designers and patternmakers.

At the end of the 1960s, yet another main fashion institute was created which came to have a very decisive role in promoting the unity of Soviet fashion design in the whole country. This was the All-Union Institute of the Assortment of the Light Industry and the Culture of Dress under the Ministry of Light Industry (shorter: VIAlegprom). While the All-Union Houses of Fashion functioned practically autonomously in relation to one another, each one within its own field of specialization (the design of clothes, tricot, shoes, or leather items), VIAlegprom was created to overcome the disadvantage of such a specialization by promoting the design of complex sets of clothing. People did not simply want to wear a fashionable dress or a pair of shoes but wanted to dress fashionably and beautifully as a whole. In or-

der to achieve this result, one had to work scientifically, it was argued: to study and to agree on the present and the future trends of fashion in every aspects, the colors and type of the textiles and other materials (for instance, leather, fur, and others), the style of the dress as well as shoes, hats, underwear, hairdressing, and cosmetics, etc. VIAlegprom gradually left the ODMO, the All-Union House of Fashion Design behind it in the official hierarchy of the Soviet fashion in the 1970s.

**The directives** of the main fashion organizations and the decisions made during their methodical meetings (shape and contours, style, colors, etc) were only recommendations. They offered the Soviet designers and the patternmakers a kind of general orientation. These recommendations were reinforced by the orders of the Ministry of the Light Industry but they had only a rather formal character. Neither the archives nor the interviews with the former workers revealed any cases where someone would have been punished or reprimanded for not following the recommendations of the center. Soviet fashion design undoubtedly had its own taboos. The fashion designers mostly followed their own professional standards of beauty in their creative activity. The limits of Soviet sexual decency were quite narrow, and some signs, colors and patterns were never even on the table because of their obvious religious or political connotations. The destiny of jeans in the USSR offers a good example of such taboos.

“Look at the jeans I got as a present”, L. I. Brezhnev proudly declared with obvious pleasure, turning around and demonstrating like a fashion model the “symbol of the American way of life” which fit his corpulent figure very well. Such a rare scene could be seen in the beginning of the 1970s in the office of the main director of the Moscow State Department Store (GUM) when the artistic director of the Fashion Department, D. B. Shimilis' happened to drop in the room: it was obvious not only that the jeans appealed to Brezhnev, but he was also well aware of their obvious ideological connotations. What surprised Shimilis was not the relation of confidentiality which reigned between Brezhnev and the director of this most famous Soviet department store on the Red Square. The Soviet political leadership at the Kremlin regularly visited its “closed” departments and, together with their family members, provided themselves with all the necessary consumer goods and sprang to the services of the designers and other employees of its fashion atelier. What surprised Shimilis more was Brezhnev's highly positive reaction to this comfortable and practical piece of clothing which, until the 1980s, suffered in the USSR from the ideological labeling as a symbol of American imperialism. Therefore, the Fashion Department at GUM, the purpose of which was to design beautiful and practical clothes for the Soviet citizens, could not design domestic Soviet jeans.

## GUM – MAIN ATTRACTION AT RED SQUARE

The GUM building was constructed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries following the example of the best European department stores. Originally it was called “Upper trade rows”. During the Revolution and the Civil War it was closed. Its commercial activities started again during the New Economic Policy and went on for a very short time in the 1920s when it received its name State Department Store, or GUM. In the 1930s it was closed again. It wasn't reopened again until after Stalin's death in 1953 on the order of the Government of the USSR. This “reawakening” of GUM was really a sign of its times. Or at least this is how people then understood it. The new leaders of the country who had declared that the problems of consumption would now be prioritized decided to create an “exemplary department store” in Moscow which would offer the best possible goods and commodities with the most progressive forms of trade and service.

It was opened at the very Red Square which, during the Soviet era, had a pre-eminently political status as the main symbol of the Soviet power. It was a festive place, in fact, the holy place of all the important Soviet state rituals. Just 50 meters from the show windows of GUM was the holiest of holy sites, Lenin's mausoleum, behind which many other famous revolutionaries and leaders of the Communist Party were buried in the Kremlin wall. At the Red Square, parades and official demonstrations were organized regularly. The pioneers made their vows and the students had their graduation ceremonies there. It is therefore quite obvious that the reanimation of trade at such a special place was a politically important event and by no means an accident. GUM was meant to become yet another major attraction at the Red Square – the main proof of the achievements of Soviet power in the field of trade and serving of the population.

**GUM was the biggest** store in the USSR both according to the turnover of products and its number of employees. It was the “main store of the country”. At its opening it had three and a half thousand workers; in 1973 its work collective consisted of seven thousand workers. According to the official statistics, 200,000-300,000 people visited it every day, buying 220,000-230,000 items.<sup>3</sup> Muscovites were naturally among its regular customers, but numerous guests from the other republics and regions of the USSR visited it too. The foreign tourists, for whom GUM became one of the main attractions of the capital, were mainly interested in its rich department of souvenirs. The department store had a special status which was kept up mainly because all the consumer goods which, because of limited supply, were the most difficult to find elsewhere, were sent here: This made GUM very attractive to customers. If you could not buy it at GUM it was probably not available for purchase anywhere in the Soviet Union. From 1950 to 1970 GUM sold 70-85 percent of all the better quality consumer goods, or high demand goods, produced in Moscow.<sup>4</sup> Among these, the imported goods became all the more important: for instance, as early

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as the end of the 1950s they made up over 30 percent of all the fabrics sold at GUM.<sup>5</sup> The department store became notorious among the Soviet population for its long queues, which could stretch up to several kilometers.

### THE FASHION ATELIER

Just like the rest of the department store, the Fashion Atelier – or the atelier of individual sewing of clothes, as it was officially called – which opened its doors in the spring of 1954, was thought from the very beginning to be exemplary. It belonged to the category of “lux” and could therefore charge 70 percent more for its services than the ateliers that belonged to the – otherwise highest – first class. All customers who either could not find any adequate clothes in the ordinary shops because of their “deviant” body shape and size or their outstanding taste connected with their striving for a more individual style were expected to turn to the services of the Atelier at GUM. Many members of the cultural and administrative elite of the country were among its regular customers. At the end of the 1950s, this atelier became the methodical center of the system of individual sewing (indposhiva) or custom-made clothes, within the Soviet system of trade. The specialists of trade and fashion came here from all over the country to learn about the most advanced methods of trade.<sup>6</sup>

From 1955 to 1960 the collective of the Atelier GUM consisted of 500 people. At the beginning of the 1960s, it filled up to 60,000 orders a year which, compared to the number of potential customers in Moscow, was not all that much. As everyone knew, those who would have wished to get their clothes sewn here greatly outnumbered the number of orders actually taken. This created chronic shortages and, as was quite common in the Soviet Union, promoted the system of bribes and illegal deals of all kinds.

According to their plans, the male and female salons should receive a certain number of orders every day. However, the principle of having only one single queue for all the customers was soon abandoned in practice. Not only was one's place in line turned into an object of financial speculation, but in addition, the employees of the Atelier had an obligation to fill the orders coming from “people who had special needs”. This took place by order of the administration of GUM, the executive committee of the Moscow city administration (Mosgorispolkom), or the Ministry of Trade. According to the directors of the Atelier, it received up to 500 such orders for men's clothing alongside the official queue each year, in both 1956 and 1957.<sup>7</sup> The number of such special orders must have been at least as high in the department for women's clothing.

The salons where the customers' orders were received were supposed to become the real “display windows” of the Atelier. They employed consulting patternmakers who gave advice to the customers about which fashionable designs would fit them best. They also offered advice about the proper fabrics to be used in sewing the clothes. These fashion consultants would, while advising their customers, not only be occupied with the reception and consignment of their orders but also with propagandizing for Soviet fashion and educating the customers in the matters of good



A beach dress designed by L. F. Averyanova. The 1958 GUM fashion album.

The fitting of a fashionable suit at an atelier that was part of “indposhiv”, the Soviet system of custom-made clothes, early 1960s.



The leading fashion designers at GUM in the second half of the 1950s. E. A. Tomashevich and E. N. Istomina are the first two from the left, R. A. Singer and L. F. Averyanova, the first two from the right.

**Brezhnev in well-cut jeans. Anachronism or resignation, depends on one's perspective.**

**When many want what few can enjoy. A society of queues arises when things must cost nothing.**

taste. Special display windows with regularly changing designs showed the newest clothes worked out by the patternmakers of the Atelier. Several fashion journals and albums were at the disposal of the customers. From them they could select all the new designs they liked. The comments book at the Atelier included many positive notes but the customers also complained about the “formalism” of the service and of old journals with designs gone out of fashion long ago.

**The main reason** for the great popularity of GUM was that in its early years the Ministry of Trade gave it the opportunity to select its textiles and other goods from among the best and most fashionable domestic and imported clothes. Unlike all the other ateliers, GUM did not in the beginning sew any clothes from the customer's own textiles. Later this changed under the pressure of the concrete conditions of work. As early as 1964, half the orders were sewn from the customers' own textiles. In the beginning of the 1960s, the Atelier lost its right to get special provisions, textiles, tools and instruments directly from the central stores of the Ministry and had to provide itself with what was available in the regular store rooms of GUM. These provided equally all the other ordinary clothes selling departments with all their goods. They had an equal interest in getting the best-selling fabrics – those in “deficit” or in short supply – which led to repeated conflicts between them. The directors of the Atelier complained regularly about the bad quality of the textiles available at GUM, the meager variety, monotonous colors. Sometimes only silk was available, at other times wool, etc. However, in general, the quality of the clothes sewn at the Atelier was better than the ready-made clothes sold in the Soviet shops at the time.<sup>8</sup>

The status of “Lux” of the Atelier at GUM gave it many valuable advances compared with the first-class ateliers of the “indposhiva”. In these, the norm for clothes that the patternmakers were supposed to fill every month was 60, at GUM, only 32. In the first-class ateliers the monthly salary was 900 rubles per month, at GUM, 1400 (in April 1958).<sup>9</sup> Under these beneficial conditions the patternmakers of the Atelier at GUM had more time to work individually with their clients and to design new clothes according to the wishes of the individual clients. Most importantly, they could sew more fashionable and modern clothes of high quality. Clothes sewn at an atelier of the luxury category had a higher price too. One of the peculiarities of the Soviet system of fashion was, however, that the state in fact subsidized quite heavily custom-made clothes, which made them competitive with – indeed often even cheaper than – similar ready-to-wear garments.

The Atelier had a small experimental workshop that specialized in designing, working out new ideas, and developing finished patterns from the sketches they received from the ordinary patternmakers. Its major task was, however, the adaptation of the more promising and marketable designs which came from the other fashion institutes in the USSR to the concrete capacities of the Atelier at GUM.<sup>10</sup> It was in general not profitable for the patternmakers of the ateliers to experiment with any fundamentally new, fashionable designs. For to be creative one had to ignore the annual plans and quotas and the attendant personal bonuses. As a result,

instead of really exclusive and individual service, the clients were after all mostly offered a rather limited collection of more or less fashionable designs worked out by the local patternmakers.

The employees of the Atelier were well aware of these problems. For instance, in one of its regular party meetings in 1955, the confectioner Smorodinova claimed that “the patternmakers of the Atelier are not at all interested in doing any more demanding designs. Neither are they interested in offering their customers new designs from the Fashion Design Department of GUM. They want to do something simpler.”<sup>11</sup> The situation did not change for ten years: in 1964 the patternmakers were criticized again at the party meeting for purposefully simplifying the designs and patterns in order to achieve the goals of the plan.<sup>12</sup> “We live with old designs, and the new ones appear very seldom”,<sup>13</sup> the same Smorodinova repeated her accusations again in January 1964.

The meetings of the party organization had a critical and open atmosphere. Here, the workers, referring to the opinion of their customers, mostly complained about the low quality of the design at the Atelier. In September 1959, the general director of GUM, Kamenev, was very critical of its work: “The designs we show lag behind real life ... The Atelier does not have a leading role in the design of the new clothes, ...”<sup>14</sup> Even after such harsh criticism, the leaders of the Atelier continued to follow their policy of promoting their own autonomy in the field of fashion design, also in relation to another department of GUM which engaged only in designing fashionable models and which had come into being at the same time as the Atelier.

## COLLECTIONS OF COMMANDS

The Department of Fashion Design was established at GUM in 1954 at Anastas Mikoyan's personal initiative. As a long time leader of the Soviet trade he was well known not only as an experienced politician, diplomat, and a lobbyist for the interests of his own ministry, but also as a defender of the transfer into the Soviet system of consumption of the best international experience and perspectives.<sup>15</sup> The founding of the Department of Fashion Design at GUM was one of his experiments. Until then, the big Soviet department stores did not have their own departments of fashion design. As Mikoyan hoped, the Department “should be the first one in the Union, and, who knows, with time, it could become even better than those in the other countries”.<sup>16</sup> He was also well known for liking to dress well and for making use of the services of the best tailors in Moscow.

The tasks of the Fashion Design Department were from the very beginning quite unusual for a trade organization and not at all directly related to the regular sale of commodities – the design of clothes, the propagation of fashion and good taste among the populace (for instance, by publishing fashion albums and booklets as well as by organizing regular fashion shows at the demonstration hall), and, finally, the establishment of the trade relations with the textile factories in order to produce new clothes in small series following the designs of GUM. The designers at GUM were expected not only to design male and female clothes, shoes, and hats. They started to create complete seasonal collec-

tions consisting of a whole set of 100-150 designs of primarily female clothes. All this was to a great extent reminiscent of the tasks of another main organization of Soviet fashion design, the All-Union House of Clothes Fashion Design, ODMO, which made possible thoughts of the birth of a parallel, competing organization.

**Mikoyan continued to** be personally interested in the workings of the department. He attended fashion shows, often in the company of other members of the Soviet leadership, like A. N. Kosygin. Mikoyan's son, Vano Mikoyan, who became a famous constructor of airplanes and the director of the firm MIG, was a regularly seen guest at the shows. Mikoyan was among those Soviet leaders who understood that fashion, like culture in general, was an international phenomenon, and consequently he worked hard to promote international cooperation in this area. As early as 1956, the designer L. F. Averyanova from GUM was included in the small delegation of the Ministry of Trade which for the first time headed for Paris in order to study the famous fashion houses there.<sup>17</sup> In Averyanova's own words, the twenty days she spent in Paris changed her ideas not only about fashion and her own profession, but also about life in general.<sup>18</sup> Mikoyan thus succeeded in surpassing his main competitor, the Ministry of Light Industry, which, as we know, the All-Union House of Fashion worked under. The representatives of ODMO visited Paris, the Mecca of International Fashion, only a year later, at the end of 1957.

During the second half of the 1950s, The Department of Fashion Design at GUM was one of the leaders of Soviet design. When the Soviet delegation participated for the first time in the Leipzig trade exhibition in 1957, only two Soviet design organizations represented Soviet fashion: ODMO and the fashion design department of GUM.<sup>19</sup>

The department was located in GUM's main building, a close neighbor of the vividly pulsating life of the sales departments. The “brains” there were placed in two rooms in which the designers and the patternmakers worked separately. The shoe design department also had a room of its own. A small sewing workshop was attached to the fashion department. Its task was to sew prototypes of the new clothes. The best designs were regularly published in fashion albums with large editions or sold on separate sheets with patterns of individual dresses with attending, detailed sewing instructions. The demonstration hall was the “face” of the department for the world outside. The demonstrations started in September of 1954. Models, musicians, speakers, an administrator, and an art instructor (educated as an art historian) all worked in the demonstration hall.

The total work force of the department was not very large, about 70 people in 1954-1955, among them 7 designers and 15 models. In the 1960s and 1970s, the number stabilized to about 90 workers.<sup>20</sup> In 1972, of the 90 (among them 75 women) workers, 50 were occupied in the sewing workshop (tailors, patternmakers and dress constructors, designers), 26 in the demonstration hall, and 9 in the publishing department.

From the professional point of view, the key positions were those of the designers, pattern and dressmakers as well as art instructors. In the 1950s however,

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specialists in these professions were very rare in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the designer positions were mostly occupied by the ordinary patternmakers or cutters who didn't have the right professional qualifications. It was just as difficult to find experienced dressmakers. For instance, one dressmaker, Mokshina, had just finished some ordinary sewing and knitting courses, and another one, A. Lapidus, had been educated as an airplane builder. She had learned to sew and knit in some short evening courses.<sup>21</sup>

In 1955, there were only six specialists working in all the departments of GUM that had received a higher education. Almost all of them had administrative duties and did not take part in the design of clothes. Only in the second half of the 1960s did the professional level of the cadres improve remarkably due to the recruitment of new workers who had graduated from the Moscow Textile Institution, which became the main educational institute of fashion design in the Soviet Union. The number of the designers increased too. Thus, in 1967 the Fashion Department had twelve designers, and in 1973 fifteen: three in female outer wear, eight in female dress, but only one in each of male clothes, shoes, head gear, and embroidery.<sup>22</sup>

**One of the first** designers at the department was Lidia Fedorovna Averyanova (born 1916) who came to GUM in 1954. Averyanova quickly became one of the leading designers of female clothes who had a decisive influence on the general style of GUM, called “modest elegance”. She had no education as a designer. After returning home from the front, she attended some short sewing courses. Because she was religious, she refused to become a member of the Communist Party. Her “non-party” status did not prevent her from making a career and traveling with the GUM models to many parts of the world.<sup>23</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, Averyanova became almost a “house” consultant at the “closed” 200<sup>th</sup> section of GUM. In the event that a client with high status could not make up her or his mind about which dress was right and wanted to consult someone, a specialist from the fashion design department was called upon. Depending on the situation, it could be the artistic leader of the department (D. B. Shimilis, 1960-1976) or one of the leading designers: on female dress, L. F. Averyanova, on male dress, R. A. Singer.

At the end of such consultations the client quite often decided to order an individually designed dress from the Atelier instead of buying a ready-made one. Then the designer turned at once to a patternmaker and took the necessary measures of the client. This was how many of the clothes designed by Averyanova ended up in the closets of the Ministry of Culture E. A. Furtseva as well as of the daughters of the Soviet leaders, Prime Minister Kosygin and the secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSS B. N. Ponomarev.<sup>24</sup> E. A. Furtseva and Ljudmila Gvishiani (Kosygina) also relied on the services of the designers of the nearby ODMO on the Kuznetsky Most Street. In 1954, the recently opened Atelier at GUM employed Yevgenija Nikolayevna Istomina as a designer. Elena Alekandrovna Tomashevich, whose specialty became festive female evening dresses, joined the GUM collective about the same time. Neither of them had any formal education in designing clothes, but they had solid experience



An evening dress from the GUM collection demonstrated by the model Yana Kokoreva in 1964.

A GUM advertisement by A. M. Rodchenko and V. V. Mayakovsky, 1923.



A fashion demonstration at the annual meeting of the Soviet fashion designers of the Ministry of Light Industry at ODMO, the All-Union House of Fashion Design, Moscow, in the 1950s.

**Creativity on command. Difficult to achieve when people become objects of creativity.**

**Models on the catwalk as ideological superstructure. Window-dressing for the base.**

sewing clothes. They had to learn the art of design by doing it. Their colleagues humorously referred to Averyanova, Tomashevich, and Istomina as the “three whales” supporting the whole Department of Fashion at GUM on their backs. They had, in fact, designed the first basic seasonal collections at GUM, which had become a success abroad at the end of the 1950s and gave a firm direction to the future “house style”.

### Some former designers

from the nearby Central Department Store, TsUM, became the first “generation” of designers at GUM. The atelier at the Central Department Store had experience of fashion design from the 1930s. Naum Yakovlevich Katz who became the first director of the fashion department at GUM was among them. He was the only director of a department who was not a Party member. He remained in charge of GUM for ten years. In 1964, Anna Georgievna Gorshkova was nominated to the director’s post after N. Ya. Katz, who had become seriously ill and died soon after. In contrast to her predecessor, Gorshkova had no previous experience of fashion design at all. She used to work in the personal administration of GUM – a section which traditionally had strong ties with the KGB and a lot of influence in the store.<sup>25</sup> The nomination of a reliable member of the Communist Party to the director’s post was to a great extent motivated by “special control” needed by the employees of the fashion department – the “house” mannequins in particular. They often met foreigners and regularly traveled abroad. In the memories of her colleagues, Gorshkova had rather conservative views about fashion and what constituted proper dress code. She was clever enough not to interfere with the creative questions and left them to the artistic leaders of her department, instead taking care for the most part of the administrative issues. The leading designer of the house, Rubin Aaronovich Singer, was considered for the post of artistic director of the department, but he did not have formal education in art. Singer had emigrated from pre-war Poland. He was one of the leading tailors in post-war Moscow. Being a virtuoso tailor he did not turn down profitable private orders during his time as GUM’s main designer of male clothing. The leadership of the department store was fully aware of his unofficial activities. From 1950 to 1960, many Soviet leaders and famous artists were among his clients.<sup>26</sup> Singer worked in the fashion department at GUM until his dismissal due to conflicts with the directors. He then emigrated to the West where he died tragically in a car accident.

During the first six years, the fashion department was totally without any artistic leader because no suitable, qualified candidates could be found. The first one to be nominated to the post was David Borisovich Shimilis. He was a graphic designer educated at the Moscow Textile Institute and worked at GUM from 1960 until 1976. He came to play an important role in its development.

## IN SEARCH OF A “HOUSE STYLE”

The Ministry of Trade, headed by Anastas Mikoyan, had great ambitions and expectations to see the Fashion Atelier at GUM, given that it was the law giver of Soviet fashion with its own “house style”. The director of the Fashion department, N. Ya. Katz told that he expected to create “a new style of clothes, and consequently new designs and new kinds of clothes”.<sup>27</sup> In the middle of the 1950s a lively discussion went on about what kind of a fashion should in fact be created at GUM. The secretary of the Party committee calmed down the most eager spirits by recommending that the designers should “stay on earth” and not to be carried away to the sky. Instead they should orient themselves according to the, after all, very modest conditions of the supply of the raw materials as well as the real demands of the Soviet consumer. Consequently, he understood the style of GUM as a synthesis of four basic elements: simplicity of the form, beauty of design, comfort of the use and cheap prices.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, many workers of the Fashion department turned up at the party meetings arguing that their “house style” should not be mundane but rather something extraordinary, festive or even “ultramodern”. In their support, they argued that such clothes are in great demand now, in particular among the Moscow youth. In the mid 1950s, such a position was in fact the dominating one among the rang-and-file designers. The proponents of the more festive dresses made an extra case of the use of the brilliant Demonstration Hall at GUM – at the time only ODMO at Kuznetsky could boast about anything like it. Beautiful, bright and more festive designs looked much better on the podium than any everyday wardrobe. During the general euphoria of the first years of the Fashion department, many expected eagerly and triumphantly the future competition with ODMO and even with the best Western fashion houses. “This caused many heavy disputes among us. Comrade Singer thought that our designs should compete with the Western things and should be ultramodern”, N. Ya. Katz remarked in 1955.<sup>29</sup>

It is obvious that the perspective of the GUM fashion reaching the world standards greatly appealed to the leaders of the newly opened Department store and to Anastas Mikoyan’s own ambitions as well. On the other hand, the workers at GUM knew, better than anyone else, the real conditions of their work, the low level of the consumer goods markets and their own material base. Moreover, in 1955 the whole role of fashion in the Soviet Union was quite ambivalent – many ideologists still believed that it was something totally alien to socialism. To many colleagues the call to “ultramodernity” sounded quite adventurous if not scaring. Katz was therefore quite careful and suggested that GUM’s “house style” should consist of the simplicity of the construction as well as the functionality and elegance of design.<sup>30</sup> In practice, the designers of GUM worked out both everyday and festive clothes, mostly for the women. On the 19th of July, 1955, the first annual report of the Department was discussed in the extended meeting of the Party committee of GUM with the presence of all the heads of the other departments and sections of the whole big department store. In addition to Katz’s oral report the participants were invited to attend a

“real” fashion show. The main question that was raised after the demonstration was whether ordinary Soviet citizens could in reality wear all these clothes or did they just have a purely artistic value as unique objects of art? If the second alternative was true, was it really worth the trouble to continue designing such unpractical things? A lot of criticism was directed, for instance, to one of the designs, a festive female dress with ribbons of rosettes which, in the opinion of those present, “hardly any Soviet woman would like to wear”.<sup>31</sup> In the absence of any artistic council – this was founded a bit later – or any artistic director, the Party committee took itself the role of the “aesthetic arbitrator”. It soon proved out that the taste of the members of the Party committee as well as of some of the heads of the other departments at GUM were often more conservative than the fashion designers’ own taste.

### During all these years

even the best designs of GUM, with some exceptions, remained outside the reach of the ordinary Soviet consumers since they were not profitable enough to the Soviet garment industry to produce in big series. Most of the designs remained at the stage of the sketches and pictures on the paper or, in case they were approved into the seasonal collection, they were sewn in a unique copy to fit the model demonstrating them. In this respect they were not all that different from the fashionable creations of the best Parisian houses of “haute couture”.<sup>32</sup> One could think that under these conditions the whole discussion about the “house style” of GUM would have lost its actuality. As a matter of fact, this was not the case. The leadership of GUM continued to emphasize that the adaptation of the designs of GUM into industrial production was after all a political question. Sooner or later the citizens of Moscow could be able to recognize in the streets the superior designs from GUM and become aware of its unique “house style”. In this respect the actual numbers produced were thought to be of only secondary importance: “let them (the industry – the authors) take into production just five designs in the year, but such ones which they cannot compare with the designs of the other Fashion houses”.<sup>33</sup> In these words the artistic director, D. B. Shimilis declared his own position to the working collective at the end of 1967. He argued that the Department store needed in fact a firm of its own to produce such designs which could not be found anywhere else thus echoing a popular stance among Soviet fashion designers who eagerly propagated the production of small series of fashionable clothes which could be sold in their own “firmennye magaziny” or boutiques.

In 1960–1970 the question of the right proportion in designing, on the one hand, more festive dresses to the seasonal collection and fashion shows and, on the other hand, mundane clothes to industrial production continued to occupy the minds of the designers at GUM. Many continued to claim that the department designed too many expensive, festive clothes and should instead design more “cheap and good clothes” to the ordinary consumer.<sup>34</sup> In 1974 the director of the Department of fashion A. G. Gorshkova criticized her own designers for not paying “enough attention to designing practical clothes, such designs that are near to the life and available to the great majority of our people”.<sup>35</sup> In

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the 1960s, GUM’s “house style” was however more or less firmly established. It consisted of the “utilitarian fashion”, which was based, more concretely, on the following principles: to study the modern fashion with great care but with a reservation concerning the use of any “ultra-modern” tendencies, to create comfort in use, as well as simplicity of design combined with moderate prices. Most of all the designs should be fashionable and beautiful too. One should orient oneself not after any “fashion leaders” but rather after the needs of the ordinary Soviet customer. The collections should include all kinds of clothes but with a special emphasis on the design of practical things which can be used everyday at home and at work, in the theater and cinema, while on leisure or engaged in sport.<sup>36</sup>

If we compare these principles with the rules that were in general used in Soviet fashion world during this period there was nothing particularly striking about the GUM’s “house” style. It followed loyally the general trends of the Soviet fashion.<sup>37</sup>

The designers were often more eager to design festive collections than clothes to more mundane use. They had very good reasons to deviate from the principle of “utilitarian fashion”. In designing clothes for the “high status” international fashion shows “ultra-fashionable” designs, in bright tones and often with expensive additions of fur, were in fact highly appreciated. The “utilitarian” principle was in need of being revised from time to time since the living conditions improved rapidly in those days. Ordinary people had both a wish and a real possibility to dress better, more varied and more festive. Consequently, even everyday fashion changed and became more festive and varied too.

### With the increasing

differentiation of taste it became more difficult to determine the “needs of the Soviet mass consumer”. In the 1960s, the designers of GUM saw how the actual manner of clothing as well as the demand for fashion among the inhabitants of Moscow changed quite rapidly. If GUM wished to orient its fashion towards to demands of the Muscovites it had to raise its standards all the time. This became particularly clear in the 1960s when the amount of the visitors to its Demonstration hall suddenly decreased quite drastically. Many saw the reasons not only in the fact that GUM had, under the increasing competition of all the other, quite numerous fashion organizations, lost its monopoly in demonstrating fashion in the Soviet capital. Evidently, the Soviet citizens had gradually turned into more fashion conscious and critical customers who actively compared the designs at GUM both with the achievements of the domestic and international fashion. The Communist Party and the Government of the Soviet Union soon discovered that they faced an almost impossible task in trying to cope with fashion: the more effort and finances they invested in the promotion of fashionable clothes – and the more complex and many-sided the Soviet system of fashion developed – the more demanding did the Soviet customers get. ❌

Note. — This article is drawn from the forthcoming book by the authors, *Fashion Meets Socialism* (2011). All images are from private collections.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Interview with D. B. Shimilis, May 6, 2008.
- 2 The Department Number 200 was closed to ordinary customers. It was opened in the middle of the 1950s to provide the leaders of the country well as their family members with the best consumer goods, mostly of foreign origin.
- 3 3. TsAODM. F.947 (The party organization of GUM). Op.1. D.1.L.1; D.165.L. 49 (later in this article all the archival documents refer to this collection).
- 4 Ibid. D.12. P.228. The minutes of the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Party committee at GUM, 1955-04-27.
- 5 Ibid. D.1. L.46.
- 6 Ibid. D.44. L.40. The minutes of the Party organization of the Atelier, September 14, 1959.
- 7 Ibid. D.30.L.99-101.
- 8 The mother of one of the authors still preserves as a kind of a family relic her winter overcoat which was sewn at the Atelier GUM in the middle of the 1970s. She was very pleased with the designs and materials available as well as with the quality of the service and sewing.
- 9 TsAODM. F.947. Op.1. D.40. L.70.
- 10 Ibid. D.1.L.14; D.44.L40. The minutes of the Party organization of the Atelier September 14, 1959.
- 11 Ibid. D.16.L.153. The minutes of the Party meeting of the Atelier and Department of fashion June 19, 1955.
- 12 Ibid. D.96. L.79.
- 13 Ibid. D.96.L.78. The minutes of the Party meeting of the Atelier January 13, 1964.
- 14 Ibid.D.44.L.42.
- 15 A. I. Mikoyn was one of the most important union leaders in the entire history of the Soviet Union. After the war, he occupied simultaneously some of the most important positions in the Party and the government. He was the Minister of Trade (from 1953) and the First Deputy Prime Minister (from 1949), as well as a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSS (from 1952).
- 16 TsAODM F.947. Op.1. D.12.L.141. The minutes of the meeting of the Party committee GUM, July 19, 1955.
- 17 In addition to Averyanova (GUM), the delegation consisted of a member of the Trade center (Torgovaya palata), one delegate from TsUM (the Central Department Store which had a well-known fashion atelier in Moscow as well), as well as a representative of the organization Lenodezhda, which was also engaged in the sewing of custom-made clothes. (Interview with L. F. Averyanova, April 30, 2008.)
- 18 Interview with L. F. Averyanova, April 30, 2008.
- 19 A. Vavilova, GUM’s own model demonstrated the designs created at its fashion department. (Interview with A. Vavilova, April 30, 2008.)
- 20 TsAODM F. 947. Op.1.D.12.L.137.
- 21 D.12.L.143.
- 22 D.165.L.72; D.110.L.125.
- 23 Interview with L. F. Averyanova, April 30, 2008.
- 24 Interview with L. F. Averyanova, April 30, 2008.
- 25 Interview with A. Vavilova and D. B. Shimilis, April 27, 2008.
- 26 From the 1950s to the 1970s, many designers of GUM took on extra work in their leisure time with private orders. The income from these deals was often higher than their official salary at GUM. Naturally, no taxes were paid for this extra income. The transfer from the system of “indposhiva” to GUM was in many cases economically not profitable. For instance, Singer had received 3,000 rubles per month in his previous work place in the Atelier of indposhiva whereas at GUM he was paid only 1,400 rubles. An interview with L. M. Lobacheva (Andreeva), April 30, 2008. See also Alik Singer’s Internet publication about his father: www.bdm.ru/arhiv/2006/09/84.htm and www.teatr.newizv.ru/news/?IDNews=1251&date
- 27 TsAODM. F. 947. Op.1.D.121.L.137. The minutes of the meeting of the Party committee of GUM, July 19, 1955.
- 28 D.12.L.151-152.
- 29 D.12.L.137.
- 30 D.12.L.138.
- 31 D.12.L.141.

32 According to Diane Crane, “haute couture” clothes are within the reach of no more than one thousand women in the world whereas luxury ready-to-wear clothes have a substantially larger market. (*Fashion and Its Social Agendas. Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing*. Chicago 2000, p. 136.)

33 D.110.L.170.

34 D.110.L.102. This particular citation is from 1967.

35 D.175.L.31.

36 See the minutes of the meetings of the Party organization in 1966, 1968 and 1973. Ibid. D.105.L.160; D.126.L.15; D.165, L.62.

37 An international fashion conference of the socialist countries in 1959 released, for instance, a joint statement according to which it was necessary to respect the aesthetic proportions of the figure and the simplicity of the form in both female and male dress. (N.B. Leбина & A. N. Chistikov, *Obyvatel’ i reformy: Kartiny provednevoi zhizni gorozhan v gody NEPa i khrushchevskogo desiatiletiya* [The citizens and the reforms: Images of the everyday life of townspeople during the NEP period and Khrushchev’s decade]. St Petersburg 2003, p. 212.)