

Khrushchev's Lampshade

A Bright Symbol for the Modern Soviet Home

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“Better, faster and more economical!”¹ cried the Khrushchev government as it pushed for the rapid construction of millions of apartments to solve the housing crisis in the Soviet Union of the mid-1950s. The state could have added a fourth exhortation to the motto, “more ideological!” as it also promoted specific architectural housing plans and interior decorations to propel Russian society to the next stage of communism, and away from Stalinism. Through housing policies, the state became more authoritarian in its governing of the domestic sphere. Soviet officials attempted to transform previously mundane objects, such as the lampshade, into ideological symbols of Soviet modernization.

In the Stalinist era, a frilled orange lampshade dominated production lines and in the 1950s, the Khrushchev government demonized this style in favor of a more modern glass or plastic design. The new lampshade represented the beginning of a brighter phase of Communism in a country still healing from the terror of Stalinism and the Second World War (WWII). However, by attempting to entirely remodel the Soviet living space in the midst of a troubled economy and a culture of shortages, the state could seldom provide the new domestic lifestyle it promoted.² This forced the state to polemicize inconsistencies constantly in order to remain legitimate. The impact of the new modern lampshade on the domestic sphere will be examined by investigating Khrushchev's housing vision, the adaptation of 1920s design principles to Soviet life in the 1950s, the ideological power of

¹ Christine Varga-Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era,” *Journal of Social History* 41, no.3 (Spring 2008): 564.

² *Ibid*, 574.

light and finally how the government altered its ideal of Soviet modernization because the economy could not support it.

Use of Primary Sources

To examine the Khrushchev's government increased ideological influence over the domestic sphere, I use primary sources from a variety of Soviet press publications, a page from a household manual and a speech by Nikita Khrushchev. I recognize that these sources reflect the Communist party line and signify the voice of the state rather than the voice of its citizens. Further, when working with only Russian sources translated into English, it is very difficult to uncover the reaction of citizens to the policies. For this reason, my paper instead shows how the state used the press and domestic housekeeping manuals to manipulate the consumerist desires of the Soviet population. The Khrushchev government reframed the lampshade, a seemingly lacklustre domestic object, into a powerful symbol of the Soviet modern ideal.

The Khrushchev construction project and reality

The project of the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union, while it remained an authoritarian state, forced the government to redefine its power in a way that demonstrated to citizens that the state was no longer a brutal dictatorial regime. The state publicly differentiated itself from the Stalinist period by becoming more tolerant in the public sphere through, as Susan E. Reid describes, "a renunciation of the Stalinist terror, a relatively liberalized public discourse, a commitment to broadening participation and committing to improve the conditions of the ordinary people."³ Yet, even with considerable public populist tendencies, in the private sphere the state turned increasingly authoritarian through both the design and construction of new single-family apartments, as well as the development of

³ Susan E. Reid, "Gender and the Destalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union," in *Gender and Consumption: domestic culture and the commercialization of everyday life*, ed. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Ashgate: London, 2007), 52.

modern furniture for these homes.⁴ Construction of the apartments officially began in July 1957, and between 1956 and 1970 the program produced approximately thirty-four million apartment units and more than 126 million people—more than half the country—moved into them.⁵ The objects and design of the living space served as a link between the state’s moral modernist principles and the individual lives of Soviet citizens.

Combining 1920s Revolutionary Asceticism with 1950s Modernization

The Khrushchev government’s apartment architecture and design plans combined the minimalist design of early 1920s revolutionary asceticism with 1950s consumerism. In the earliest years of the revolution, as Randi Cox explains, the government “encouraged asceticism in revolutionary culture; self-denial served as a marker of willingness to put social obligations ahead of personal desires.”⁶ This revolutionary mindset carried over to the 1950s and enabled the Khrushchev government simultaneously to differentiate itself from Stalinism and to modernize the population through a more strictly Communist lifestyle. To help citizens adopt this lifestyle, the state infused its buildings with three main design principles used in apartment construction to reflect the revolutionary ascetic mentality: utility, lightness and overall harmony.⁷ Ideology reigned supreme over the aesthetic of the apartments. In order to overcome the showy stylization of Stalinist design, Deborah Field

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Henry W. Morton, “What Have Soviet Leaders Done About the Housing Crisis?” *Soviet Politics and Society in the 1970s*, ed. Henry W. Morton and Rudolf L. Tokes (New York: Free Press, 1974), 163.

⁶ Randi Cox, “NEP Without Nepmen: Soviet Advertising and the Transformation to Socialism,” in *Everyday in early Soviet Russia: taking the Revolution inside*, ed. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 122. For more on asceticism and the revolution see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 29-120.

⁷ Vargas-Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic,” 567.

explains that the government worked to “coordinate between public and private life, and denying any possible conflict between individual interests and public goals.”⁸

Although the state built single-family apartments, strict design rules aimed to limit any potential conflict between state and individual interest. Increased government domestic control resulted in less freedom in the private sphere. Reid underscores this point:

The housing program gave many the privacy of their own, one-family apartments for the first time, affording fewer opportunities for surveillance than the old communal living. But it was counterbalanced by concerted efforts to intervene in terms of domestic life, to counter the individualistic tendencies it might foster, to rationalize and discipline domesticity and propagate a new regime of austere ‘contemporary’ taste in home furnishing.⁹

The government had to integrate the private apartment carefully, adhering to Soviet egalitarianism. It was hoped that modern and necessary objects such as plastic lampshades inside the home would overpower the mind of the individual; by calming consumerist impulses to purchase outlandish quantities of the new and modern items created by the state. The reality, however, showed it to be difficult for the modern domestic consumer and the revolutionary ascetic to harmonize together.¹⁰

The rise and fall of the orange lampshade

In the 1930s, the state developed a more positive attitude towards household items, originally deemed *petit-bourgeois* in the 1920s, as Russian society began to crave

⁸ Iurii Gerchuk, “The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64),” trans. Susan E. Reid, in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2000), 82.

⁹ Reid, “Gender and Destalinization,” 66.

¹⁰ Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 338.

comfort. This trend continued to rise after WWII.¹¹ Objects previously demonized by Lenin, such as the frilled and tasseled orange lampshade, fluffy cats and potted plants became associated with coziness in the home.¹² Reid explains that these *meshchanstvo* or petit-bourgeois household items, began to “acquire a new respectability”¹³ in the Stalinist era. Khrushchev created his new “rationalized domesticity” policy in opposition to these domestic goods. *Meshchanstvo* items became attached to people of, as Iurii Gerchuk explains, “bad, retrograde, ‘philistine’ tastes, [people] who were understood to be artistically uneducated and unable to distinguish crude sham and stage-prop luxury from genuine art.”¹⁴ The shape of the orange lampshade changed from a symbol of comfort to a household item that, as an article from 1957 sharply stated, “was conceived fifty years ago in the boudoirs of bourgeois apartments.”¹⁵ The Khrushchev era designed its objects physically and symbolically in opposition to *meshchanstvo*, by focusing on modernism and utility, as seen in its new lampshade designs.

The ideal modern lampshade and the ideological power of light

The government hoped that the design of the new lampshades would help to trigger Socialist advancement in the realm of the home. As a newspaper article titled “Bringing Art into Everyday Life” emphasized, lampshades like the rest of modern furnishings were supposed to be applied with “understatement, simplicity of form, and precision.”¹⁶ In the *Izvestia* newspaper, Olga Rusanova also underscored the importance of a bright lampshade, “The lamp is the room’s ‘sun’ and we must regulate it with the aid of decorative glass. We

¹¹ Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 49.

¹² Kelly, *Refining*, 338.

¹³ Reid, “Gender and Destalinization,” 67.

¹⁴ Gerchuk, “Aesthetics of Everyday,” 89.

¹⁵ L. Kamensky, “Taste vs. Lack of Taste,” *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 11, no. 26 (1957): 16-17, <http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/13970573>, accessed 1 November 2009.

¹⁶ “Bring Art into Everyday Life,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 8, no.17, (May 1961): 21-22, <http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/13793709>, accessed 24 October 2009.

need chandeliers with transparent coloured shades, lamps of completely new design, all glass, smart and inexpensive.”¹⁷ A progressive society needed to have modern housewares. By 1959, the government announced a goal: to discontinue the production of silk lampshades within two years in order to produce several “lampshades made of plastics, light-diffusing elastic films, fireproof lampshade paper and high-quality lampshade glass in various colors.”¹⁸

Brightness, one of the three Soviet design principles, was thought to encourage good health because at the time, “luminosity was thought to destroy microbes, the source of disease,”¹⁹ explains historian Victor Buchli. Moreover, with increased light, the brighter the room, and the healthier citizens were thought to be physically and mentally: “lamps or electricity more generally drove away darkness and the entire *petit-bourgeois* consciousness, by the purifying and illuminating effects of its rays.”²⁰ A 1959 *Pravda* article titled “Orange Lampshade” discusses the health risks of the Stalinist orange silk lampshade, calling it a “microbe-breeder, which can be neither washed nor wiped off after collecting much dirt and dust.”²¹ A housewife’s response to an article titled “On Cultivating Taste” from 1955 also complained about the unhealthy ambiance of a dark lampshade: “I asked the salesman to turn on the light in this [orange] shade, and everything around us took on a deathly colour.”²² Christine Varga-Harris emphasizes the negative metaphor of the orange lampshade:

¹⁷ Olga Rusanova, “On things which Grace Everyday Life,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 6, no.37 (September 1954): 21-22, <http://dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=13845781>, accessed 1 November 2009.

¹⁸ “In the Party Central Committee and the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers: On Measures for Increasing the Production, expanding the assortment and Improving the production, expanding the assortment and Improving the quality of cultural, everyday and Household goods,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 42, no. 11 (November 1959): 35, <http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/13820827>, accessed 1 November 2009.

¹⁹ Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 52.

²⁰ Buchli, *Archaeology*, 52.

²¹ Sem. Narinyani, “Orange Lampshade,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 11, no. 27 (November 1959): 30-31, <http://dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=13819327>, accessed 1 November 2009.

²² Readers Forum, “On Cultivating Taste,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 14, no. 7 (1955): 24-26, <http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/13847260>, accessed 1 November 2009.

“They shaded or obscured the radiant future of Communism as it was developing.”²³ The brighter the lampshade in the home, the healthier and stronger the Soviet future would be.

As suggested by articles in the Soviet press, the state felt that the population needed to have good “taste” in order to move forward, but needed guidance.²⁴ Domestic advice literature increased rapidly in the Khrushchev era, offering suggestions to citizens on how best to complete many household tasks, such as lighting a person’s home.²⁵ Taste was central to all elements of the home as a 1957 article highlights: “taste is expressed in the kind of products, wallpapers and decorative fabrics chosen and the way they are used.”²⁶ For this reason, the state published the *Concise Housekeeping Manual*, a housekeeping guide for women in the late 1950s. The manual was, as Kelly describes, “an exhaustive alphabetical inventory of Soviet material culture from *abazhur* (lampshade) through *billiard* to *oboi* (wallpaper) and onwards.”²⁷ Significantly, the instructional book included a page, as seen in figure one, specifically devoted to showcasing a large variety of proper lampshades and lamps that were supposed to be available in the near future.²⁸ The different light styles included lampshades in a number of different materials for working, for the bedroom, for the dining room and night-lights.²⁹

²³ Varga-Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic,” 567.

²⁴ Kamensky, “Taste vs. Lack,” 16-17.

²⁵ Kelly, *Refining*, 317.

²⁶ Kamensky, “Taste vs. Lack,” 16-17.

²⁷ Kelly, *Refining*, 321.

²⁸ “From Concise Housekeeping Encyclopaedia: Photo Essay,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Macalester College,

<http://soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&show=essa&SubjectID=1961khrushchevby&Year=1961&navi=byYear>, accessed 19 October 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.



Fig.1 "From Concise Housekeeping Encyclopaedia: Photo Essay."

Seventeen Moments in Soviet History. Macalester College.

<http://soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&show=essay&SubjectID=1961khrushchevby&Year=1961&navi=byYear>, accessed 19 October 2009.

The ideal Soviet woman of the mid-1950s needed an understanding of good taste in the home, because as housewife I. Ponomarenko explained in 1955, "every Soviet person has a love of beauty and a desire to surround himself with fine things."³⁰ Expected household knowledge included an understanding of the different sorts of newly available lighting

³⁰ Kelly, Refining, 321; Reader's Forum, "On Cultivating Taste," 24-26.

fixtures, as seen in the household manual. A woman's taste in lighting needed to be multifaceted because the new apartments were supposed to be properly "zoned" with different lighting in order to make different areas of the tiny apartments feel like separate spaces. Hence, homes of the Khrushchev era required a type of lighting that was different from the single type offered during the Stalinist period. Lighting became essential to the state's vision of success, because as another 1950s housewife reflected, "lighting can make the most modest furniture smart or, conversely, make drab the most elegant."³¹ The state used light as a transformative force; light differentiated between areas of the home and replaced the remainders of Stalinist-era furnishings with modern Khrushchev lighting style. However, the state was unable to provide the newly required lampshades, despite the government's active promotion of these lampshades in domestic manuals and the press.

Modernizing in a culture of shortages

"Pretentious, dust catching chandeliers *should* be replaced by simple, cup-shaped opaque glass shades reflecting the light off the ceiling," one household manual instructed.³² The Soviet government claimed that it wanted each household to have many new types of lampshades, although the reality was very different. Modernized lampshades were very difficult to obtain, while the old orange lampshade was not.³³ In a 1959 *Pravda* article, writer Sem. Narinyani scathingly critiqued the mass availability of the old orange lampshades: "I saw many lampshades, but what kind were they? The same: fringed and tasseled. There were hundreds of them, thousands. They stared at the customers like silken sarcophagi."³⁴ He then questioned why the newer lampshades were not available. In the midst of heavy state promotion of new goods necessary for modernization, the state could not adequately satisfy consumer demand. The economy remained "plagued with perpetual shortages," while simultaneously the state worked to create Soviet-style consumerist desires

³¹ Rusanova, "On things which grace," 21-22.

³² Reid, "Gender and Destalinization," 67. Emphasis mine.

³³ Narinyani, "Orange Lampshade," 30-31.

³⁴ Ibid.

in their citizens in the press and household manuals.³⁵ This new type of desire reflected the state's promised improvement in the standard of living, because the state allowed its citizens only to "see the future" through objects. Yet, the government did not have to provide the physical goods—only the idea of them—as it worked to "satisfy people's basic needs" under Socialist egalitarianism.³⁶

The government promoted both an ideal modern lifestyle and modern décor, while at the same time it needed to account for the fact that most of the modern items were not actually available to consumers. As Buchli explains more generally, these shortages created an "irreconcilable tension" between the state's design legislation and the "situation on the ground."³⁷ Despite the government's commitment to provide Soviet citizens with more consumer goods, the state continued instead to produce more weapons and capital goods related to the "military industrial complex" in the midst of the Cold War.³⁸ Despite the knowledge that better lampshades existed, the culture of shortages forced the population to purchase the orange-frilled lampshade. In a 1957 *Trud* article called "Taste vs. Lack of Taste," architect L. Kamensky, blamed the factory managers for the lack of tasteful lampshades on the market. Discussing lampshades, he argues that it is the factory managers who, "defending their archaic and tasteless products, argue that such products are in demand. But is it not because nothing better is sold?"³⁹ He harshly chastises factories, but not the state itself, for the lack of glass or plastic lampshades for sale in Moscow's Central Department Store. The state also allowed the press to acknowledge that there was a shortage of modern lampshades and attempted to give the impression that perpetual shortages existed because of the poor taste of the factory managers, who lacked the modern aesthetic taste the government wanted its citizens to have.

³⁵ Varga-Harris, "Homemaking and the Aesthetic," 574.

³⁶ Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28.

³⁷ Victor Buchli, "Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against *Petit-bourgeois* Consciousness in the Soviet Home," *Journal of Design History* 10, (1997): 163.

³⁸ Kelly, *Refining*, 314.

³⁹ Kamensky, "Taste vs. Lack," 16-17.

The economy of shortages acted as a barrier to the people's degree of consumption. Perpetual shortages enabled the government, concerned about triggering uncontrolled consumerism in the population, to ensure that this remained an impossibility. As Reid argues, "The government was not promoting a culture of 'boundless consumption,' because the consumers could quite simply not consume."⁴⁰ The government wanted the population to consume rationally, while it attempted to counteract potential dangers of consumerism and private housing through Socialist ideology.⁴¹ The government made an effort to inculcate the population with rational attitudes towards consumption of material goods in the home. By appearing to have been constantly one step ahead of the population with the promotion of modern consumerist knowledge, the government could more easily manipulate symbols without actually providing new lampshades for the population. Perhaps the government hoped that people, carrying idealized images of consumer products, such as the new lampshade, in their minds would look forward to having these objects in the Soviet future. In theory, this logic would make the population work even harder. However, the state may have instead created feelings of frustration among citizens as the government sold dreams without providing opportunities for the population to fulfill them.

Conclusion

The state discourse on the lampshade was a powerful means for the Khrushchev government to differentiate itself from the Stalinist era and at the same time, to create its own ideology. Using the new lampshade, an inexpensive household item, as a symbol of the Soviet future, the government promoted an accessible, egalitarian image of progress. Further, by strategically allowing criticism of lampshade shortages in the press, the state appeared more liberal in the public sphere, while at the same time succeeded in deflecting the blame for the shortages away from itself. Although the actual production and delivery of the new

⁴⁰ Reid, "Gender and Destalinization," 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

lampshades fell short, the promise that the lampshade embodied, that of a brighter future, remained intact.