



We Want To Be Modern

A trove of objects, hidden away for 40 years in Warsaw's National Museum, reveals the glamorous aspirations of post-war Polish design, says Agata Pyzik

We Want To Be Modern:
Polish Design 1955-1968
The National Museum, Warsaw
Until 17 April

EXHIBITION

"We are aiming at a beautiful future, but we cannot see its shape yet, we cannot imagine the form and the scope of the life we are aspiring to. Which is why we want and we demand that visual arts show us this good, just and happy future life." So said Polish designer and theorist Jerzy Hryniewiecki in the first issue of *Projekt* magazine in 1956, heralding the new commandments of life after the "thaw" in People's Poland. Modernity became a fetish for society. The exhibition *We Want To Be Modern: Polish Design 1955-1968* from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw shows a flamboyant, glamorous and complicated side to socialist-era Polish design. The museum is seeking a permanent exhibition space for its vast collection of more than 24,000 objects, until now hidden away.

After the Second World War, Poland was dominated by reconstruction, a dire necessity in a country that had suffered widespread devastation. Relief, and the thaw, came with Warsaw's World Festival of Youth in 1955, a mass event typical of the People's republics. Carnavalesque street decorations were designed by students from the city's Fine Arts Academy. Before the thaw, Polish designers couldn't refer to the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde, because socialist realism forbade steps outside its canon. Now, the liberation from *sotsrealizm* brought enormous hunger for everything new. In this era, Poland was to create its most original culture of the 20th century, founding the Polish schools of poster design (led by Henryk Tomaszewski, Roman Cieslewicz and Jan Młodożeniec) and cinema (Andrzej Wajda, Roman Polanski, Andrzej Munk).

Many Polish artists of the period were devoted socialists, believing they were building the new Poland, but designers were apparently less subjugated to the power apparatus and much less controlled. It seems that decorative arts were freer than



so-called pure art. Their calling was to make life under socialism beautiful. Polymaths like Oskar Hansen, Jerzy Sołtan, Wojciech Fangor and Wojciech Zamecznik were designing everything from film posters and book covers to cars and lipstick advertisements, as well as painting and sculpting.

Among the most popular features of the new aesthetics were soft lines, vivid colours, light materials, and asymmetrical, slanted forms taken from biology or science, and made possible by the use of plywood, fibreglass, or textile printing techniques. Art was supposed to parallel the exploration of the world on a micro as well as a macro scale. Hence Polish designers took inspiration from Alvar Aalto, Charles and Ray Eames and Eero Saarinen, as well as the abstract high art of Moore, Picasso and Matisse – not to mention Klee, Arp, Brancusi and Pollock.

The Warsaw Institute of

Industrial Design was the queen bee's cell of Polish design in that era. There, artists prepared prototypes that were presented in exhibitions and sold to factories. This way, an average Polish family could afford a fragment of the futuristic dream of luxury in their houses. The then very popular and now sought-after Cmielów ceramic figures are a perfect example of the more mass-produced but stylistically unique design of the time.

The question lurking in the exhibition space is whether it was possible to develop the spectre of luxurious consumption when such consumption was never really a possibility. Many of the projects were never actually realised, having been deemed unacceptable by government officials. But the main elements of the style made their way into every Polish house, showing the post-war nation the importance of material culture.

Above
Muszelka
(small shell)
chair by Teresa
Kruszewska,
1956

Below
Model of a
telephone
by Olgierd
Rutkowski,
1960

