

**Christianna Bonin**

MIT Department of Architecture, Cambridge MA

### **Pictures of Wool: Art, Craft, and Politics in the Soviet Union, 1917-75**

This dissertation establishes handcraft's place as a discursive counterweight within the history of modernizing and industrializing Soviet economic transformations of the mid-twentieth century. The project offers a history of craft in the Soviet Union during three critical periods of transition: in the 1920s, as creative practitioners and political officials debated the aesthetic possibility, market value, and ideological potential of transforming pre-existing imperial modes of production into "socialist" ones; the 1930s, as mass industrialization and geopolitical restructuring eliminated certain modes of handwork, while mobilizing new spaces for its display and study as national craft; and the postwar 1950s and 60s, as Cold War cultural diplomacy, a burgeoning tourist industry, and a sense of historical loss spurred handicraft revivalist programs across Soviet Central Asia. Countering the assumption that modern industry necessarily subsumes craft, or that Soviet entities and creative practitioners were overwhelmingly interested in mass production at the expense of handwork, my research instead seeks to demonstrate that it is partially through the figure of the craftsman and the vector of the handmade that industrial society in the Soviet Union comes to know itself.

Each chapter situates a practitioner or group of practitioners in a key institutional setting that provided new terms for evaluating the stakes of handcraft against the era's ideas about mass production, art, and social activation. The introduction explores the valences of "craft" alongside the concepts of "modern" and "industrial" arts in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia and Europe. Chapter One reads ceramic production at the former Imperial Porcelain Manufactory in Leningrad against the semi-capitalist New Economic Period (1921-28) and First Five Year Plan (1928-32). I argue the manufactory's specific set of policies, practitioners, and international exhibitions

separated it from government demands for mass production, transforming it into an experimental, artistic laboratory that promoted unique, handmade wares. Chapter Two analyzes Lyudmila Mayakovskaya's (1884-1972) technical innovations at the Trekhgornaya and Krasnaya Rosa Textile Factories and teaching at VKhuTEMAS (all in Moscow) in the 1920s and 30s, exploring her trailblazing work with aerosol sprays in textile production as a way of interrogating the future of handmade wares amid mass production. It situates Mayakovskaya's practice within larger contemporary debates at the Moscow Union of Artists (MOSKh) about ethnicity and abstraction as sources for socialist textile ornament. The final chapter extends MOSKh's debates about textiles and ornament to Kazakhstan, the Central Asian republic that underwent the most dramatic social and economic change during the Soviet period. It chronicles how the introduction of industrial labor and a system of art education and display interacted with local, handmade textile production. I analyze a hybrid form of modernist painting made by a young generation of Kazakh artists, later called the *Shestidesyatniki* (the Sixtiers). They strategically positioned their work in response to the conservatism of the local academy in Alma-Ata and the demand for ethnic displays at international exhibits during the postwar Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, which brought historic Kazakh weaving processes into coordination with the primitivist aesthetics of Western modern artists. Exhibited just as the first displays of handmade textiles appeared in Kazakhstan's Museum of Fine Arts, the group destabilized any simple distinction between "native" and "import," or "art" and "craft."

Throughout the dissertation, I attend to the categories used by practitioners and their commentators to discuss ceramics, paintings, and textiles—binaries like modern/traditional, art/craft, conceptual/manual, luxury/common, and capitalist/socialist. Who used these categories to describe the work? What is at stake ideologically when a conventionally "non-art" object, such as a carpet or a teacup, is read as modern art, or when modern values of originality and aesthetic feeling are bestowed onto "non-art" objects? I also probe the gendered and racial formations that have surrounded and critically produced textiles and ceramics since the 1920s. The project emphasizes the work of women and ethnic minority-practitioners, many of whom are absent in the

dominant histories of “high” art in the Soviet frame. In doing so, my primary aim is to expand discussion of Soviet art to more fully incorporate those media, makers, and markets that activated the Soviet art world, yet have remained under the threshold of critical visibility.

The dissertation builds on a rich body of literature around craft’s utility to politics in the early twentieth century. In method, I share the interest of art historians Christina Kiaer and Susan Buck-Morss in undoing the legacies of Cold War rhetoric by revealing how cultural practitioners in the Soviet Union adapted the cultural forms of Russia’s past and socioeconomic models from capitalist countries. I too argue that the Soviet Union was no haven free from the commodity. In fact, transformations to handcrafted objects were the grounds in which political, social, and cultural battles were waged under the guise of pants and dresses, teacups and carpets.